

Perfectionism and Psychological Well-Being Among Malaysian Undergraduates: A Dimensional and Disciplinary Perspective

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Abstract

Perfectionism is commonly perceived as a strength linked to ambition and success, but it is increasingly associated with mental health challenges. For university students, ongoing performance pressures may heighten perfectionist tendencies, contributing to anxiety, depression, and a decline in emotional and psychological well-being. This study examined the relationship between perfectionism and psychological well-being among 154 undergraduate students (74 males, 80 females) at a private university in Malaysia. Quantitative design was employed using the Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS; Smith et al., 2014) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS; University of Warwick & University of Edinburgh, 2006). Data were analyzed using SPSS, incorporating descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, and Pearson correlation. Results indicated that self-oriented perfectionism was the most prominent form among participants. Significant differences in psychological well-being were found between psychology and non-psychology majors, with psychology students reporting lower levels of well-being. A strong negative correlation ($r = -.781$, $p < .001$) was observed between perfectionism and psychological well-being, suggesting that higher perfectionism is associated with poorer mental health. These findings highlight the need for targeted mental health interventions that address perfectionistic thinking and promote psychological resilience among university students.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Psychological Well-Being, University Students, Malaysia, Academic Discipline

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is often viewed as a positive trait, especially in educational settings, where it is linked to high achievement and seen as a pathway to both personal and social success. Perfectionism has been linked to personality traits such as motivation, cognition, emotions, and behavior that are predictive of successful academic performance (Fernández-García et al., 2022). More perfectionistic people tend to be precise, persistent, and driven to display their worth, all of which drive them to strive for higher academic standards and better performance.

While psychological well-being describes how individuals perceive and evaluate their lives (Fernández-García et al., 2022). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), when someone is in good mental

health, they can effectively manage life's typical stressors, work efficiently, and give back to their community. They also acknowledge their own potential. Thus, it is reasonable to say that promoting, preserving, and regaining mental health should be considered a top priority for people across globally, as well as for communities.

Perfectionism, while often seen as a drive for academic success, can have detrimental effects on psychological well-being, especially among university students. Studies have shown that excessive perfectionism is linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Aschwanden, 2019). In Malaysia, the prevalence of mood disorders and psychological distress has significantly increased among young people, with academic pressure identified as a major contributing factor (Hamzah et al., 2023).

Across the globe, 26% of youth (16–24 years old) suffer from a psychological disorders. Low psychological wellness among college students is a worldwide problem that affects Malaysia as well (Hamzah et al., 2023). In 2011, 10% of Malaysian students had mental health issues; by 2016, that percentage had risen to 20%. According to (Hamzah et al., 2023), the pressures associated with academics caused the highest prevalence of psychological discomfort in young people aged 16 to 24. This indicates that mental illness can stem from multiple factors, one of which is academic pressure, as reflected in statistics involving students across different educational levels. Moreover, perfectionism is harmful because it pushes oneself to an unachievable ideal whereby over time it sets people towards continuous failure. This research aims to examine the elements of perfectionism and key indicators of psychological well-being among university students, explore their correlation, compare well-being between psychology and non-psychology majors, and suggest coping strategies to improve mental health in Malaysian undergraduates.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a common and multifaceted personality trait that can influence many areas of life. It may be present in both adaptive, beneficial forms and maladaptive, dysfunctional ones (Stoeber, 2017). Alfred Adler (1870–1937) and Karen Horney (1885–1952) are two well-known psychoanalytic theorists, who did their pioneer research writing on perfectionism using psychodynamic theory (Stoeber, 2017). According to Adler, and supported by Sullivan, Akay-Sullivan, and Bratton's (2016) research, the desire for perfection is a natural and essential part of life, something that is difficult to imagine living without. However, individuals pursue perfection in different ways, which can be identified through the functional or dysfunctional behaviors they display in the process.

According to a study by Lasalle and Hess (2022), interpersonal rewards and demands were most strongly reflected in the external perfectionism subscale. Interestingly, contrary to initial expectations, grades were not classified as external incentives but aligned more closely with perceived and self-oriented perfectionism. Maladaptive perfectionism has been found to contribute both directly and indirectly to a wide range of psychological disorders, physical health issues, and interpersonal or occupational difficulties. It is also associated with stress-related medical conditions such as headaches, gastrointestinal ulcers, chronic fatigue, and hypertension. According to Patterson et al. (2021), the analysis confirmed a range of adverse psychological outcomes associated with maladaptive perfectionism. While the development of targeted interventions remains in its early stages, evidence suggests that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is effective, and several emerging therapeutic approaches show promise.

2.2. Positive and Negative Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being is a broad term that includes having a positive view of oneself, having healthy relationships, having a purpose in life, and having faith in one's capacity to overcome obstacles (Dhanabhakya & Sarath, 2023). It encompasses more than just the absence of mental illness; it also refers to a person's general sense of happiness, fulfilment, and pleasure with life. It represents a mental condition marked by contentment, healthy psychological functioning, and a sense of goal and purpose in life. Nevertheless, according to Huppert (2009), psychological well-being can be destructive when negative emotions that are severe or persistent impair a person's capacity to go about their daily lives.

Khayyer and Jalali (2022) found that perfectionism is associated with elevated levels of both neuroticism and conscientiousness. Interestingly, their study reported a positive correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being. This suggests that while neuroticism typically undermines well-being, the influence of conscientiousness and possibly adaptive forms of perfectionism may contribute positively, highlighting the complex interplay between personality traits and mental health outcomes. A study by Lewis and Cardwell (2020b) found that enrolling in a professional course due to extrinsic factors—such as parental expectations—is less likely to enhance a student's psychological well-being compared to enrollment driven by intrinsic motivation, regardless of the student's personality traits.

2.3. Relationship Between Perfectionism and Psychological Well-Being

Nevertheless, some research indicates that there is a significant or partial correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being. Simon (2022) reviewed the mental health impacts of perfectionism among students, particularly during COVID-19. The study demonstrated that while perfectionism and mental health issues are related, other types of perfectionism might actually benefit students' wellbeing. Similarly, Filipkowski (2021) explored the effects of perfectionism on the mental, social, and physical well-being of graduate students in health sciences. Intriguingly, there were no significant differences in the groups' overall physical health outcomes, but the results showed that adaptive perfectionism had a positive impact on mental health, quality of life, and social interactions while maladaptive perfectionism had a negative impact on these areas.

2.4. Mental Health Comparison of Psychology and Non-Psychology Students

In a cross-sectional study, Suhaimi et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between resilience and mental health status and compared the degree of stress, anxiety, and depression among undergraduate science and non-science students. According to the study, undergraduate science students had much greater levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than their non-science students. These results are consistent with previous research showing that psychological distress is higher among science students than among non-science students, and that academic burnout is a significant contributing factor.

Similarly, Miles et al. (2024b) discovered that across all the academic fields examined, psychology majors had the greatest mental health ratings, confirming earlier studies that connected psychological knowledge to improved mental health. The general pattern indicates that exposure to psychological concepts may promote increased mental health awareness, even though their average score was somewhat low on a conventional grading system. This result could be impacted by coursework variation because not all students take courses that focus on mental health, which involves counselling psychology or abnormal psychology. However, the results suggest that even general psychological instruction could have a beneficial effect on students' mental health. This shows that psychology majors had comparatively higher psychological well-being, which may be explained by prior awareness of psychological concepts, especially the significance of mental health.

The literature review highlighted the significant influence of personality traits, self-esteem, and career decisions, particularly in shaping individuals' vocational paths and decision-making processes. However, existing research has primarily focused on the general dimensions of perfectionism, often overlooking maladaptive forms—particularly narcissistic perfectionism—in both international and local contexts. Given this gap, this research aimed to analyze the correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being among undergraduate students at a private university in Malaysia. By exploring these factors within the Malaysian context, this research aims to support mental health professionals—such as counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers—by providing local data to inform discussions on perfectionism and its impact on psychological well-being, particularly among university students. The findings contribute to existing literature and aim to assist students in managing perfectionistic traits in a constructive manner to promote a healthier lifestyle.

It is therefore anticipated that evidence will demonstrate rigid, self-critical, and narcissistic perfectionism as distinct constructs, each exerting different effects on psychological well-being. Based on these rationales, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Ha1: There are significant dimensions of perfectionism among students at a private university in Malaysia.

Ha2: There are significant indicators of psychological well-being among students at a private university in Malaysia.

Ha3: There is a significant correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being among students at a private university in Malaysia.

Ha4: There is a significant difference in psychological well-being between psychology majors and non-psychology majors at a private university in Malaysia.

Through the exploration of these hypotheses, this research aimed to provide nuanced insights into the factors influencing career decisions among Malaysian undergraduate students, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this important area of study.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, correlational, and cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among rigid perfectionism (RP), self-critical perfectionism (SP), narcissistic perfectionism (NP), and psychological well-being among university students. Standardized instruments were used to measure the variables of interest. The target population comprised of students enrolled in Undergraduate programs specializing in Public Relations and Psychology programs at a private university in Malaysia. A convenience sampling technique was employed, with participants selected based on their availability and willingness to participate.

Perfectionism was assessed using the 45-item Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS; Smith et al., 2016), which measured three higher-order dimensions: rigid, self-critical, and narcissistic perfectionism. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of perfectionism. Items were presented in randomized order to reduce response bias. Psychological well-being was measured using the 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS; University of Warwick & University of Edinburgh, 2006), a unidimensional scale with items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater well-being. Selected items were rephrased in both questionnaires to enhance contextual relevance for the population. The Cronbach's alpha values of 0.943 for the Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS), 0.888 for the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and 0.886 overall. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social

Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0.

4. Result & Discussion

4.1. Demographic Characteristics

The sample consisted of 151 undergraduate students, with 48.3% identifying as male and 51.7% as female. Participants were primarily within the age range of 18 to 29 years. In terms of academic programs, 51.7% (n = 78) were enrolled in the Bachelor in Psychology (BPSY), while 48.3% (n = 73) were enrolled in the Bachelor in Public Relations (BPR).

4.2. Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the elements of perfectionism among private university students in Malaysia. Self-oriented perfectionism recorded the highest mean score (M = 15.87), indicating that students generally hold high personal standards and are self-driven in their pursuit of perfection. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism showed the lowest mean score (M = 11.40), suggesting that students are less influenced by perceived external expectations. Among the perfectionism elements, self-oriented perfectionism—associated with rigid perfectionism—appears to be the most prominent, reflecting students' tendency toward self-imposed high expectations and critical self-evaluation.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis for the Elements of Perfectionism

| GENERAL DIMENSION | SUB-DIMENSION | MEAN | SD |
|-----------------------------|---|-------|------|
| Rigid Perfectionism | Self-oriented Perfectionism (SOP) | 15.87 | 3.93 |
| | Self-worth Contingencies (SWC) | 15.30 | 5.67 |
| | Concern Over Mistakes (COM) | 15.76 | 5.91 |
| | Doubts About Action (DAA) | 15.22 | 5.84 |
| Self-Critical Perfectionism | Self-Criticism (SC) | 11.90 | 5.39 |
| | Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism (SPP) | 11.40 | 4.23 |
| | Other-Oriented Perfectionism (OOP) | 14.07 | 5.50 |
| | Hypercriticism (HC) | 11.66 | 3.94 |
| Narcissists Perfectionism | Entitlement (ENT) | 11.70 | 3.11 |
| | Grandiosity (GRAN) | 12.02 | 3.67 |

Table 2 presents the descriptive analysis of university students' psychological well-being. The mean score of 46.23 indicates a moderate level of well-being, with a wide range (23–70) suggesting considerable variability in students' experiences. Notably, optimism about the future emerged as a key indicator, with 42.2% of respondents reporting a sense of optimism—an attribute often linked to greater emotional resilience and overall psychological health.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Psychological Well-Being

| DIMENSION | MIN | MAX | MEAN | STANDARD DEVIATION |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------------------|
| Psychological Well Being | 23.00 | 70.00 | 46.227 | 15.523 |

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the results of a Pearson correlation analysis examining the relationship between perfectionism and psychological well-being among students at a private university in Malaysia. In this analysis, perfectionism is treated as the independent variable, while psychological well-being is the dependent variable.

The results reveal a strong, statistically significant negative correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being ($r = -0.781$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that students with higher levels of perfectionism tend to report lower levels of psychological well-being. The strength of this correlation suggests a meaningful inverse relationship, underscoring how maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies may detract from students' emotional and psychological health.

These findings provide empirical support to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) associated with H_{a3} , which stated that there is no significant correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being. Instead, the results affirm the alternative hypothesis (H_{a3})—that a significant negative correlation exists between the two constructs. This underscores the role of perfectionism as a potential predictor of reduced well-being among university students. Given the strength and significance of the correlation, the findings emphasize the importance of addressing perfectionistic behaviors in mental health interventions, student support services, and psychoeducational programs.

Table 3: Correlations analysis of Perfectionism and Psychological Well-Being (N=154)

| | PERFECTIONISM | PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Perfectionism | 1.000 | -.781** |
| Psychological Well-Being | -.781** | 1.000 |

Note. $p < .001$.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.4. Independent Sample T-Test

Table 4 reports the results of an independent samples t-test comparing psychological well-being scores between psychology majors and non-psychology majors. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was significant ($F = 31.429$, $p < .001$), indicating that the assumption of equal variances was not met. Therefore, the t -test results assuming unequal variances were used.

The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in psychological well-being between the two groups ($t = -2.707$, $p = .008$). Non-psychology majors reported significantly higher well-being ($M = 49.605$, $SD = 18.035$) compared to psychology majors ($M = 42.936$, $SD = 11.823$).

These findings support the rejection of the null hypothesis associated with H_{a4} , which proposed no significant difference in psychological well-being between the groups. The results suggest that students not majoring in psychology experience significantly better psychological well-being than their psychology counterparts. This discrepancy warrants further investigation into possible academic, emotional, or

contextual factors contributing to the difference.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-Test for Psychological Well-Being by Field of Study
LEVENE'S TEST T-TEST FOR EQUALITY OF MEANS
FOR EQUALITY OF
VARIANCE

| Test | F | P | t | df | P (2 tailed) | Mean (Psych) | Mean (Non-Psych) |
|--------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| Levene's Test For Equality | 31.429 | < .001 | | | | | |
| T-Test (Equal Variances Not Assumed) | | | -2.707 | 128.938 | .008 | 42.936 | 49.605 |

5. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between perfectionism and psychological well-being among university students in Malaysia, addressing four key hypotheses.

Ha1: There are significant dimensions of perfectionism among students at a private university in Malaysia.

The results demonstrated that distinct facets of perfectionism were present among students, with self-oriented perfectionism ($M = 15.87$, $SD = 3.93$) emerging as the most prominent. This reflects a tendency among students to impose high internal standards and engage in self-critical evaluations, particularly in academic contexts. Such patterns are consistent with previous findings by Aryani et al. (2020), who identified stress as a key mediator between self-driven perfectionism and psychological distress. In contrast, socially-prescribed perfectionism had the lowest mean ($M = 11.40$, $SD = 4.23$), indicating that external expectations played a less significant role. These findings substantiate the multidimensional nature of perfectionism in this population.

Ha2: There are significant indicators of psychological well-being among students at a private university in Malaysia.

Descriptive analysis revealed a moderate level of psychological well-being among students ($M = 46.23$; range = 23–70), suggesting variability in individual experiences. This range may reflect the influence of diverse factors such as coping mechanisms, personality traits, academic workload, and interpersonal support. Previous research by Ahmad and Munir (2022) further highlighted procrastination as a significant correlate of psychological well-being, often stemming from perfectionistic concerns. This reinforces the view that psychological well-being is shaped by a complex interaction of behavioral and emotional factors.

Ha3: There is a significant correlation between perfectionism and psychological well-being among students at a private university in Malaysia.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant negative relationship between perfectionism and psychological well-being ($r = -0.781$, $p < .001$). This indicates that higher levels of perfectionism are associated with lower psychological well-being. Students exhibiting maladaptive perfectionism—characterized by excessive self-criticism, fear of failure, and rigid standards—are more likely to experience emotional distress. Parental influence also emerged as a contributing factor. Seki (2023) identified helicopter parenting as a predictor of maladaptive perfectionism and a heightened need

for social validation, both of which are detrimental to psychological functioning during emerging adulthood.

Ha4: There is a significant difference in psychological well-being between psychology majors and non-psychology majors at a private university in Malaysia.

The results of the independent samples t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference in psychological well-being between the two groups ($t(128.94) = -2.707, p = .008$). Non-psychology majors reported higher psychological well-being ($M = 49.61$) compared to psychology majors ($M = 42.94$). This disparity may be attributed to the emotionally demanding nature of psychology programs, which often involve deep engagement with topics such as trauma, psychopathology, and self-analysis. These academic pressures may contribute to increased stress and reduced well-being. This finding aligns with Larionow (2024), who reported that high levels of academic stress and maladaptive perfectionism can negatively impact both psychological and physical health.

In conclusion, the results of this study provide empirical support for all four hypotheses, emphasizing the complex and multifaceted relationship between perfectionism and psychological well-being. The findings highlight the need for targeted mental health initiatives that address perfectionistic tendencies and account for discipline-specific stressors. Developing supportive, tailored interventions may play a critical role in enhancing students' emotional resilience and overall well-being in university settings.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the dimensions of perfectionism and their relationship with psychological well-being among students at a private university in Malaysia. Self-oriented perfectionism emerged as the most prevalent trait, while socially-prescribed perfectionism was less common. Overall, students reported moderate levels of psychological well-being, with notable variation across individuals.

A strong negative correlation was found between perfectionism and psychological well-being, indicating that higher perfectionistic tendencies are associated with lower mental health outcomes. Additionally, a significant difference in psychological well-being was observed between psychology and non-psychology majors, with non-psychology students reporting better outcomes.

These findings have important implications for educational policy, mental health practice, and future research. They underscore the need for tailored interventions that address maladaptive perfectionism and discipline-specific stressors in higher education. Mental health professionals and counsellors should be attentive to the psychological burden of perfectionism and incorporate strategies to foster adaptive coping, emotional resilience, and realistic self-appraisal. By doing so, institutions can play a proactive role in enhancing student well-being and academic success.

While the study contributes valuable insights, several methodological considerations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations; future research could adopt longitudinal or qualitative approaches to examine changes over time. The reliance on self-reported data, though suitable for psychological research, may be influenced by individual interpretation or social desirability bias. Furthermore, as the sample focused on university students in young adulthood, generalizability is limited to this demographic. Lastly, psychological well-being was treated as a single construct; future studies could explore its specific dimensions to deepen the understanding of its relationship with perfectionism.

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