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Dreams Come at a Cost: An Analysis of Stress-Causing Factors Among TNPSC Group Services Aspirants in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

The Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC) is one of the oldest recruiting bodies in India and was established in 1929. Every year, thousands of degree holders move to cities such as Chennai and Coimbatore to prepare for competitive examinations conducted by the Commission with hopes and aspirations of entering public service. While TNPSC recruits candidates for several specialist services, generalist services such as Group I, Group II, and Group IV have remained the aspiration of many candidates. The present study focuses on the stress-causing factors among TNPSC aspirants (Group 1, Group II, and Group IV) during the preparation process. Among the various factors, digital factors, particularly extended screen time and social media usage, emerged as the major source of stress and were reported by 90% of the respondents. This was followed by family expectations to clear the examination (56.7%), and factors such as long gaps in the recruitment process, financial dependence on family, prolonged preparation without income, and guilt associated with depending financially on family (53.3% each). Interestingly, a majority of the respondents reported that they used social media as a stress buster during preparation; however, increased screen time, comparison with other aspirants, and exposure to success narratives eventually contributed to higher levels of stress rather than reducing it.

INTRODUCTION

Preparation for competitive examinations is often associated with prolonged uncertainty, high expectations, and continuous investment of time, effort, and personal resources. Among TNPSC aspirants, stress may arise not only from the academic demands of preparation but also from administrative delays, financial dependence, social expectations, psychological burden, and increased digital engagement. Aspirants preparing for Group I, Group II, and Group IV services frequently undergo extended periods of preparation with uncertain outcomes, which may influence their emotional well-being and motivation. In the context of TNPSC preparation, stress manifests through indicators such as fear of failure, anxiety, sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, reduced confidence, and thoughts of quitting preparation. The study examines stress among TNPSC aspirants as an outcome of financial dependence on family and administrative delays in the recruitment process, with particular focus on administrative, economic, social, psychological, and digital factors influencing the preparation experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on stress among competitive examination aspirants has increasingly highlighted the psychological, social, and economic challenges associated with prolonged preparation and uncertain outcomes. Although several studies have examined the well-being of UPSC and other competitive examination aspirants, research focusing specifically on TNPSC aspirants remains limited.

A survey-based study on the mental health status of 203 UPSC Civil Services Examination aspirants revealed that the mental health status of the majority of the respondents was somewhat poor or poor, emphasizing the urgent need for mental health support, counselling services, and awareness programmes for UPSC aspirants (Shandilya, 2023).

A mixed-method investigation of psychological distress among UPSC Civil Services Examination aspirants identified moderate to severe psychological distress among aspirants, with financial difficulty emerging as a significant predictor (Fatima, 2025).

The relationship between gender, number of attempts, social media usage, and well-being among civil service aspirants was examined, revealing that excessive social media usage negatively affected the mental well-being of aspirants, while repeated examination attempts were associated with lower emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (Fatima & Pradhan, 2024).

A study on the causes and consequences of examination anxiety among foundation students in Oman revealed that lack of preparation, fear of obtaining low grades, and difficulty in understanding English lessons were the major factors contributing to examination anxiety. The study further suggested that effective preparation, time management, adequate sleep, support from teachers, and a conducive examination environment could help reduce examination anxiety (Jogy *et al.*, 2026).

A study investigating depression, anxiety, and stress among 400 students preparing for competitive examinations

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found that stress levels were higher among students who slept for less than six hours, had non-supportive parents and teachers, and spent less than two hours studying each day (Pachole *et al.*, 2023).

The findings of a study on gender differences in English language anxiety among university students in Morocco confirmed that female students experienced significantly higher levels of English language anxiety than male students. The study further emphasized the need for gender-specific interventions to improve students' academic achievement and psychological well-being (Baba Khouya, 2025).

The relationship between spirituality and stress among students preparing for competitive examinations was examined, and the findings suggested that spirituality had a positive role in reducing anxiety and stress among aspirants, while also emphasizing the importance of family support and avoiding unnecessary social comparison (Ola, 2016).

A study on depression, anxiety, and stress among graduates preparing for competitive examinations in Central India revealed that medical graduates, including MBBS, BAMS, BDS, nursing, and paramedical graduates, reported higher stress levels than graduates from arts, science, commerce, and engineering disciplines, with engineering graduates reporting the lowest levels of stress (Ramteke *et al.*, 2025). The review of the literature indicates that most existing studies have focused on UPSC and other national-level competitive examinations, while empirical research on TNPSC aspirants remains limited. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the stress-causing factors among aspirants preparing for TNPSC Group I,

Group II, and Group IV examinations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A convenience snowball sampling method was used to collect data pertaining to the various factors contributing to stress among TNPSC aspirants. A structured questionnaire was developed using Google Forms, and the link was circulated among aspirants. The questionnaire focused exclusively on stress-causing factors and consisted of checkbox-type questions categorised under administrative, economic, social, psychological, and digital factors. Overall, 85 aspirants responded, and their responses were analysed using simple percentage analysis. Data relating to the recruitment timeline of TNPSC Group Services and the Civil Services Examination, as well as vacancy allocation for these services, were collected from the respective official websites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the administrative factors, 53.3% have identified the long gaps between examination notification and result announcement as the major stress-causing factor. Delay in notification and lack of transparency in recruitment were reported by 43.3% each. Further, 36.7% of the respondents indicated delay in result announcement as a source of stress. Uncertainty in the recruitment calendar and age limit concerns due to delay were mentioned by 16.7% each. Poor translation of questions was reported by 3.3% of the respondents, while another 3.3% expressed that they had lost hope in TNPSC examinations and had decided to stop trying.

Table 1: Administrative Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation

Sl. No.	Administrative Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation	Percentage (%)
1	Delay in notification	43.3%
2	Delay in result announcement	36.7%
3	Long gaps between examination notification and result announcement	53.3%
4	Uncertainty in recruitment calendar	16.7%
5	Age limit concerns due to delay	16.7%
6	Lack of transparency in recruitment	43.3%
7	Lost hope in TNPSC examinations	3.3%
8	Poor translation of questions	3.3%

Table 2: Economic Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation

Sl. No.	Economic Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation	Percentage (%)
1	Financial dependence on family	53.3%
2	Coaching expenses	36.7%
3	Long preparation without income	53.3%
4	Guilt about depending financially on family	53.3%

According to the findings of a previous study, 50% of the TNPSC aspirants in the sample belonged to families engaged in agriculture or coolie work, indicating considerable representation from economically weaker sections (Mercy & Udhayakumar, 2025). This socio-economic background may explain why economic factors emerged as a significant source of stress among many respondents. Financial dependence on family

during the preparation process, guilt arising from such dependence, and prolonged preparation without contributing economically to the family were identified as major stress-causing factors by 53.3% of the respondents each. Further, 36.7% of the respondents reported that coaching expenses had also contributed to their stress during TNPSC preparation.

Table 3: Social Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation

Sl. No.	Social Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation	Percentage (%)
1	Family expectation to clear TNPSC exam	56.7%
2	Social comparison with successful candidates	43.3%
3	Pressure when others ask about preparation/progress	43.3%
4	Marriage decisions influenced by TNPSC preparation	23.3%
5	Fear of social image loss after failure	33.3%
6	Competition in locality	16.7%
7	Exhaustion from prolonged preparation leading to its discontinuation	3.3%

Among the social factors, family expectation to clear the TNPSC examination emerged as the major stress-causing factor for 56.7% of the respondents. Social comparison with successful candidates was identified as a source of stress by 43.3% of the respondents, while another 43.3% experienced pressure when others asked about their preparation and progress. Further, 33.3% reported fear of losing their social image after failure as a stress-causing factor, whereas 23.3% stated that marriage decisions were

influenced by TNPSC preparation, especially in the case of female aspirants. Another 16.7% of the respondents stated that they were being compared with neighbours of the same age group who had successfully secured jobs in private organizations with attractive salaries. A small proportion (3.3%) reported that they had become exhausted after preparing for several years and had planned to stop trying for government employment.

Table 4: Psychological Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation

Sl. No.	Psychological Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation	Percentage (%)
1	Fear of failure	46.7%
2	Anxiety thinking about the exam	43.3%
3	Sleep disturbances	33.3%
4	Feeling isolated from employed friends/peers	36.7%
5	Loss of motivation after results	26.7%
6	Feeling like quitting preparation	40.0%
7	Worry about age limit/time running out	36.7%

Among the psychological factors, fear of failure emerged as the major stress-causing factor for 46.7% of the respondents, while 43.3% reported that anxiety arising out of preparation was a major source of stress. Sleep disturbances, as an aftermath of strenuous preparation, were reported by 33.3% of respondents, and 36.7% stated that feeling isolated from their employed friends and peers contributed to their stress. Further, 26.7% of the respondents reported feeling demotivated when they were not selected despite meticulous preparation, which in turn caused stress. Another 36.7% stated that

they were constantly worried about crossing the upper age limit and that this had become a source of stress during preparation. A notable 40% of the respondents reported experiencing thoughts of quitting preparation due to the stress associated with prolonged preparation and uncertainty.

Among the digital factors, social media emerged as the major stress-causing factor, as reported by 90% of the respondents. Most respondents stated that they turned to social media either for motivation or as a break from long hours of preparation; however, this often resulted in

additional stress. Increased screen time created feelings of guilt for having taken too much rest, while exposure to success stories of other aspirants lowered their confidence and made them question their preparation strategies, thereby contributing to stress. Further, 33.3%

of the respondents reported that online result discussions were stress-causing for them. Overall, social media, which many respondents relied upon as a means of stress relief, resulted in increased screen time and emerged as a major contributor to stress among the majority of respondents.

Table 5: Digital Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation

S. No.	Digital Factors Causing Stress During TNPSC Preparation	Percentage (%)
1	Social media increases anxiety	90.0%
2	Online result discussions increase stress	33.3%

Table 6: TNPSC Recruitment Timeline: Group I, Group II and Group IV Services (2015–2025)

Year	Group I (Total Days)	Group II (Total Days)	Group IV (Total Days)
2015	768 days	484 days	—
2016	833 days (Impact of cases against the recruitment)	—	324 days
2017	—	445 days	258 days
2018	—	539 days	—
2019	362 days	—	180 days
2020	911 days (Impact of COVID-19)	—	—
2022	641 days	687 days	359 days
2024	413 days	329 days	272 days
2025	385 days	349 days	187 days

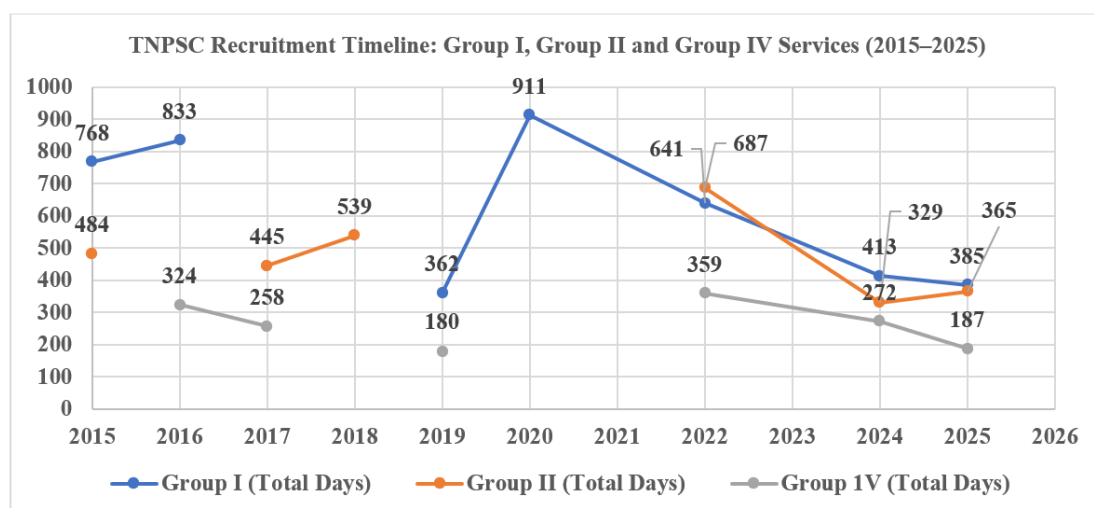


Figure 1: TNPSC Recruitment Timeline: Group I, Group II and Group IV Services (2015–2025)

Note: Gaps indicate years in which no recruitment notification was issued for the respective service.

Long gaps between examination notification and result announcement were highlighted as the third major factor causing stress by 53.3% of the respondents in the present study. Analysis of the 10-year recruitment timeline data (2015–2025) for Group I, Group II, and Group IV examinations conducted by TNPSC revealed irregularities and prolonged recruitment cycles. The Group I recruitment process consists of Preliminary Examination,

Main Examination, and Interview stages. Similarly, until 2023, Group II recruitment involved three stages, namely Preliminary Examination, Main Examination, and Interview. However, currently, Group II and Group IIA Services consist of only Preliminary Examination and Main Examination stages. In contrast, Group IV Services involve only a single-stage written examination consisting of multiple-choice questions (MCQs).

Except for the years 2019 and 2025, in which the Group I recruitment process was completed in nearly one year, the cycle remained considerably lengthy in most years. In 2015, the Group I recruitment process took 768 days, while in 2016 it extended to 833 days due to the impact of cases filed against the recruitment process. In the following years, vacancies were not announced owing to pending cases related to the 2016 recruitment process. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the recruitment cycle, resulting in the 2020 Group I recruitment process extending to 911 days. In 2022, the recruitment process took 641 days, while in 2024 it was completed in 413 days. A similar pattern of prolonged recruitment process was observed across other TNPSC

Group Services during the period 2015–2025. Unlike the UPSC Civil Services Examination recruitment process, which includes Preliminary Examination, Main Examination, interview, and final result declaration within approximately one year, the TNPSC Group I Services recruitment process appears comparatively irregular in duration. For instance, in 2025, the UPSC notification was released on 22 January 2025, and the final results were declared on 6 March 2026, completing the process within nearly one year. Respondents stated that such irregularity and prolonged recruitment cycles in TNPSC create stress, particularly among aspirants who have devoted several years exclusively to preparation and remain uncertain about recruitment timelines.

Table 7: Year-wise Vacancy Position in Civil Service Examination and TNPSC Group Services (2022–2026)

Exams	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Civil Service Examination	1022	1105	1056	979	933
Group I	92	0	90	70	26
Group II/IIA	6021	0	2537	826	Not yet announced
Group IV	10292	0	9491	4662	Not yet announced

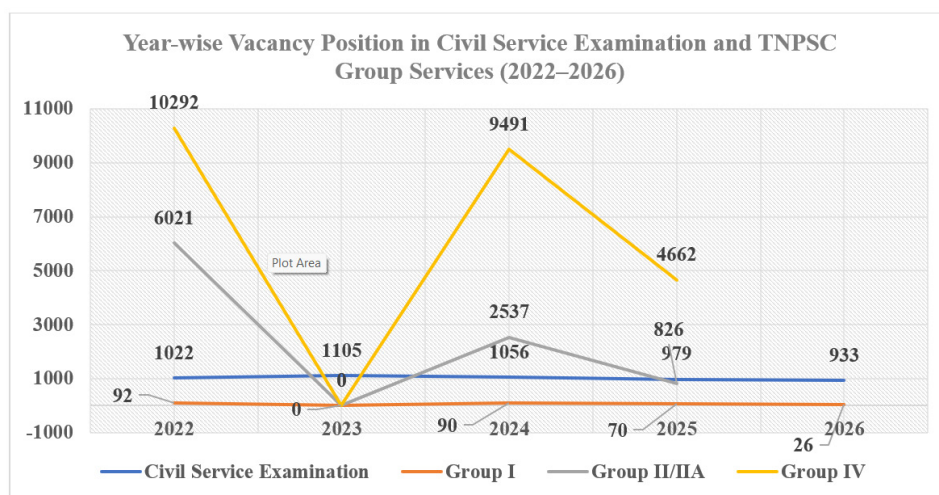


Figure 2: Year-wise Vacancy Position in Civil Service Examination and TNPSC Group Services (2022–2026)

Note: A value of 0 indicates that no recruitment notification was issued for the respective TNPSC service during that year.

The table indicates variation in the vacancies announced under TNPSC Group Services across the years. The UPSC recruitment process has historically maintained a relatively stable examination calendar and vacancy announcement pattern. For instance, the table shows consistency in vacancy announcements during the period 2022–2026 in the Civil Services Examination. In contrast, the TNPSC Group Services data indicate fluctuations across years. Notably, there was no notification for certain Group Services in 2023, and only 26 vacancies were announced for Group I in 2026. Similar fluctuations can be observed across other TNPSC Group Services over the years. Such variation in vacancy announcements and uncertainty in recruitment cycles may contribute to stress among aspirants,

particularly those who devote several years exclusively to examination preparation. Further, some respondents expressed concerns regarding the translation quality of questions in TNPSC Group Services examinations. For instance, respondents referred to an incident in the TNPSC examination conducted for Assistant Draughtsman posts, where one of the Tamil options containing the phrase “Mudi Soodum Perumal” (meaning “the crowned lord”) was reportedly translated into English as “God of hair cutting” (The Times of India, 2025). Respondents stated that such translation errors create confusion during examinations and may affect candidates’ time management and confidence. According to respondents, such issues have become a recurring concern in TNPSC examinations.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the stress-causing factors among aspirants preparing for TNPSC Group I, Group II, and Group IV examinations. The findings reveal that digital factors, particularly excessive social media usage, emerged as the major source of stress among the respondents. Administrative issues such as irregularities in examination notifications, prolonged recruitment cycles, delays in the declaration of results, inconsistency in vacancy announcements, and poor translation of question papers were also identified as major stress-causing factors. The researchers suggest that TNPSC may adopt a regular and predictable recruitment calendar similar to that of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). Timely notification of examinations, prompt declaration of results, consistent vacancy announcements, and improved quality control in the preparation and translation of question papers would help reduce uncertainty, improve transparency, and alleviate stress among aspirants.

Counselling and psychological support services should be made available for TNPSC aspirants through coaching centres and government employment guidance centres. Awareness programmes on stress management, time management, and digital well-being may help aspirants cope with the psychological challenges associated with prolonged examination preparation. The researchers further suggest that greater consideration may be given to graduates in disciplines such as Public Administration and Political Science, as Group I and Group II services primarily involve governance, public administration, policy implementation, and public service delivery. Since these disciplines provide systematic knowledge of governance, public policy, constitutional principles, administrative systems, and public institutions, they may be considered as desirable qualifications for these services. Accordingly, the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission may consider including a bachelor's degree in Public Administration or Political Science as a desirable qualification, without making it a mandatory eligibility criterion, for recruitment to Group I and Group II services.

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