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A Comparative Study on Career Readiness and Career Identity Among Undergraduate Students: Influence of Gender, Medium of Instruction, and Academic Background

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***Abstract*: This study investigates the factors influencing career readiness and career identity among undergraduate students, focusing on demographic, educational, and contextual variables. The readiness and stronger career identity and commitment compared to their male counterparts. Similarly, students instructed in English exhibit significantly greater career readiness and stronger career identity than those taught in Tamil. However, no statistically significant differences were found across academic streams (Arts, Commerce, and Science), suggesting uniformity in career preparedness across disciplines. Additionally, neither residential area (rural, semi-urban, urban) nor college location had a significant impact on career readiness or career identity, although slight trends favoring semi-urban areas were observed. The type of school attended and students' preferred career paths did not significantly affect their career readiness or identity, despite marginally higher scores among private school students and those aspiring for higher education. These findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions that account for language and gender-based disparities while supporting holistic career development across diverse student populations.**

***Keywords*: Career Readiness, Career Identity, Undergraduate Students, Gender Differences, Medium of Instruction.**

1. Introduction

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood marks a critical period in which individuals make foundational decisions regarding their educational and professional futures. This phase is often characterized by exploration, uncertainty, and the need for informed guidance. Career readiness the extent to which individuals are prepared to make informed choices and succeed in postsecondary education or the workforce plays a pivotal role in supporting successful transitions. For many students, particularly those from underserved backgrounds with limited access to quality educational resources and guidance (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010), developing career readiness skills is not only beneficial but essential.

Underserved adolescents often face significant barriers that hinder their ability to explore career pathways and develop the necessary skills for academic and professional advancement. These barriers include inadequate access to information, mentoring, and structured support systems that promote career development (Gee et al., 2020). In response, various college and career readiness programs have been developed to help students cultivate positive behaviors, attitudes, and skills, along with opportunities to explore college and career aspirations (Bates et al., 2019; Oyserman et al., 2002). However, existing career readiness initiatives often fall short in addressing the specific needs of underserved populations, particularly in areas such as social-emotional development and life skills, which are critical components of long-term career success.

Simultaneously, the concept of career identity has gained prominence in the literature as a key psychological construct influencing individuals' career choices and trajectories. Career identity refers to an individual's understanding of who they are in a career context, including their values, goals, motivations, and perceived roles (Fugate & Kinicki, 2004). In today's rapidly evolving economic and technological landscape—characterized by non-linear, boundaryless careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009)—the ability to adapt and maintain a strong sense of identity is increasingly essential. Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) highlights career adaptability—the readiness to cope with changing work roles—as a foundational element influencing the development of career identity. Empirical studies have consistently shown that higher levels of career adaptability are associated with stronger and more coherent career identities over time (Negru-Subtirica, 2015; Tien & Wang, 2017).

Given the growing emphasis on adaptability and self-directed career management, it becomes imperative to investigate how career readiness initiatives contribute to the formation of career identity, particularly among undergraduate students who are in a critical phase of career exploration. While some research has examined the effects of CCR programs on skill development and educational outcomes, less attention has

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been given to their role in shaping career identity—especially for students who require holistic and inclusive support systems.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of career readiness on career identity among undergraduate students. By examining this relationship, the study aims to generate insights that can inform the design of more effective, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate career readiness programs that not only prepare students for the workforce but also help them build a strong and adaptable sense of career self.

2. Career Readiness

During the transition to young adulthood, adolescents increasingly grapple with decisions about their educational and professional futures. Many underserved adolescents—defined as those with inequitable access to educational resources (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010)—face limited choices due to their lack of access to interventions and supports that develop their college and career know-how (Gee et al., 2020). Interventions such as college and career readiness (CCR) curricular programs can help youth build positive attitudes, behaviors, and skills, while also supporting the exploration of their emerging college and career aspirations (Bates et al., 2019; Oyserman et al., 2002). Although several CCR programs have been developed and implemented for youth more broadly (e.g., Perry, Wallace, & McCormick, 2018), there is still limited understanding of how these programs can be tailored to benefit underserved adolescents—many of whom may require supports beyond academic skill-building. These supports include social-emotional and life skill development, which are not always emphasized in mainstream CCR programs.

3. Career Identity

Economic, societal, and technological advancements have necessitated the need for individuals to adjust, adapt, and display flexibility a requirement further emphasized during the recent pandemic (Rivera & Shapoval, 2021). The notions of protean and boundaryless careers have gained traction, highlighting the individual's responsibility in proactively managing their own career. Adaptability is now seen as a pivotal element in achieving career success (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Career identity refers to an individual's self-awareness and understanding of the motivations behind selecting a specific career. It is intertwined with one's aspirations, values, and sense of purpose (Fugate & Kinicki, 2004). According to Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013), career adaptability serves as a crucial resource that influences adaptive responses and outcomes particularly by enhancing career identity. Empirical research supports this view: Negru-Subtirica (2015) and Tien and Wang (2017) found that career adaptability positively influences career identity. Longitudinal studies have shown that career adaptability measured at one point in time significantly predicts higher levels of career identity six months later (Negru-Subtirica, 2015). This indicates that greater adaptability in early career development correlates with a stronger and more coherent career identity over time.

Additionally, research on interventions such as decision-making skills training and exposure to diverse career opportunities has shown that these experiences significantly clarify and strengthen career identity (Konstam & Celen-Demirtas, 2015). These findings underscore the importance of fostering adaptability and self-awareness as foundational strategies for enhancing career identity.

4. Review of Literature

Career readiness preparation contributes to vocational development by helping young people to identify a career goal; plan a career path that specifies the training and work experiences needed to achieve the goal; and obtain the skills, knowledge and support to move along the specified path. Skills and knowledge gained go beyond the mechanics of getting and keeping a job. They include building relational competencies necessary for positive, productive relationships at work, and managing the life circumstances that stand as barriers to staying connected to employment and/or training (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Collins, 2001; Lemaire & Mallik, 2002; Wertheimer, 2002). They also support self-determination; the ability of young people to participate in making their own career decisions (Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009). The career readiness preparation of young people in foster care is, however, often interrupted. Consequently, these young people experience a disruption in their vocational development and successful transition to adulthood. This disruption is caused by many factors such as: the challenging life circumstances caused by poverty; families (birth or foster) lacking the knowledge, skills and social networks to support their children in academic and vocational attainment; schools that do not offer resources for career exploration and planning; and limited exposure to career choices Blustein et al., (2002) Exploring the longitudinal relationship between career adaptability, career commitment, career identity, and career well-being among Chinese undergraduate nursing students. A mediation effect analysis was performed. The Career Adaptability Scale, the Chinese version of Career commitment, the Career identity Scale, and the Career well-being Scale were used as research instruments. Six hundred ninety-two nursing students were followed up in two waves to explore the relationships among career adaptability, career commitment, career identity, and career well-being. Career commitment plays a longitudinal mediator role in the relationship between career adaptability and career identity and the relationship between career adaptability and career well-being. Kevin A. Gee and Carolynne Beno (2020) studied a pilot college and career readiness curriculum intervention called Paths to the Future for All (P2F4A). P2F4A takes a developmental approach to college and career development, weaving together the procedural know-how of college and career planning with a broader focus on building social-emotional skills that support positive trajectories towards the future. We evaluated pre-post changes in adolescents' career-related and social-emotional outcomes alongside views of their personal growth.

5. Research Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative research approach to examine the factors affecting career readiness among undergraduate students. This methodology was chosen to facilitate systematic data collection and enable statistical analysis, allowing for the exploration of relationships between key variables. These variables included Career Readiness encompassing occupational expertise, labor market knowledge, soft skills, career involvement, career confidence, career clarity, social support from school, family, and friends, networking, career exploration, and self-exploration and Career Identity and Commitment, which involves identification with commitment, reconsideration of commitment, understanding the relevance of learning, perceived program relevance, career exploration and awareness, and occupational mobility.

A. Participants and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised undergraduate students enrolled in government arts and science colleges. To ensure representation across various fields of study, academic years, and types of institutions, a stratified random sampling method was employed. The study included a total of 418 participants, with deliberate efforts to maintain gender balance and demographic diversity.

B. Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire that incorporated items on Career Readiness adapted from Julian Marciniak, Andreas Hirschi, Claire S. Johnston, and Madeleine Haenggli (2020), and Career Identity adapted from S. Ananthram, S. Bawa, D. Bennett, and C. Gill (2022). The questionnaire was organized into several sections, including Career Readiness factors such as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, as well as demographic information like age, gender, and academic background. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument's validity and reliability were ensured through expert evaluation and a pilot study involving 30 students to confirm clarity and consistency.

C. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed electronically via university portals and academic networks to reach a wide range of participants. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all respondents. The anonymity and confidentiality of all responses were rigorously upheld throughout the study.

6. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using SPSS version 21. Descriptive statistics summarized the demographic information and overall patterns, while inferential statistics—such as correlation analysis and multiple regression—were used to explore the relationships between career readiness and its predictors. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was adopted for all statistical tests.

Table 1
Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.981	67

Table 2
Frequency and percentage distribution of demographic variables

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	221	52.9
Male	197	47.1
Field of Study	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Arts	128	30.6
Commerce	145	34.7
Science	145	34.7
Residential Area	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Rural	182	43.5
Semi urban	42	10.0
Urban	194	46.4
College Location	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Rural	120	28.7
Semi-urban	55	13.2
Urban	243	58.1
Type of School	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Government aided school	78	18.7
Government school	294	70.3
Private school	46	11.0
Medium of Instruction	**Frequency**	**Percent**
English	132	31.6
Tamil	286	68.4
Preferred Career Path	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Entrepreneurship	31	7.4
Government job	220	52.6
Higher studies (Masters, PhD)	80	19.1
Not decided	24	5.7
Private sector job	63	15.1

N=418

Table 3
Independent samples t-Test for gender differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factor	Gender	M	SD	t	P
Career Readiness	Female	3.54	.647	3.181	.002
	Male	3.33	.680		
Career Identity and Commitment	Female	3.69	.689	3.752	.001
	Male	3.43	.702		

The demographic profile of the 418 undergraduate respondents highlights several interesting trends. The gender distribution is even, with a slightly higher proportion of females (52.9%) compared to males (47.1%). In terms of field of study, Commerce and Science students are equally represented (34.7% each), while Arts students make up 30.6% of the sample. A majority of the respondents reside in urban (46.4%) or rural (43.5%) areas, with only 10% from semi-urban areas. Most students attend colleges situated in urban areas (58.1%), suggesting a concentration of higher education institutions in cities. Regarding schooling background, a significant majority (70.3%) studied in government schools, while private school attendees account for only 11%. The medium of instruction is predominantly Tamil (68.4%), reflecting the strong regional language preference. As for career aspirations, over half of the respondents (52.6%) aim for government jobs, followed by those pursuing higher studies (19.1%) and private sector employment (15.1%). A smaller portion of students are interested in entrepreneurship (7.4%) or are undecided (5.7%). These patterns underscore the influence of educational and

socio-demographic factors on students' career preferences and aspirations.

The independent samples t-test results presented in Table 3 reveal significant gender differences in both Career Readiness and Career Identity and Commitment among the respondents. Female participants scored significantly higher on Career Readiness (M = 3.54, SD = 0.647) compared to their male counterparts (M = 3.33, SD = 0.680), with the difference reaching statistical significance (t = 3.181, p = .002). Similarly, for Career Identity and Commitment, female respondents again scored higher (M = 3.69, SD = 0.689) than male respondents (M = 3.43, SD = 0.702), with this difference also statistically significant (t = 3.752, p = .001). These findings suggest that female participants demonstrate greater readiness for their careers and exhibit stronger identification and commitment to their professional identities compared to male participants.

The independent samples t-test results in Table 4 indicate significant differences in Career Readiness and Career Identity and Commitment based on the medium of instruction. Students who studied in English reported significantly higher Career Readiness (M = 3.61, SD = 0.595) compared to those instructed in Tamil (M = 3.36, SD = 0.689), with the difference being statistically significant (t = 3.618, p = .001). Likewise, for Career Identity and Commitment, English-medium students scored higher (M = 3.75, SD = 0.624) than their Tamil-medium peers (M = 3.48, SD = 0.726), and this difference was also statistically significant (t = 3.655, p = .001). These results suggest that students educated in English demonstrate greater career readiness and stronger career identity and commitment compared to students educated in Tamil.

The One-Way ANOVA results in Table 5 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in Career Readiness and Career Identity and Commitment across the three fields of study: Arts, Commerce, and Science. For Career Readiness, the mean scores were 3.35 (SD = 0.731) for Arts, 3.52 (SD = 0.674) for Commerce, and 3.45 (SD = 0.603) for science, with the differences not reaching statistical significance (F = 2.271, p = 0.104). Similarly, for Career Identity and Commitment, the mean scores were 3.47 (SD = 0.782) for Arts, 3.66 (SD = 0.664) for Commerce, and 3.57 (SD = 0.668) for science, also showing no significant difference (F = 2.556, p = 0.079). Although the Commerce students showed slightly higher mean scores in both factors, these differences are not statistically significant, suggesting that field of study does not have a meaningful impact on career readiness or career identity and commitment among the respondents.

The One-Way ANOVA results in Table 6 show that there are no statistically significant differences in Career Readiness across different residential areas (Rural, Semi Urban, and Urban), with mean scores of 3.47 (SD = 0.630) for Rural, 3.51 (SD = 0.557) for Semi Urban, and 3.40 (SD = 0.728) for Urban areas (F = 0.768, p = 0.465). For Career Identity and Commitment, although the mean scores vary—3.61 (SD = 0.666) for Rural, 3.76 (SD = 0.731) for Semi Urban, and 3.49 (SD = 0.730) for Urban—the differences approach but do not reach statistical significance (F = 2.983, p = 0.052). This suggests that residential area does not have a significant impact on career readiness or career identity and commitment among the respondents, although there is a marginal trend toward higher career identity and commitment in Semi Urban students.

The One-Way ANOVA results presented in Table 7 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in Career Readiness and Career Identity and Commitment based on college location. For Career Readiness, the mean scores were 3.42 (SD = 0.615) for Rural colleges, 3.64 (SD = 0.523) for Semi Urban colleges, and 3.41 (SD = 0.720) for Urban colleges, with the differences approaching but not reaching statistical significance (F = 2.686, p = 0.069). Similarly, for Career Identity and Commitment, the mean scores were 3.57 (SD = 0.637) for Rural, 3.70 (SD = 0.648) for Semi Urban, and 3.53 (SD = 0.749) for Urban colleges, showing no significant difference (F = 1.212, p = 0.299). These findings suggest that

Table 4
Independent samples t-Test for medium of instruction differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factor	Medium of Instruction	M	SD	t	P
Career Readiness	English	3.61	.595	3.618	.001
	Tamil	3.36	.689		
Career Identity and Commitment	English	3.75	.624	3.655	.001
	Tamil	3.48	.726		

Table 5
One-way ANOVA for field of study differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factors	Field of Study	M	SD	F	p
Career Readiness	Arts	3.35	.731	2.271	.104
	Commerce	3.52	.674		
	Science	3.45	.603		
Career Identity and Commitment	Arts	3.47	.782	2.556	.079
	Commerce	3.66	.664		
	Science	3.57	.668		

Table 6
One-way ANOVA for residential area differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factors	Residential Area	M	SD	F	p
Career Readiness	Rural	3.47	.630	.768	.465
	Semi Urban	3.51	.557		
	Urban	3.40	.728		
Career Identity and Commitment	Rural	3.61	.666	2.983	.052
	Semi Urban	3.76	.731		
	Urban	3.49	.730		

Table 7
One-way ANOVA for college location differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factors	College Location	M	SD	F	p
Career Readiness	Rural	3.42	.615	2.686	.069
	Semi Urban	3.64	.523		
	Urban	3.41	.720		
Career Identity and Commitment	Rural	3.57	.637	1.212	.299
	Semi Urban	3.70	.648		
	Urban	3.53	.749		

Table 8
One-way ANOVA for type of school studied differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factors	Type of School Studied	M	SD	F	p
Career Readiness	Govt. Aided School	3.45	.547	1.171	.311
	Govt. School	3.42	.690		
	Private School	3.58	.723		
Career Identity and Commitment	Govt. Aided School	3.56	.623	2.786	.063
	Govt. School	3.54	.725		
	Private School	3.80	.685		

Table 9
One-way ANOVA for preferred career path differences in career readiness and career identity and commitment

Factors	Preferred Career Path	M	SD	F	p
Career Readiness	Entrepreneurship	3.28	.687	1.019	.397
	Govt. Job	3.43	.717		
	Higher Studies	3.55	.582		
	Not Decided	3.40	.511		
	Private Sector Job	3.44	.649		
Career Identity and Commitment	Entrepreneurship	3.40	.695	2.094	.081
	Govt. Job	3.54	.753		
	Higher Studies	3.75	.562		
	Not Decided	3.45	.638		
	Private Sector Job	3.55	.707		

college location does not significantly influence students' career readiness or their career identity and commitment.

The One-Way ANOVA results in Table 8 show that there are no statistically significant differences in Career Readiness and Career Identity and Commitment based on the type of school studied. For Career Readiness, the mean scores were 3.45 (SD = 0.547) for students from Government Aided schools, 3.42 (SD = 0.690) for Government schools, and 3.58 (SD = 0.723) for Private schools, with no significant differences observed ($F = 1.171$, $p = 0.311$). Similarly, for Career Identity and Commitment, mean scores were 3.56 (SD = 0.623) for Government Aided, 3.54 (SD = 0.725) for Government, and 3.80 (SD = 0.685) for Private school students, with the difference approaching but not reaching significance ($F = 2.786$, $p = 0.063$). These findings suggest that the type of school attended does not have a significant effect on students' career readiness or career identity and commitment, although students from Private schools tend to report slightly higher scores.

The One-Way ANOVA results in Table 9 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in Career Readiness and Career Identity and Commitment based on the respondents' preferred career path. For Career Readiness, mean scores ranged from 3.28 (SD = 0.687) for those preferring Entrepreneurship to 3.55 (SD = 0.582) for those aiming for Higher Studies, with no significant difference across groups ($F = 1.019$, $p = 0.397$). Similarly, for Career Identity and Commitment, mean scores varied from 3.40 (SD = 0.695) for Entrepreneurship to 3.75 (SD = 0.562) for Higher Studies, with the differences approaching but not reaching significance ($F = 2.094$, $p = 0.081$). These findings suggest that students' career readiness and their identification and commitment to their careers do not significantly differ based on their preferred career paths, although those planning for higher studies tend to report slightly higher levels in both factors.

7. Findings

- Female students demonstrate significantly higher levels of career readiness and stronger career identity, and commitment compared to male students.
- Students instructed in English show significantly greater career readiness and stronger career identity and commitment than those instructed in Tamil.
- There are no statistically significant differences in career readiness or career identity and commitment across students from Arts, Commerce, and Science streams.
- Neither residential area (rural, semi-urban, urban) nor college location significantly affects students' career readiness or career identity and commitment, although there are marginal trends suggesting slightly higher scores in semi-urban groups.
- The type of school attended (government, government-aided, private) and students' preferred career path do not significantly influence their career readiness or career identity and commitment, despite slightly higher scores among private school students and those planning for higher studies.

8. Suggestions

- Since female and English-medium students show higher career readiness and identity, colleges should develop targeted career counselling, skill-building workshops, and

mentoring programs specifically designed to support male students and those from Tamil-medium backgrounds to boost their confidence and career preparedness.

- Given that field of study, residential area, college location, school type, and preferred career path do not significantly affect career readiness, institutions should implement broad, inclusive career development activities that cater to the diverse student population, ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities regardless of background or career preferences.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights important demographic and educational factors influencing career readiness and career identity among undergraduate students. Significant differences were observed based on gender and medium of instruction, with female and English-medium students demonstrating higher levels of career preparedness and commitment. However, variables such as field of study, residential area, college location, type of school, and preferred career path did not significantly impact these career-related outcomes. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to support male and Tamil-medium students while promoting inclusive career development initiatives across all student groups. Overall, the study provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to enhance career readiness and identity among diverse student populations.

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