

COPING STRATEGIES ACROSS GENDER AND RESIDENTIAL LOCALE AMONG INDIAN YOUTH: URBAN MALE, URBAN FEMALE, RURAL MALE, AND RURAL FEMALE COMPARISONS.

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ABSTRACT

Indian youth experience growing psychological stress due to academic pressure, employment uncertainty, digital saturation, and changing social expectations. Coping strategies play a crucial role in moderating the impact of stress, yet limited Indian research has examined coping through the combined lens of gender and residential locale. This study compares coping strategies among four groups of Indian youth – urban males, urban females, rural males, and rural females – using a cross-sectional design. A sample of 400 participants (100 per subgroup), aged 18–24 years, completed the Brief COPE Inventory and the Perceived Stress Scale. Data were analysed using two-way ANOVA and correlation techniques. Results indicate that urban females report higher approach-orientated and social support coping, rural males rely more on avoidance coping, and rural females demonstrate stronger religious/meaning-focused coping. Avoidance coping is positively associated with perceived stress, whereas approach and social support coping show negative associations. The findings highlight the importance of gender- and context-sensitive mental health interventions for Indian youth.

Keywords: Coping strategies, Indian youth, gender differences, urban–rural, perceived stress

1. INTRODUCTION

India is home to one of the world's largest youth populations, and young people today confront multiple, overlapping stressors. Academic competition, uncertainty in labour markets, pressure to meet familial expectations, and the rapid expansion of digital and social media environments have intensified psychological strain among adolescents and young adults. Recent national and institutional reports indicate rising levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among Indian students, with mental health concerns emerging as a critical public health issue (IC3 Institute & CISCE, 2025), (Mental Health Status of Youth, 2024).

Psychological stress does not impact all youth uniformly. Individual responses are shaped by coping strategies, cognitive and behavioural efforts used to manage internal and external stressors. Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping conceptualises coping as a dynamic process, influenced by appraisal of stressors and available personal and social resources (R. S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, 1984). Within this framework, coping strategies are commonly grouped into approach-orientated strategies (active coping, planning, positive reframing), avoidance strategies (denial, disengagement, substance use), social support-orientated strategies, and meaning-based or religious coping (C. S. Carver, 1997).

In India, coping processes are deeply embedded within socio-cultural contexts. Gender norms influence emotional expression and help-seeking behaviour, while residential locale shapes access to educational, digital, and mental-health resources. Urban youth often face intense academic pressure, constant performance evaluation, and exposure to social comparison,

particularly through digital platforms (R. Parikh et al., 2019). Conversely, rural youth may experience economic constraints and limited institutional support but often benefit from stronger family and community ties (A. Mallya et al., 2024). These contextual differences are likely to influence not only stress exposure but also preferred coping strategies.

Gender further compounds these dynamics. Studies across cultures suggest that females tend to use more emotion-focused and social support coping, while males are more likely to engage in problem-focused or avoidance strategies (B. S. Graves et al., 2021). Indian research reflects similar patterns, with young women reporting greater emotional awareness and support-seeking but also higher perceived stress (S. Verma and R. Kaur, 2023). At the same time, traditional masculine norms, especially pronounced in rural settings, may discourage emotional disclosure among young men, increasing reliance on avoidance-based coping (S. Srivastava et al., 2014).

Despite growing interest in youth mental health, Indian studies rarely examine gender and residential background together. Most research either compares males and females within urban samples or contrasts rural and urban youth without gender disaggregation. This limits understanding of how gendered socialisation and spatial context jointly structure coping responses. Addressing this gap, the present study provides a systematic comparison of coping strategies across urban males, urban females, rural males, and rural females, and examines how different coping patterns relate to perceived stress.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Coping theory emphasises that strategies are context-specific and shaped by socio-cultural factors (R. S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, 1084). The Brief COPE developed by Carver remains one of the most widely used instruments to measure multidimensional coping responses. Indian adaptations and validations of the Brief COPE and related scales have demonstrated acceptable reliability, supporting its applicability in diverse Indian populations (P. Raghavan and S. Kumari, 2017).

Empirical studies in India show that adolescents and college students commonly use approach coping and social support strategies, though maladaptive coping such as avoidance and self-blame is evident in high-stress groups (N. Mathew et al., 2015). Gender-based studies consistently report higher emotional and support-seeking coping among female students, while male students report higher disengagement and substance-related coping.

Urban-rural research suggests that urban youth experience greater psychological pressure linked to academic and career competition, whereas rural youth rely more on familial and religious coping resources (R. Koneru and G. Yenagi, 2024). However, few studies explicitly examine how gender and residential locale interact. As a result, nuanced patterns, such as whether urban females differ from rural females in coping or whether rural males are uniquely vulnerable to maladaptive strategies, remain underexplored.

3. METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. The sample consisted of 400 Indian youth aged 18–24 years, equally divided into four groups: urban males, urban females, rural males, and rural females ($n = 100$ each). Participants were recruited from colleges and youth training centres across two North Indian states using stratified sampling.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of the Sample (N = 400)

Variable	UM	UF	RM	RF
Mean age (years)	20.2	19.9	20.4	19.6
Low-income households (%)	24	20	56	62
Joint family (%)	32	28	59	62

Coping strategies were assessed using the Brief COPE Inventory, culturally adapted for Indian use. Items were grouped into four composite dimensions: approach coping, avoidance coping, social support coping, and religious/meaning-focused coping. Internal consistency coefficients ranged from $\alpha = 0.76$ to 0.82. Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), a widely validated instrument used in Indian studies (S. Cohen et al., 1983). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, two-way ANOVA (gender \times locale), and Pearson correlation coefficients to examine associations between coping strategies and perceived stress.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Group Differences in Coping

Descriptive statistics reveal clear and systematic differences in coping strategies across gender and residential locale (Table 2). Mean scores indicate distinct coping profiles for urban males (UM), urban females (UF), rural males (RM), and rural females (RF), reflecting the joint influence of gendered socialisation and contextual resource availability.

Table 2. Mean Coping Scores by Group

Coping Dimension	UM	UF	RM	RF
Approach coping	2.85	3.05	2.72	2.88
Avoidance coping	2.41	2.29	2.63	2.37
Social support coping	2.67	3.01	2.48	2.86
Religious coping	2.71	2.88	2.92	3.12

Urban females reported the highest levels of approach coping, characterised by planning, active problem solving, and positive cognitive reframing. This suggests that urban women are more likely to engage directly with stressors and attempt to regulate stress through deliberate cognitive and behavioural efforts. Their elevated social support coping further indicates frequent reliance on peers, family members, and emotional expression as mechanisms for stress management. This pattern is consistent with existing evidence that young women, particularly in urban educational settings, are more inclined toward emotionally expressive and relational coping styles.

Urban males also displayed relatively high approach coping, though consistently lower than their female counterparts. Their moderate social support scores suggest selective help-seeking, potentially constrained by masculine norms that value self-reliance. In contrast, rural males exhibited the highest avoidance coping among all groups. Elevated avoidance scores,

reflecting denial, disengagement, and substance-related strategies, suggest that rural young men may experience stressors perceived as less controllable and may lack socially sanctioned avenues for emotional disclosure. This pattern highlights a risk profile wherein stress is managed through short-term emotional suppression rather than constructive engagement.

Rural females demonstrated a mixed coping profile. While their approach and social support coping levels were moderate, they scored highest on religious/meaning-focused coping. This indicates a strong reliance on faith, spiritual practices, acceptance, and meaning-making processes as ways to manage psychological distress. In rural Indian contexts, religion often functions as both a personal and collective coping resource, embedded within everyday life and social identity (A. Mallya et al., 2024). However, such coping may operate more as an emotional buffer than as a mechanism for addressing the structural sources of stress.

Two-way ANOVA analyses confirmed these descriptive trends. Significant main effects of gender were observed for approach and social support coping, with females scoring higher than males overall. Significant main effects of residential locale were found for avoidance and religious coping, with rural youth showing greater reliance on these strategies. Importantly, gender \times locale interaction effects emerged for approach and social support coping, indicating that gender differences were more pronounced in urban settings than in rural ones. This interaction suggests that urban environments may amplify gendered coping patterns due to differential access to resources, exposure to mental-health discourse, and social norms around emotional expression.

4.2 Coping and Perceived Stress

Correlation analyses examined the relationship between coping strategies and perceived stress across the full sample. Results indicate that coping strategies differ substantially in their adaptive value.

Avoidance coping showed a strong positive correlation with perceived stress ($r \approx .41, p < .01$), indicating that individuals who frequently relied on denial, disengagement, or substance-based strategies experienced higher levels of stress. This finding suggests that avoidance may exacerbate stress rather than alleviate it, possibly by delaying problem resolution and reinforcing feelings of helplessness.

In contrast, approach coping demonstrated a moderate negative association with perceived stress ($r \approx -.32, p < .01$). Youth who engaged in active problem-solving, planning, and positive reinterpretation reported lower stress levels, supporting the view that cognitively engaging with stressors enhances perceived control and psychological adjustment. Social support coping also showed a significant negative correlation with stress ($r \approx -.24, p < .01$), although the magnitude was smaller than that for approach coping. This suggests that emotional and instrumental support can buffer stress, but its effectiveness may depend on the responsiveness and quality of available support networks. Religious/meaning-focused coping did not show a significant overall association with perceived stress. This neutrality indicates heterogeneity in its function: while spiritual coping may provide emotional comfort and existential reassurance for some individuals, it may not consistently reduce stress in contexts where stressors are structural, chronic, or materially driven. Subgroup patterns (not shown) suggested that religious coping may offer greater emotional buffering for rural females than for other groups, but this effect was not strong enough to emerge at the aggregate level.

Figure-based visualisations (Figures 1–4) complement these findings by illustrating both group-level differences and interaction effects. Together, the statistical and graphical results

demonstrate that coping strategies are not uniformly adaptive and that their relationship with stress is shaped by gender and residential context.

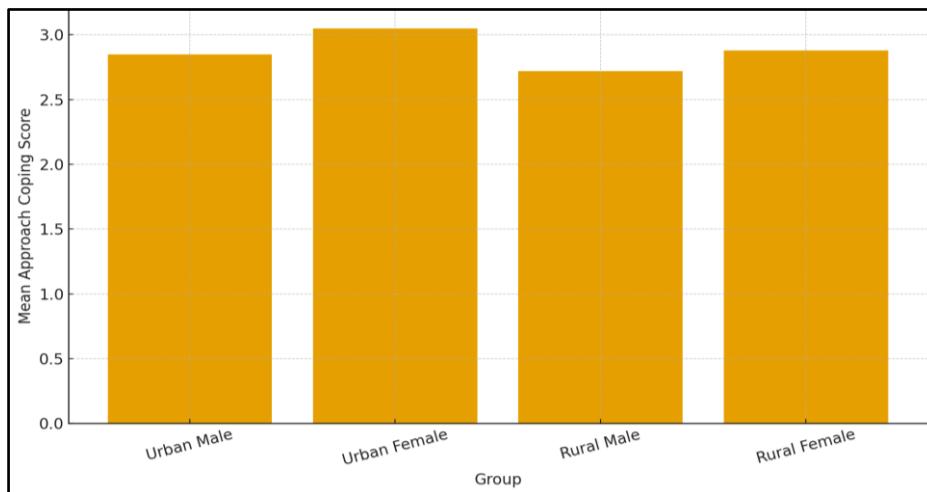


Figure 1. Mean Approach Coping Scores by Gender and Residential Locale.

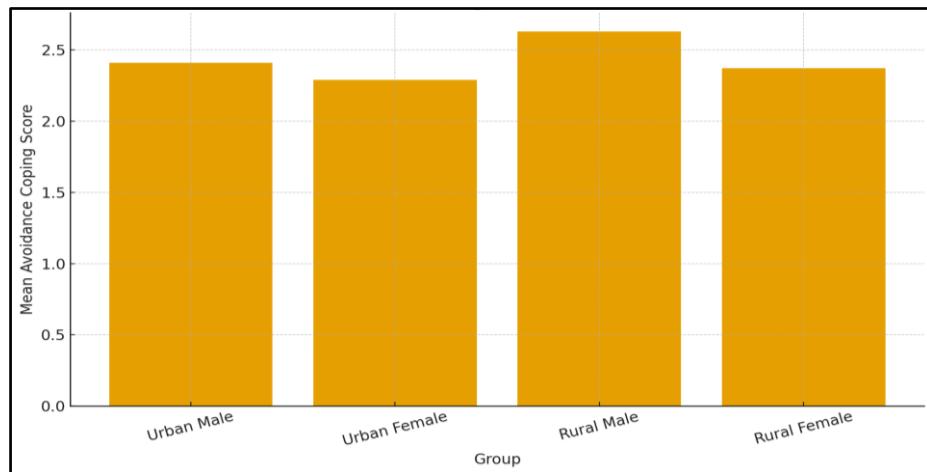


Figure 2. Mean Avoidance Coping Scores by Gender and Residential Locale.

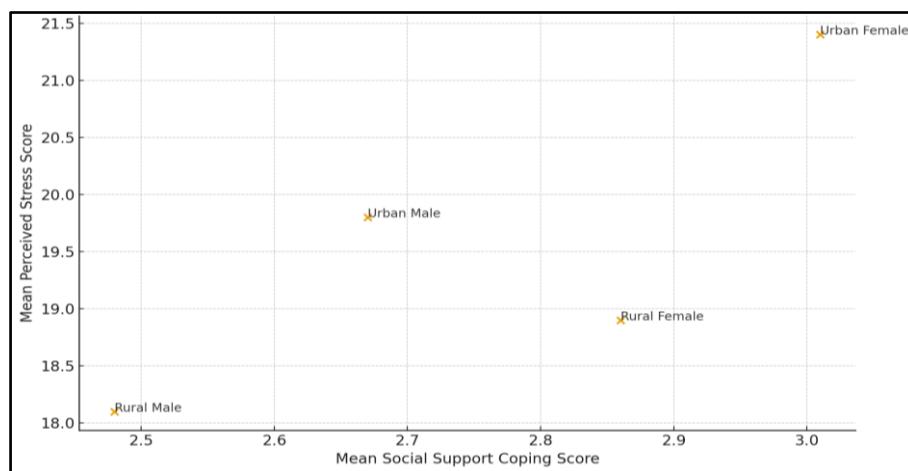


Figure 3. Relationship Between Social Support, Coping and Perceived Stress Across Groups.

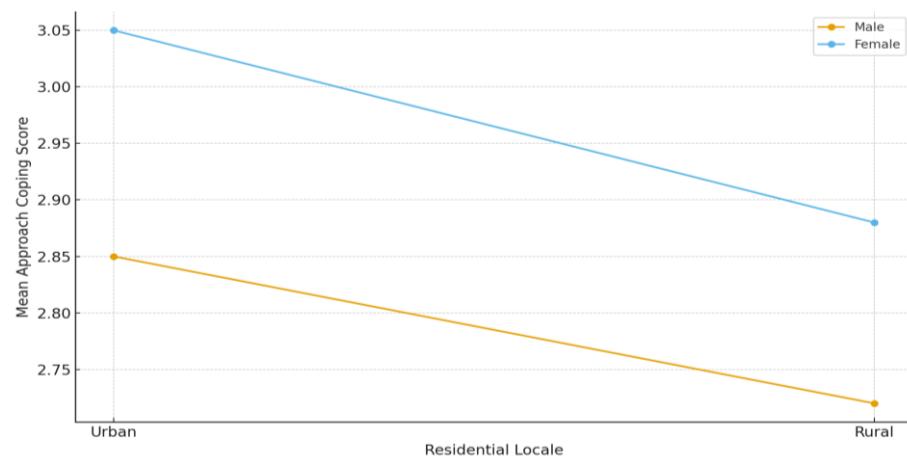


Figure 4. Interaction Effect of Gender and Residential Locale on Approach Coping.

5. DISCUSSION

The present findings demonstrate that coping strategies among Indian youth are not merely individual psychological choices but are deeply shaped by the intersection of gender and residential locale. Urban females emerge as a group that combines high levels of approach-orientated and social support coping with elevated perceived stress. This coexistence suggests that although urban young women actively engage in adaptive coping, they are simultaneously exposed to intense and persistent stressors related to academic competition, career uncertainty, and gendered expectations. In such contexts, individual-level coping may mitigate distress but may be insufficient to offset structural pressures embedded in educational and social systems.

Rural males, by contrast, appear particularly vulnerable due to their heavy reliance on avoidance coping. Elevated avoidance may reflect restricted emotional expression, stigma surrounding help-seeking, and limited access to mental-health resources in rural settings. Rather than reducing stress, these strategies are associated with greater perceived stress, reinforcing cycles of psychological vulnerability. This finding underscores the need for targeted interventions that challenge restrictive masculine norms and promote emotional literacy among rural young men.

Rural females' strong reliance on religious and meaning-focused coping reflects culturally embedded resources that offer emotional anchoring in the face of adversity. While such strategies may provide psychological meaning and endurance, their limited association with reduced stress suggests that faith-based coping alone may not address the underlying socio-economic constraints faced by rural women. Without complementary instrumental and support-orientated strategies, religious coping may function more as acceptance than empowerment.

6. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The study underscores the need for context-sensitive youth mental health interventions in India. Urban institutions should focus on stress reduction alongside coping skills, while rural programmes must address stigma and expand emotional literacy among young men. Incorporating culturally meaningful resources such as faith-based support, without reinforcing inequality, is particularly relevant for rural females.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report data. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches and extend analysis to diverse regional and socio-economic contexts.

In conclusion, coping among Indian youth is neither gender-neutral nor context-free. Recognising how gender and residential locale intersect is critical for designing effective psychological support systems and policies aimed at youth well-being.

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