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The role of peer group influence in shaping career choices of rural youth in three Indian states

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Abstract

This study was carried out to examine the relationship between peer group influence and career decision-making among 900 rural senior secondary students from socio-cultural zones across three Indian states namely Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand. The study explored peer group influence among students across zones in Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand. To assess peer group influence at different levels, a self-structured peer group influence questionnaire was used to measure the extent of peer group influence perceived by senior secondary students for career decision making. Equal proportion of boys and girls were randomly chosen for the data collection. Frequency, Percentages and Z-Test were the statistical tools used in the study to analyse the results. Findings of the study revealed that peer group influence was highest in the Majha zone of Punjab and in Kumaon and Garhwal zone of Uttarakhand, with Mewat and Ahirwal in Haryana also showing elevated levels. Bagar zone had the lowest influence. Overall, peer group influence was greater in Uttarakhand than in Punjab and Haryana. The study revealed significant gender differences in peer group influence across various zones. In Punjab's Doaba, girls experienced stronger peer influence, while boys reported higher influence at moderate and low levels. Similar patterns were found in Haryana's Ahirwal and Mewat, with girls showing more high-level influence. In Nardak, more boys reported low influence as compared to girls, while in Kumaon (Uttarakhand), girls experienced stronger peer influence with a significant difference.

Keywords: Career decision making, adolescents, senior secondary students, rural and peer group influence

Introduction

Adolescence is a dynamic and challenging phase in the human life cycle, marked by rapid physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes, including puberty, identity formation and the pursuit of greater independence. One of the most significant challenges faced during this period is making decisions about one's career, which largely depends on personal interests and aspirations. According to Landline (2013)^[6], Erickson's concept of late adolescence highlights that ideological and occupational commitment is a key developmental task during this stage.

Career decision-making requires individuals to assess their own abilities and interests before arriving at a well-informed conclusion. Adolescents must balance submission and independence while developing their decision-making skills alongside other capabilities. Both internal and external factors impact this decision-making process directly or indirectly. The rapid advancements in technology and India's booming economy have made career choices even more complex. With the rise of globalization and the increasing competition for talent, career planning has gained significant importance (Smith 2011)^[12]. It involves a long-term process of making numerous decisions that shape one's

future.

As Hoyt (1991)^[3] asserts, various educational, psychological, sociological, economic and physical factors influence career choices throughout an individual's life. These decisions are shaped by factors such as maturity, self-awareness, intelligence, aptitude, attitudes, parental support, family socio-economic status and peer group influence. Peer groups are youngsters and students' first social group outside of their homes where they look for approval and recognition. Peers are called as motivational factors; they motivate and influence each other's career decisions. Naz *et al* (2014)^[8] examined that peer and friends had a significant role in changing the behaviour of individuals, personality development and decision-making process. Sometimes adolescents are enrolled in certain programmes of study because of their friend's enrolment in the same field. Such adolescents may struggle more to achieve the goals since their options do not align with their interests and abilities in that area. Salami (2006)^[11] looked into the issue of young people who made inadequate career decisions in Nigeria owing to peer pressure, ignorance, lack of experience or the reputation of particular jobs without adequate vocational assistance and career counselling.

According to Wenstrom (1981), students who had not been able to identify a specific career choice according to their own abilities and interests were more influenced by their peers than those who had already selected a choice. In this case, peer pressure had a very strong influence on career choices and it was seen that they were influenced more by their close friends and classmates than their parents and teachers. Study also showed that students who had worse attitude to school and lower expectations were more likely to be attracted towards peers. Researches by Naz *et al* (2014)^[8], Mtemeri (2017)^[7] and Ogutu *et al* (2017)^[9] also showed peer pressure being asset in career decision making of an individual. On the other hand, Edwards and Quinter (2011)^[2] depicted that peer’s advice to the students were less important as compared to family members, teachers and career counsellors. Career decisions are a crucial aspect of a student's life, influenced significantly by parents, teachers, counsellors, peers, and their surrounding environment. They motivate and encourage adolescents to explore their abilities, skills and interests, thereby equipping them to make well-informed decisions regarding their careers. Therefore, this study is important as it explores how peer groups impact the career choices of rural youth, a group often influenced by limited resources and social networks. Understanding these influences can help educators, policymakers and career counsellors design better support systems tailored to the unique needs of rural students across different zones.

Methodology

Sample: The study was conducted across the socio-cultural zones of three Indian states i.e. Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand. Punjab comprises three socio-cultural zones namely Majha, Malwa and Doaba while Haryana is divided into five zones *viz.* Ahirwal, Mewat, Bagar, Nardak and

Khadar. Uttarakhand includes two socio-cultural zones namely Garhwal and Kumaon. From each socio-cultural zone, a list of all the districts was prepared. From socio-cultural zones of each state, proportionate number of districts were selected to represent equal distribution of sample from the states. From each selected district one block was randomly selected i.e. five blocks from Punjab, five blocks from Haryana and four blocks from Uttarakhand to have a representative data from each state. From all the selected blocks, 15 senior secondary schools from Punjab, 15 from Haryana and 12 from Uttarakhand were randomly selected till the sample of 900 students with Arts was completed (300 from each state). Further the 300 students from each state were divided into equal number of boys and girls (150 each) with Arts stream. Diagrammatic representation of the sample selection has been shown in Fig.1.

Research Tools: A self-structured peer group influence questionnaire was used to assess the extent of peer group influence perceived by senior secondary students for career decision making. It had total of 23 statements. It was a three-point Likert Scale with options naming ‘Low=3’, ‘Moderate=2’ and ‘High=1’. For each statement, respondents were asked to select one of the three responses. All statements were positive only indicating a higher score showing low peer group influence. The reliability of the scale was calculated using split-half method and it was found to be 0.80.

These categories were formed using category interval method where minimum and maximum scores of the respondents were considered. Score range for interpretation of peer group influence perceived by students are as follows:

Table 1: Score Range for Interpretation of Peer Group Influence

Levels of Peer Group Influence	Range of scores
High	23-38
Moderate	39-53
Low	54-69

Pretesting: Research instrument was translated to vernacular languages i.e., Hindi and Punjabi. English and Hindi versions were pre-tested on 20 non-sampled senior secondary students with Arts stream from a Government School, Ateli (Haryana) and Government Girls Inter College, Pantnagar (Uttarakhand). Punjabi version of the questionnaire was pre-tested on 10 non-sampled adolescents with Arts stream from Government Senior Secondary School, Dakha (Punjab). Respondents were proficient in understanding all the statements and responded independently.

Statistical Analysis: The obtained data was analyzed using SPSS version 23 software. Frequency, percentages and Z-test were used to analyze the results from collected data.

Data Collection: The students were approached in the schools with the consent of the principals by the letter of requisition from head of the department. The significance and objectives of the study were discussed with them. The students were approached for data collection in their respective schools only. They were assured that their information would remain confidential and would only be used for the research purpose only. Before filling out the questionnaires, the students were provided important instructions such as type of statements and guided them about how the questionnaires were to be filled. Then, the respondents were given questionnaires to fill the most appropriate responses according to them.

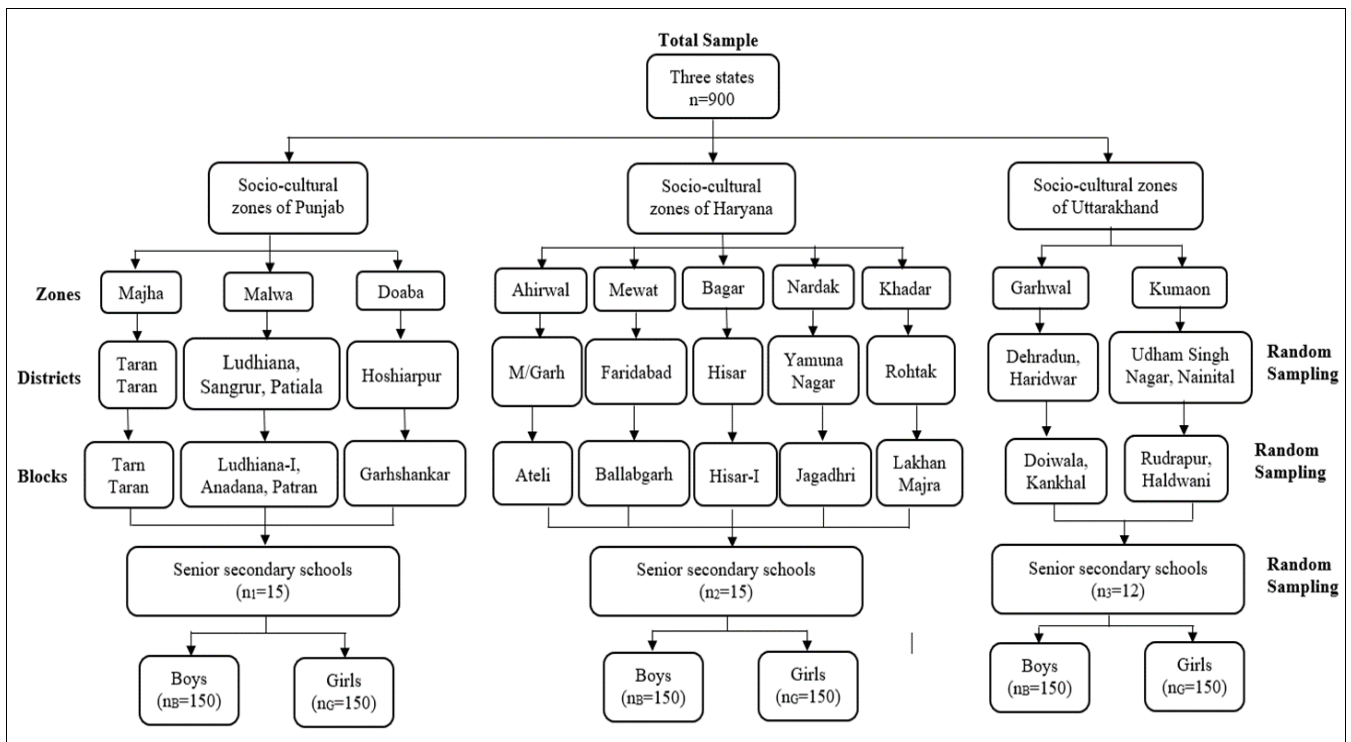


Fig 1: Diagrammatic representation of sample selection

Results

Table 2: Per cent distribution of senior secondary students across three states as per levels of peer group influence (n=900)

Levels of peer group Influence Zones/ States	Low	Moderate	High
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Punjab (n_P= 300)			
Majha (n ₁ = 60)	7 (11.67)	22 (36.67)	31 (51.67)
Malwa (n ₂ = 180)	17 (9.44)	88 (48.89)	75 (41.67)
Doaba (n ₃ = 60)	20 (33.33)	14 (23.33)	26 (43.33)
Haryana (n_H= 300)			
Ahirwal (n ₄ = 60)	10 (16.67)	23 (38.33)	27 (45.00)
Mewat (n ₅ = 60)	10 (16.67)	22 (36.67)	28 (46.67)
Bagar (n ₆ = 60)	20 (33.33)	21 (35.00)	19 (31.67)
Nardak (n ₇ = 60)	9 (15.00)	25 (41.67)	26 (43.33)
Khadar (n ₈ = 60)	14 (23.33)	25 (41.67)	21 (35.00)
Uttarakhand (n_U= 300)			
Garhwal (n ₉ = 150)	11 (7.33)	66 (44.00)	73 (48.67)
Kumaon (n ₁₀ = 150)	7 (4.67)	64 (42.67)	79 (52.67)

Table 2 and Fig 2 presents per cent distribution of senior secondary students across three states as per levels of peer group influence. In Punjab, the Majha zone had the more percentage of individuals experienced high peer group influence (51.67%), followed by Doaba (43.33%) and Malwa (41.67%). The moderate influence category was most prominent among Malwa students (48.89%). Low influence was relatively low across all three zones comparatively more in Doaba (33.33%). In Haryana, Mewat (46.67%) and Ahirwal (45.00%) showed more peer group influence while, Bagar (31.67%) had the lowest percentage

of peer group influence at high level. The moderate category was dominant in both Nardak and Khadar (41.67%), whereas, low influence was most notable in Bagar (33.33%). In Uttarakhand, Kumaon students (52.67%) had the more influence at high level, followed by Garhwal (48.67%). The moderate level peer group influence was prominent in both Garhwal (44.00%) and Kumaon (42.67%) while low level of peer group influence was lowest in both Kumaon (4.67%) and Garhwal (7.33%), indicating a strong peer group influence in this state as compared to Punjab and Haryana.

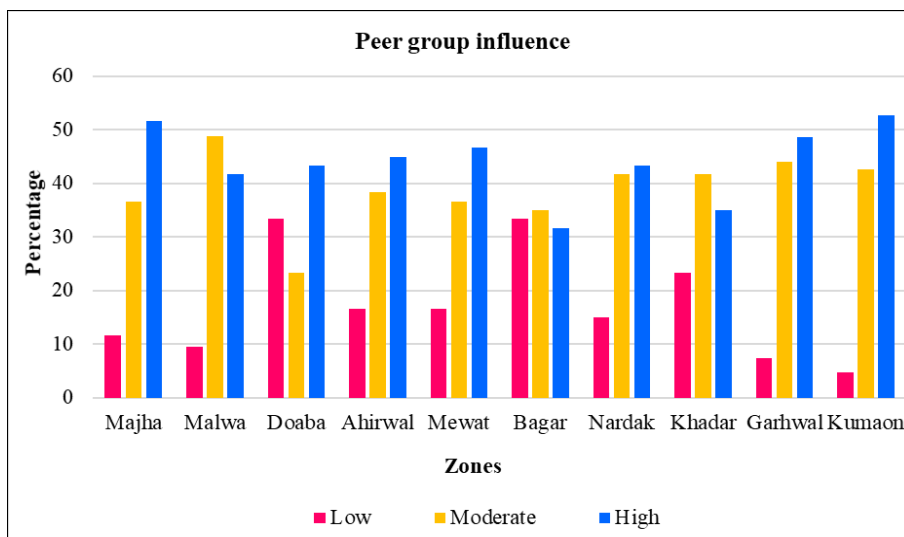


Fig 2: Per cent distribution of senior secondary students across three states as per levels of peer group influence

Gender differences in distribution of the adolescents as per levels of peer group influence across three states had been depicted in Table 3 and Fig 3 to 5. In Doaba, significant differences were observed at all levels. A higher percentage of girls (70.00%) experienced significantly ($Z=4.17$; $p<0.01$) high level of peer group influence as compared to boys (16.67%). Contrarily, boys (36.67%) perceived more peer group influence than girls (10.00%) at moderate level with a significant difference ($Z=2.44$; $p<0.05$). Likewise, boys reported significantly ($Z=2.19$; $p<0.05$) more peer group influence at low level (46.67%) as compared to girls (20.00%). In Ahirwal zone of Haryana, high peer influence with a significant difference ($Z=3.89$; $p<0.01$) was more prevalent among girls (70.00%) as compared to boys (20.00%), whereas, more boys (53.33%) experienced

moderate peer influence as compared to girls (23.33%) with a significant difference ($Z=2.39$; $p<0.05$). The gender differences in low level of peer group influence also showed significant difference ($Z=2.08$; $p<0.05$) with more proportion of boys (26.67%) as compared to girls (6.67%). In Mewat, a striking significant difference ($Z=4.66$; $p<0.01$) was found with 76.67 per cent of girls experiencing high level of peer influence as compared to only 16.67 per cent of boys. Half of the boys (50.00%) were under moderate peer group influence as compared to nearly quarter of the girls (23.33%) with a significant difference ($Z=2.14$; $p<0.05$). Additionally, one-third of boys (33.33%) reported low peer influence while none of the girls fell into this category with a significant difference ($Z=3.46$; $p<0.01$).

Table 3: Gender differences in distribution of the adolescents as per levels of peer group influence across three states (n=900)

Peer group influence States/ Zones		Low	Moderate	High
		f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Punjab (n_p= 300)				
Majha (n ₁ =60)	Boys	3 (10.00)	11 (36.67)	16 (53.33)
	Girls	4 (13.33)	11 (36.67)	15 (50.00)
	Z-value	0.40	0.00	0.26
Malwa (n ₂ =180)	Boys	5 (5.56)	49 (54.44)	36 (40.00)
	Girls	12 (13.33)	39 (43.33)	39 (43.33)
	Z-value	1.78	1.49	0.45
Doaba (n ₃ =60)	Boys	14 (46.67)	11 (36.67)	5 (16.67)
	Girls	6 (20.00)	3 (10.00)	21 (70.00)
	Z-value	2.19*	2.44*	4.17**
Haryana (n_H= 300)				
Ahirwal (n ₄ =60)	Boys	8 (26.67)	16 (53.33)	6 (20.00)
	Girls	2 (6.67)	7 (23.33)	21 (70.00)
	Z-value	2.08*	2.39*	3.89**
Mewat (n ₅ =60)	Boys	10 (33.33)	15 (50.00)	5 (16.67)
	Girls	0 (0.00)	7 (23.33)	23 (76.67)
	Z-value	3.46**	2.14*	4.66**
Bagar (n ₆ =60)	Boys	12 (40.00)	10 (33.33)	8 (26.67)
	Girls	8 (26.67)	11 (36.67)	11 (36.67)
	Z-value	1.09	0.27	0.83
Nardak (n ₇ =60)	Boys	8 (26.67)	11 (36.67)	11 (36.67)
	Girls	1 (3.33)	14 (46.67)	15 (50.00)
	Z-value	2.53*	0.79	1.04
Khadar	Boys	6 (20.00)	15 (50.00)	9 (30.00)

(n ₈ =60)	Girls	8 (26.67)	10 (33.33)	12 (40.00)
	Z-value	0.61	1.31	0.81
Uttarakhand (n₀= 300)				
Garhwal (n ₉ =150)	Boys	4 (5.33)	33 (44.00)	38 (50.67)
	Girls	7 (9.33)	33 (44.00)	35 (46.67)
	Z-value	0.94	0.00	0.49
Kumaon (n ₁₀ =150)	Boys	6 (8.00)	37 (49.33)	32 (42.67)
	Girls	1 (1.33)	27 (36.00)	47 (62.67)
	Z-value	1.94	1.65	2.45*

**Significant at 0.01

*Significant at 0.05

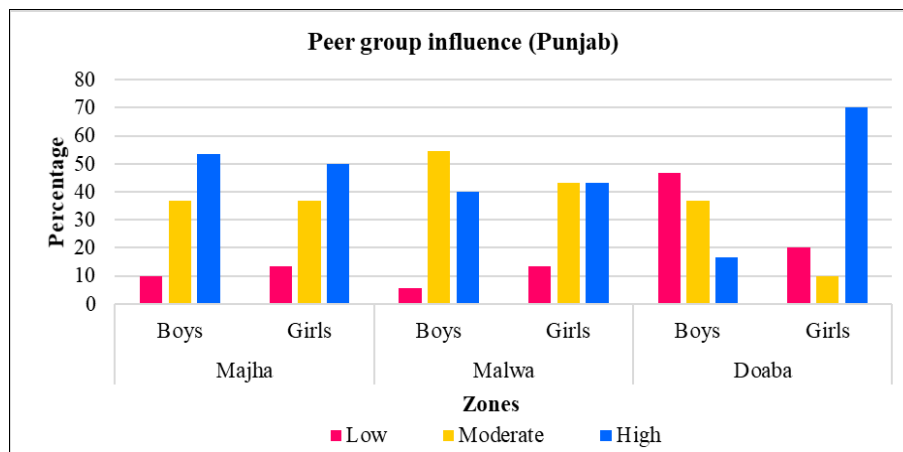


Fig 3: Gender differences in distribution of the adolescents as per levels of peer group influence in Punjab

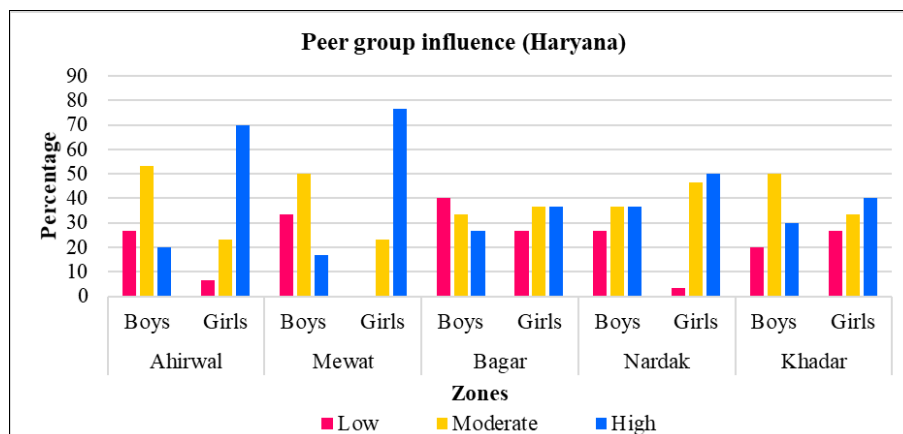


Fig 4: Gender differences in distribution of the adolescents as per levels of peer group influence in Haryana

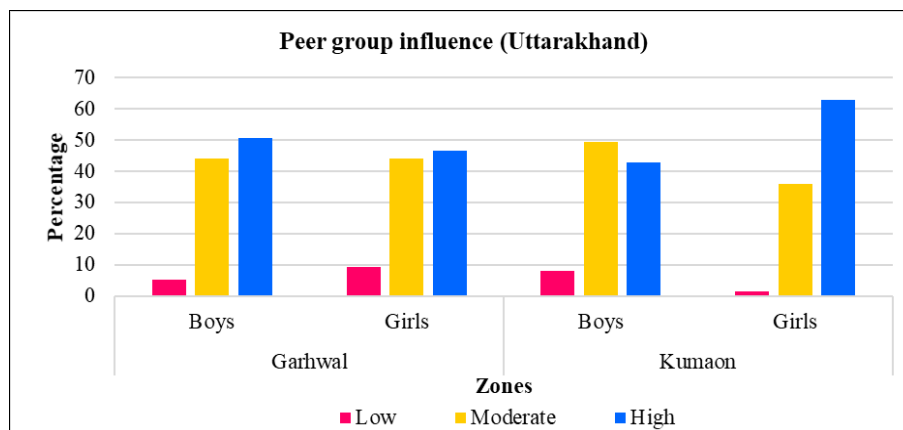


Fig 5: Gender differences in distribution of the adolescents as per levels of peer group influence in Uttarakhand

In Nardak zone (Haryana), more boys (26.67%) perceived low peer group influence than girls (3.33%), with a significant difference ($Z=2.53$; $p<0.05$). More girls (62.67%) were found at high level of peer group influence as compared to boys (42.67%) with a significant gender difference ($Z=2.45$; $p<0.05$) in Kumaon zone of Uttarakhand. Majha and Malwa zones in Punjab; Bagar and Khadar zones in Haryana and Garhwal in Uttarakhand showed no significant differences in peer group influence.

Discussion

The highest proportion of students exhibited strong peer group influence across all states. In Punjab, the Majha zone recorded the highest percentage of students who experienced high levels of peer group influence. In alignment with these results, a study carried out by Kaur *et al* (2021) ^[4] reported that majority of the youngsters migrated abroad just after completing secondary level education, indicating peer pressure as a primary factor driving their migration from rural Punjab. Students in Haryana and Uttarakhand also exhibited strong peer group influence at moderate and high levels. Low peer influence was least observed across all three states, reinforcing the overall impact of peer groups on adolescents. In support of these findings, a study by Pujilestari and Tentama (2021) ^[10] showed that peers had a positive and significant influence on career decision making of students. Similar to above results, Naz *et al* (2014) ^[8] also concluded that peers and friends play a dominant role in academic choices and career decision-making. Moreover, the findings of the study highlighted positive influence of peer group on subject selection, class choice, laboratory and library use, book selection and support in homework and co-curricular activities.

The findings highlighted a few significant gender differences in peer group influence in Doaba zone of Punjab, Ahirwal and Mewat zone of Haryana. High proportion of boys perceived peer group influence at low and moderate levels, whereas, more girls perceived at high level. Similarly, Nardak zone of Haryana also reported significant gender difference at low level of peer group influence where, boys perceived more influence. In Kumaon zone (Uttarakhand), more girls perceived high peer group influence than boys with a significant gender difference. Aligned with above aforementioned results, Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) ^[5] concluded that girls were more influenced by their friends and made choices inspired by them. In contrast to above study, Bhavne *et al* (2011) ^[1] indicated more peer group influence among boys as compared to girls because girls generally feel more connected with the parents, family members and teachers, hence receive a lot of support to develop coping skills. Boys generally do not share emotions especially with family members and are more likely to confide in peers.

Conclusion

In Punjab, the Majha zone recorded the highest proportion of students experiencing strong peer group influence, followed by the Doaba and Malwa zones. In Haryana, higher levels of peer influence were observed in Mewat and Ahirwal, whereas Bagar exhibited the lowest levels. In Uttarakhand, students from Kumaon and Garhwal reported

the strongest peer group influence, with minimal instances of low influence, indicating that peer groups exert a comparatively greater impact in Uttarakhand than in Punjab and Haryana.

Significant gender differences in peer group influence were observed across several zones. In Punjab's Doaba zone, a higher proportion of girls experienced strong peer influence compared to boys, while boys reported higher influence at moderate and low levels. Similar patterns were found in Haryana's Ahirwal and Mewat zones, where girls showed significantly greater high-level peer influence, whereas boys experienced higher influence at moderate and low levels. In Haryana's Nardak zone, more boys reported low peer group influence compared to girls. In Uttarakhand's Kumaon zone, a greater proportion of girls experienced high peer influence than boys. However, no significant gender differences were noted in the Majha and Malwa zones of Punjab, the Bagar and Khadar zones of Haryana and Garhwal zone of Uttarakhand.

Recommendations

- Enhance parental and teacher involvement in the career decision-making process to balance peer group influence and provide diversified support to students.
- Promote awareness campaigns and workshops focusing on independent decision-making skills among adolescents, particularly in regions with strong peer-driven choices.

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