

NAVIGATING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND COPING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KASHMIR AMID ACADEMIC AND CAREER PRECARITY

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ABSTRACT

University students in Kashmir today pursue their education in a context shaped less by any single dramatic event than by an ongoing, low-grade uncertainty about what a degree will actually lead to: a highly competitive landscape of limited government and private-sector positions, intense competition for postgraduate seats and professional entrance examinations and a job market in which credentials no longer straightforwardly translate into stable employment. While quantitative research has examined academic stress and general well-being among South Asian student populations and a substantial international literature links job insecurity and unemployment to psychological strain, few studies have explored, in students' own words, how young people navigate and psychologically manage this everyday climate of academic and career precarity. This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experience of resilience and coping among university students in Kashmir. A total of ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate students from institutions in Srinagar and surrounding districts with individual interviews ranging from 40 to 65 minutes approximately. Data were analyzed following Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA procedure, moving from case-by-case idiographic coding to the construction of shared superordinate themes. Four superordinate themes, each comprising three subthemes, were constructed: (1) the weight of an uncertain future (2) the body's quiet ledger (3) anchors of belonging and (4) the fragile labour of normalcy and aspiration. Findings suggest that resilience was experienced less as a fixed trait than as an ongoing, relationally embedded practice of adapting plans, drawing on family and peer support and holding hope and doubt simultaneously while working toward an uncertain occupational horizon. The discussion situates these findings within resilience theory and the vocational psychology literature on job insecurity and offers implications for university career counselling and advising services. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Kashmir, psychological resilience, coping, interpretative phenomenological analysis, career uncertainty, graduate employment, university students, qualitative psychology

INTRODUCTION

For a large and growing cohort of university students in Kashmir, the years spent pursuing a degree unfold alongside a persistent, low-grade awareness that a qualification is no longer a straightforward guarantee of stable employment. Government sector recruitment, historically a preferred and comparatively secure career pathway in the region, draws an extremely high volume of applicants relative to the number of available positions while private-sector and entrepreneurial opportunities, though expanding, remain comparatively limited relative to the number of graduates entering the labour market each year. Many students consequently describe treating higher education itself as one stage within a longer, uncertain sequence of competitive examinations, further qualifications and in many cases eventual relocation to other cities in search of suitable work.

This pattern is not unique to Kashmir. A substantial international literature has linked job insecurity, credential inflation and graduate underemployment to elevated psychological strain among young adults

(Paul & Moser, 2009) and vocational psychology research has emphasized that uncertainty about one's occupational future can itself function as a chronic stressor, independent of whether unemployment is ultimately experienced (Blustein, 2008). Separately, a growing body of research on student mental health across South Asia has documented associations between academic pressure, competitive examination culture and psychological distress (Pascoe et al., 2020). What these literatures share, but rarely examine together in depth, is an interest in how young people subjectively experience and manage prolonged uncertainty about their occupational future while still embedded in the demands of ongoing academic life. The broader resilience literature, meanwhile, has moved away from viewing resilience as a fixed individual trait and toward understanding it as a dynamic process supported by ordinary adaptive systems such as close relationships, community structures and culturally meaningful practices (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2008). What remains underexplored is how such relational resilience processes are actually mobilized by students navigating a specifically academic-and-career form of chronic uncertainty rather than a single acute stressor. The present study addresses this gap by asking: How do university students in Kashmir experience and make sense of psychological resilience and coping amid ongoing academic and career-related uncertainty? Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study foregrounds the first-person accounts of ten students to build an experience-near understanding that complements existing quantitative research on student well-being and graduate employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CAREER AND ACADEMIC UNCERTAINTY AS A CHRONIC STRESSOR

Vocational psychology research distinguishes job insecurity, the subjective anticipation of a potentially negative occupational future, from unemployment itself and finds that this anticipatory uncertainty can carry a comparable psychological cost even before any negative outcome has occurred (Blustein, 2008). Paul and Moser's (2009) meta-analytic work similarly demonstrates a robust association between employment precarity and diminished psychological well-being across diverse national contexts. For students, this form of uncertainty is compounded by its prolonged and cyclical nature: each stage of education, entrance examinations, degree completion, postgraduate admission, professional recruitment, introduces a fresh occasion for anticipatory strain well before the underlying question of long-term occupational stability is resolved. Classic stress and coping theory further distinguish between primary appraisal, the judgment of a situation as threatening and secondary appraisal, the evaluation of one's own resources to manage it, a distinction that maps closely onto how students in a competitive labour market continuously reassess both the scale of the challenge ahead and their own capacity to respond to it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Career construction theory offers a complementary lens, framing vocational uncertainty not as an obstacle external to identity development but as an ongoing narrative task through which young people actively construct rather than simply discover, a sense of vocational self over time (Savickas, 2005).

ACADEMIC PRESSURE AND COMPETITIVE EXAMINATION CULTURE IN SOUTH ASIA

Academic pressure and examination-linked career pathways have been consistently linked to psychological strain among students across South Asian higher-education contexts (Pascoe et al., 2020). In settings where a comparatively small number of secure government positions or postgraduate seats draw a very large applicant pool, this pressure is often compounded by years of sustained competitive preparation, sometimes alongside or after the completion of a first degree, introducing a distinctive, extended form of occupational uncertainty into students' academic trajectories.

RESILIENCE AS AN ORDINARY, RELATIONAL PROCESS

Masten's (2001) influential account described resilience as "ordinary magic"-the product of common human adaptive systems such as close relationships, cognitive capacities and community structures,

operating effectively under conditions of adversity rather than a rare or exceptional individual trait. Ungar's (2008) cross-cultural resilience research further argues that what counts as an effective coping resource is shaped by cultural and social context and that resilience research must attend to locally meaningful sources of support such as extended family, religious or spiritual practice and peer community rather than assuming a universal template drawn from Western, individually oriented models. Complementing this, Cohen and Wills's (1985) classic formulation of the social support buffering hypothesis propose that supportive relationships can protect individuals from the negative psychological effects of stressful circumstances particularly under conditions of ongoing, rather than one-off, strain.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES ASSOCIATED WITH NAVIGATING PROLONGED UNCERTAINTY

Several established constructs within the broader positive psychology literature offer further theoretical grounding for understanding how individuals sustain functioning under prolonged, unresolved uncertainty. Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy describes the belief in one's own capacity to organize and execute the actions required to manage a prospective situation and has been consistently linked to persistence in the face of setbacks. Building on this and related constructs, Luthans et al. (2007) proposed psychological capital as a higher-order resource combining hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism, arguing that these four components function synergistically rather than independently. Snyder's (2002) hope theory similarly frames hope not merely as a positive feeling but as a cognitive process comprising both pathways thinking, the perceived capacity to generate routes toward a goal and agency thinking, the perceived capacity to pursue those routes. Antonovsky's (1987) concept of sense of coherence, meanwhile, describes a global orientation in which life circumstances are experienced as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful even when specific outcomes remain uncertain. Finally, Duckworth et al.'s (2007) construct of grit, defined as sustained passion and perseverance toward long-term goals despite obstacles and setbacks offers a further lens on the sustained, effortful engagement with uncertain long-term goals that characterizes much of student life in competitive academic environments.

RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The literature suggests that career and academic uncertainty, competitive examination pressure and relationally embedded resilience processes are each independently documented but rarely examined together, in depth, through the first-person accounts of students living in a setting where all three converge. IPA is well suited to this task because it treats participants as experiential experts on their own lives and seeks to understand through sustained interpretative engagement how they make sense of an experience that matters to them (Smith et al., 2009). This study accordingly offers a contextually grounded qualitative account of resilience and coping among university students in Kashmir.

METHOD

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Building on the gap identified in the literature review, this study was guided by three specific questions and three corresponding research objectives developed to move from a broad exploratory aim toward the specific experiential dimensions examined in the Findings.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. How do university students in Kashmir experience and describe academic and career-related uncertainty in their day-to-day academic lives?
2. What psychological and relational resources do students draw upon to cope with this uncertainty?
3. How do students construct and sustain motivation, a sense of normalcy and hope despite ongoing, unresolved uncertainty about their future?

Based on the research questions, following objectives were formulated:

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To explore how university students in Kashmir subjectively experience academic and career-related uncertainty in the course of their everyday student lives.
2. To examine the psychological and relational coping resources that students draw upon in managing this ongoing uncertainty.
3. To understand how students construct and sustain a sense of motivation, normalcy and hope while working toward an uncertain occupational future.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION

This study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an idiographic, inductive and interpretative qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). First articulated by Smith (1996) as a means of exploring how individuals make sense of major life experiences, IPA has since become one of the most widely used qualitative approaches within health and social psychology. IPA was selected because the research question concerned meaning-making around a subjectively significant and ongoing experience rather than the frequency or distribution of that experience across a population consistent with broader qualitative inquiry principles favouring designs that match method to research purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consistent with IPA's double hermeneutic, the researcher(s) sought to make sense of participants' own sense-making adopting a stance of empathic and questioning interpretation throughout (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

A purposive, homogeneous sample of ten participants (N = 10) was recruited from undergraduate and postgraduate programs at institutions in Srinagar and surrounding districts of Kashmir consistent with IPA's preference for small, information-rich samples permitting detailed idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Inclusion criteria were: (a) aged 18–28 years (b) currently enrolled as a full-time student at a college or university in Kashmir and (c) self-identification as having experienced meaningful concern about post-graduation career or employment prospects. Sample size was guided by the principle of information power whereby smaller more homogeneous and richly detailed samples can yield sufficient analytic depth for a narrowly focused research question and an idiographic mode of analysis (Malterud et al., 2016) consistent with saturation-based sampling logic in qualitative interview research more broadly (Guest et al., 2006). Recruitment proceeded through campus networks and snowball sampling until the research team judged that thematic saturation had been reached across cases.

Pseudonym	Field of Study	Age	Location	Interview Duration (min)
P1	Psychology (Postgraduate)	23	Srinagar	58
P2	Engineering (Undergraduate)	20	Budgam	47
P3	English Literature (Undergraduate)	21	Srinagar	60
P4	Commerce (Undergraduate)	22	Baramulla	51
P5	Commerce (Postgraduate)	24	Srinagar	45
P6	Social Work (Postgraduate)	25	Anantnag	65
P7	Computer Science (Undergraduate)	20	Srinagar	42
P8	Political Science (Undergraduate)	22	Pulwama	55
P9	Education (Postgraduate)	26	Ganderbal	60
P10	Biotechnology (Undergraduate)	21	Srinagar	49

Table: Participant characteristics and interview duration (pseudonymized).

DATA COLLECTION

A total of ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted, either in person or by video call according to participant preference ranging in length from 40 to 65 minutes approximately. An interview guide was developed around broad, open questions concerning participants' everyday academic routines, sources of support and experiences of thinking about and preparing for life after graduation with follow-up probes used flexibly to pursue participant-led lines of meaning rather than a fixed structure. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim in the language used by the participant (English, Urdu or Kashmiri) with translated segments checked by a bilingual member of the research team for accuracy of meaning.

DATA ANALYSIS

Transcripts were analyzed following the six-step IPA procedure outlined by Smith et al. (2009): immersive reading and re-reading of each transcript; initial noting of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual observations; development of emergent themes for each case; searching for connections across emergent themes within each case; moving to the next case while bracketing prior analyses as far as possible; and finally looking for patterns across all ten cases to construct superordinate themes and subthemes. Analysis proceeded case-by-case before cross-case integration, preserving the idiographic commitment central to IPA.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All participants who provided informed written consent were assured of anonymity through pseudonymization and were advised of their right to withdraw at any point including up to two weeks after the interview without penalty or any bearing on their academic standing. Given that discussions of career anxiety and family financial expectations can be personally sensitive, participants were also provided with information about counselling services at the close of each interview.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOR

Trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with each transcript and independent coding of a subset of transcripts by a second researcher with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Quality was further considered against Yardley's (2000) widely used criteria for qualitative health research including sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence and impact and importance and against Tracy's (2010) complementary "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout following Finlay's (2002) call to treat the researcher's own position within the research process as an explicit and examined part of the analysis rather than a source of bias to be eliminated in order to surface and bracket the researchers' own assumptions about the region and topic. Reporting follows relevant sections of the COREQ checklist for qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007).

FINDINGS

Analysis of the ten interviews produced four superordinate themes each comprising three subthemes: (1) the weight of an uncertain future (2) the body's quiet ledger (3) anchors of belonging and (4) the fragile labour of normalcy and aspiration. Each is presented below with illustrative extracts.

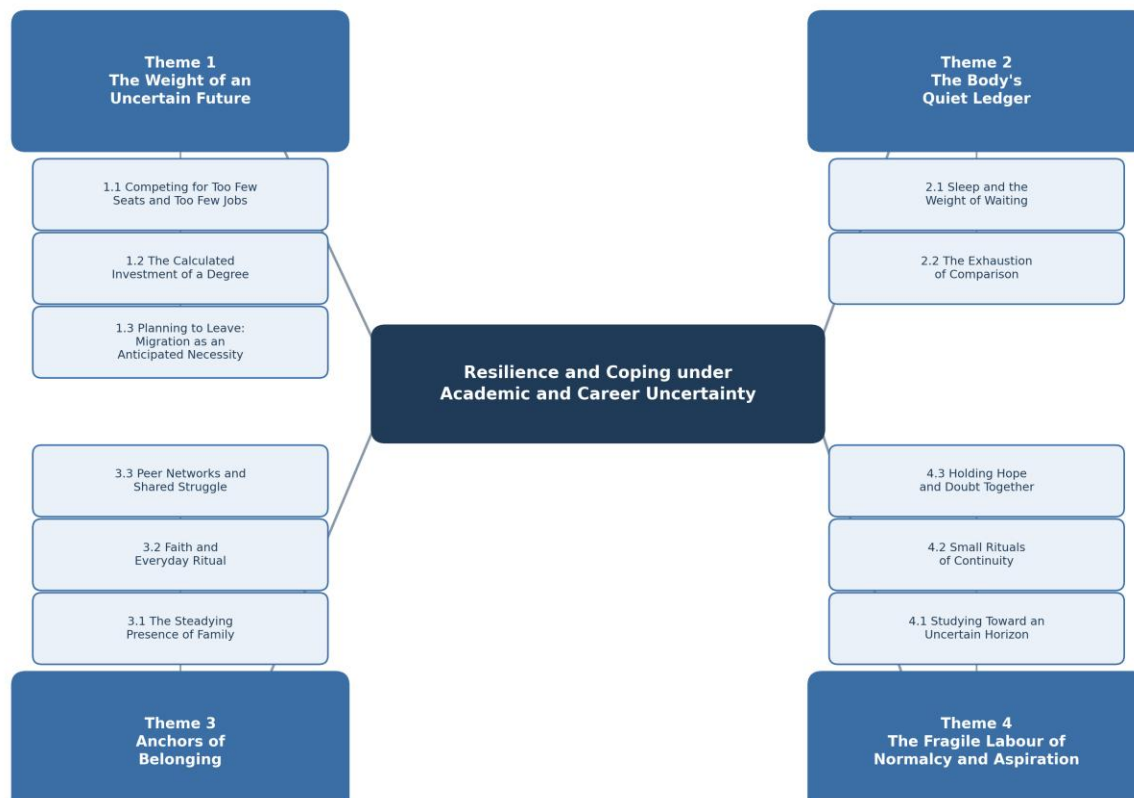


Figure: Thematic map of the four superordinate themes and their subthemes.

THEME 1: THE WEIGHT OF AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

This theme captures how participants described organizing their academic choices and daily routines around an ongoing awareness that a degree alone offered no guarantee of stable employment such that provisional, multi-track planning became a routine habit rather than an occasional adjustment.

1.1: COMPETING FOR TOO FEW SEATS AND TOO FEW JOBS

Participants described an early and sustained awareness that the number of secure government positions and sought-after postgraduate seats was small relative to the number of applicants, requiring years of parallel competitive preparation alongside regular coursework.

P7 described how this awareness shaped his approach to studying from early in his degree:

From the second year onward, I was not just studying for my regular exams, I was also preparing for two different competitive entrance tests on the side, because everyone around me kept saying the actual degree is only half the picture. You look at how many people apply for a single government opening and it puts things into perspective very quickly, so you learn to treat your college years as just the first round of a much longer competition, not the finish line at all. (P7, Computer Science, Undergraduate)

P2 put it simply: *"I stopped being surprised a while ago when I hear that one government post has drawn several thousand applications, that is just the number now, and everyone here has learned to plan around it". (P2, Engineering, Undergraduate)*

P4 said it directly: *"Every senior tells you the same thing when you join college, that the real competition starts after you graduate, not before, and somehow that stays in your head the whole four years". (P4, Commerce, Undergraduate)*

1.2: THE CALCULATED INVESTMENT OF A DEGREE

Several participants described a heightened awareness of the financial and time investment their families were making in their education and a corresponding pressure to ensure that investment eventually produced a stable return.

P5 reflected on how this sense of financial investment shaped her own relationship to her studies:

My parents never say it directly, but I know exactly how much they have put into my education, the fees, the coaching classes, all of it and I carry that number around in my head more than I probably should. It is not that they pressure me openly, it is more that I pressure myself, because I want the whole thing to actually make sense in the end, for their sake as much as for mine and that feeling does not really go away just because I try not to think about it. (P5, Commerce, Postgraduate)

P1 admitted: *"I do the math sometimes without meaning to, tuition against what a starting salary might realistically look like, and it is not always a comfortable calculation to sit with"*. (P1, Psychology, Postgraduate)

P6 mentioned: *"My father never asks me directly how my preparation is going, but I can tell from the way he brings it up sideways at dinner that it is always on his mind"*. (P6, Social Work, Postgraduate)

1.3: PLANNING TO LEAVE: MIGRATION AS AN ANTICIPATED NECESSITY

Participants frequently described an early awareness that pursuing certain career paths might eventually require relocating away from family and familiar surroundings in search of suitable opportunities, introducing a layer of anticipated future uncertainty into present academic choices.

P9 described how this awareness shaped her long-term academic planning from a young age:

Even in school, we were told, quite plainly, that the number of good opportunities here is small compared to how many of us are trying for them, so you learn early to have a plan B and a plan C and to be ready to move if that is what it takes to build a proper career. It is not something I resent exactly, it is just the reality we grew up understanding and I think it makes you plan further ahead than maybe students elsewhere need to. (P9, Education, Postgraduate)

P10 said plainly: *"I accepted a long time ago that building the career I actually want will probably mean living somewhere else for a few years, and I have made my peace with that"*. (P10, Biotechnology, Undergraduate)

P3 reflected: *"Half the people I studied with in my first year have already moved out for better opportunities, and I think about that every time I plan my own next step"*. (P3, English Literature, Undergraduate)

THEME 2: THE BODY'S QUIET LEDGER

This theme captures the ways in which chronic, low-grade uncertainty about the future appeared to register in participants' bodies, often before it was consciously named as stress, manifesting as disrupted sleep, restlessness and a heightened sensitivity to comparison with peers.

2.1: SLEEP AND THE WEIGHT OF WAITING

Several participants described periods of disrupted sleep specifically linked to waiting for outcomes beyond their immediate control such as examination results, interview call-backs or admission decisions.

P6 reflected on how waiting periods disrupted her ordinary sleep pattern:

In the week before results come out, I genuinely sleep worse, I wake up at strange hours and my mind is already running through possibilities before I am properly awake, going over what I will do if it goes one way or the other way. It happens every single time, even though logically I know worrying at three in the morning changes nothing about the

outcome. I have just accepted that my body seems to keep its own private countdown alongside the official one. (P6, Social Work, Postgraduate)

P1 said: *"In the days before anything important is decided, I just feel tired in a way that sleep does not really fix, and I cannot always explain why that happens"*. (P1, Psychology, Postgraduate)

P8 noted: *"My sleep schedule falls apart completely during result season, and it takes almost a week afterward, win or lose, before it goes back to feeling normal again"*. (P8, Political Science, Undergraduate)

2.2: THE EXHAUSTION OF COMPARISON

Several participants described a persistent, tiring awareness of how their own progress compared to that of peers often heightened by seeing others' achievements and milestones shared on social media which several described as a distinct kind of fatigue separate from academic tiredness itself.

P8 described this comparison-related fatigue as a recurring, almost involuntary habit:

I will open my phone for two minutes just to check something and end up seeing that someone I know has cleared an exam or gotten a good offer and even though I am genuinely happy for them, there is also this small, tired feeling that creeps in afterward, a kind of quiet pressure that stays with me for the rest of the day. I have tried to use social media less around results season specifically, because I noticed the pattern was wearing me down more than I realized at first. (P8, Political Science, Undergraduate)

P3 admitted: *"I started muting a few group chats during exam weeks, not because I do not care about my friends, but because I needed to protect my own focus for a while"*. (P3, English Literature, Undergraduate)

P5 said: *"Seeing someone else's good news used to genuinely ruin my whole afternoon, and it took me a long time to learn how to feel happy for them without also feeling behind"*. (P5, Commerce, Postgraduate)

THEME 3: ANCHORS OF BELONGING

Participants consistently located their capacity to keep functioning not in individual willpower alone but in relational resources extended family networks, religious or spiritual practice and peer community that provided both practical and psychological grounding.

3.1: THE STEADYING PRESENCE OF FAMILY

Family emerged as the most frequently cited source of day-to-day steadiness both through direct practical support and through the modelling of a calm response to difficulty.

P1 described how her mother's demeanour during difficult stretches shaped her own coping style:

My mother has this way of staying steady even when things are genuinely hard, she does not pretend everything is fine, but she also does not fall apart and somehow just watching her manage things calmly over the years taught me, without either of us ever really discussing it directly, that panic is usually optional even when the circumstances themselves are not. I notice myself doing the same thing now, taking a breath before reacting and I know exactly where I picked that up. (P1, Psychology, Postgraduate)

P7 said: *"My brother went through all of these two or three years before me, so whenever I panic about a deadline, he is usually the first person I end up calling"*. (P7, Computer Science, Undergraduate)

P9 mentioned: *"My mother has this habit of saying we will figure it out, no matter what the news is, and somehow I have started saying it to myself too now"*. (P9, Education, Postgraduate)

3.2: FAITH AND EVERYDAY RITUAL

Several participants described religious or spiritual practice often embedded in small daily rituals rather than only formal observance, as a source of steadiness during periods of waiting or difficulty.

P3 described how a daily ritual functioned as an anchor point in her routine:

I try to pray at the same times every day and I think what that really gives me is not so much an answer to whatever I am worried about, but a kind of fixed point in the day that does not move no matter what else is uncertain, the exam, the result, anything. Even on the hardest days, that structure stays exactly the same and I have come to rely on that steadiness almost as much as on the prayer itself. (P3, English Literature, Undergraduate)

P9 said: *"Visiting my grandmother every week gives me a kind of quiet that I cannot really get anywhere else, no matter what else is going on that particular week".* (P9, Education, Postgraduate)

P2 noted: *"I keep a short prayer routine before every exam, not really for luck exactly, but because it settles something in me before I walk into the room".* (P2, Engineering, Undergraduate)

3.3: PEER NETWORKS AND SHARED STRUGGLE

Participants described a strong norm of mutual assistance among peers preparing for the same competitive examinations or navigating similar career decisions which several framed as a practical and psychological resource distinct from family support.

P2 described how a small peer study group eased the burden of exam preparation:

There are four of us who have been preparing together for the same exam for almost a year now and it is not just about sharing notes or quizzing each other, it is knowing that someone else understands exactly what this particular kind of pressure feels like, because they are living through the same thing at the same time. On the days I feel like giving up on the whole plan, it genuinely helps to have people around who are carrying the same weight and have not given up either. (P2, Engineering, Undergraduate)

P5 said: *"My classmates are the first people I tell whenever there is career-related news, good or bad, sometimes even before I tell my own family about it".* (P5, Commerce, Postgraduate)

P4 mentioned: *"Our small group shares every job posting and every exam notification the moment we see it, because none of us wants the others to miss something important".* (P4, Commerce, Undergraduate)

THEME 4: THE FRAGILE LABOR OF NORMALCY AND ASPIRATION

A final pattern concerned the deliberate, effortful work participants invested in sustaining a sense of ordinary student life studying, socializing and imagining a future career while acknowledging that this stability required active, ongoing maintenance rather than simply occurring on its own.

4.1: STUDYING TOWARD AN UNCERTAIN HORIZON

Participants described continuing to invest heavily in their studies despite acknowledging real uncertainty about eventual outcomes, framing this investment itself as a meaningful choice rather than a naive one.

P8 articulated this tension between sustained effort and acknowledged uncertainty directly:

I still study for every exam as if it is the most important one I will ever take and I still think seriously about where I want to be in five years, even though I know none of that is guaranteed, the seat, the job, any of it. But I think choosing to keep building toward something anyway, instead of just waiting to see what happens, is its own kind of decision and it is one I make again most mornings, whether I fully feel like it or not. (P8, Political Science, Undergraduate)

P4 said: *"I would rather prepare for every possible outcome than assume the worst and stop trying altogether, that has always felt like the safer choice to me personally".* (P4, Commerce, Undergraduate)

P6 noted: *"I still write out a five-year plan every year, even though it changes almost completely by the time the next year actually arrives and I revise it again".* (P6, Social Work, Postgraduate)

4.2: SMALL RITUALS OF CONTINUITY

Participants described deliberately maintaining small, consistent daily habits, a fixed study hour, a regular walk, a weekly call home as a way of creating a felt sense of stability that did not depend on external

circumstances remaining constant.

P6 described how one such small ritual had become disproportionately important to her sense of steadiness:

I call my parents every single evening at almost the same time, even if there is genuinely nothing new to report that day and I think that ten-minute call has become one of the few things in my week that I can count on completely, no matter what else is happening with classes or results or applications. It sounds like a small thing to say out loud, but it really does anchor the whole day for me in a way I did not expect when I first started doing it.

(P6, Social Work, Postgraduate)

P10 said: *"The tea stall walk every morning is not really about the tea, it is about having one small thing that stays exactly the same every single day."* (P10, Biotechnology, Undergraduate)

P7 mentioned: *"I keep the same study playlist for every exam season, and honestly just pressing play helps me feel like I already know how to begin the work"*. (P7, Computer Science, Undergraduate)

4.3: HOLDING HOPE AND DOUBT TOGETHER

Finally, several participants explicitly described resilience not as the absence of worry but as a capacity to hold hope and doubt simultaneously, continuing to move forward without requiring certainty first.

P9 summarized this stance toward the future in her own words:

I do not think I have ever felt fully certain about how things will turn out, not about results, not about where I will end up living or working and I have stopped waiting to feel certain before I act. You just learn to carry the doubt and the hope at the same time, side by side and you keep moving forward anyway, because waiting for the fear to disappear completely before you start living your life does not really seem to work for anyone I know.

(P9, Education, Postgraduate)

P2 said: *"I stopped waiting to feel fully ready before taking the next step, because starting anyway has usually worked out well enough for me in the end"*. (P2, Engineering, Undergraduate)

P1 noted: *"I have learned to let the worry and the hope sit next to each other instead of trying to get rid of one before I can feel the other"*. (P1, Psychology, Postgraduate)

DISCUSSION

This study explored how university students in Kashmir experience and make sense of psychological resilience and coping amid ongoing academic and career-related uncertainty. Four superordinate themes each comprising three subthemes, captured a process in which resilience was not experienced as the absence of worry, consistent with resilience theory's broader move away from equating resilient functioning with an absence of ongoing strain but as an active, effortful and often relationally sustained practice of continuing to plan, connect and hope under uncertain occupational conditions.

The competitive and financially weighted sources of uncertainty identified in Theme 1 extend vocational psychology research on job insecurity (Blustein, 2008; Paul & Moser, 2009) by illustrating how anticipated rather than actual, employment precarity becomes woven into the ordinary rhythm of academic planning for students well before they formally enter the labour market. The somatic and comparison-related patterns described in Theme 2 suggest that this chronic uncertainty registers both physiologically in disrupted sleep and socially through the tiring work of managing comparison with peers in ways that participants themselves often noticed only in retrospect.

The centrality of family, faith and peer community in participants' accounts (Theme 3) closely aligns with Ungar's (2008) argument that resilience is culturally and relationally situated rather than a purely individual trait and provides support for Cohen and Wills's (1985) social support buffering hypothesis in a setting characterized by ongoing rather than acute, stress. Theme 4, the fragile labour of normalcy and

aspiration offers a further contribution: participants did not describe stability as something they simply possessed but as something they actively built and rebuilt through small, deliberate rituals and a conscious willingness to hold hope and doubt together, suggesting that resilience in this context may be better understood as an ongoing practice than a fixed outcome.

The persistence described in Theme 4 also resonates with several established constructs in the positive psychology literature. Participants' continued investment of effort despite acknowledged uncertainty parallels Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy and their combination of sustained effort, optimism and relational support closely mirrors Luthans et al.'s (2007) construct of psychological capital. The explicit "holding hope and doubt together" pattern in Subtheme 4.3 maps closely onto Snyder's (2002) hope theory in which hope reflects both a perceived pathway toward a goal and the perceived agency to pursue it even without certainty of success. More broadly, participants' capacity to experience their circumstances as difficult but ultimately comprehensible and manageable echoes Antonovsky's (1987) concept of sense of coherence while their sustained, long-horizon academic effort recalls Duckworth et al.'s (2007) construct of grit. These parallels suggest that the resilience described by participants in this study is not a single unitary process but draws on several interlocking psychological resources simultaneously.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings carry implications for university career counselling and academic advising services. First, given the competitive-examination burden described in Subtheme 1.1, structured, earlier guidance on realistic timelines and alternative pathways may help convert diffuse worry into more concrete, navigable planning. Second, because participants so consistently located their coping resources in family, faith and peer networks rather than formal services (Theme 3), counselling approaches that explicitly acknowledge and work alongside these existing relational structures rather than positioning individual therapy as a replacement for them may be more readily accepted. Third, given the comparison-related fatigue described in Subtheme 2.2, universities might consider incorporating brief psychoeducation on healthy social media use during high-pressure academic periods such as results season.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. The sample of ten participants was drawn from a single regional context and from students currently able to attend higher education likely underrepresenting young people whose educational trajectories have been shaped by more severe financial constraints. Retrospective, single-timepoint interviews are also subject to memory and framing effects and the timing of data collection relative to the academic and examination calendar may have shaped which aspects of uncertainty felt most salient to participants. Future research might extend this work through longitudinal designs following students across the transition from graduation into the labour market through comparative work with students in other regions facing similar competitive employment landscapes or through mixed-methods designs pairing IPA with validated measures of career-related anxiety and resilience.

CONCLUSION

Among the university students in this study, psychological resilience amid the academic and career-related uncertainty of contemporary student life in Kashmir was experienced not as an absence of worry but as a continuous, relationally sustained effort to keep planning, connecting and hoping despite it. By foregrounding participants' own interpretative accounts across four elaborated themes, this study offers an experience-near complement to existing quantitative research on student well-being and graduate employment and points toward institutionally supported, community-embedded avenues of academic and psychosocial support.

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