

EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING OF PERFECTIONISM AND SELF-CRITICISM IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism refers to the tendency to set excessively unrealistic high standards for oneself, while self-criticism refers to the tendency to be highly critical when evaluating oneself. The present study used a cross-sectional design to explore the relationship between perfectionism and self-criticism among undergraduate students in Lahore, Pakistan, along with potential gender disparities in these constructs. A purposive sample of 313 undergraduate students, with 156 men and 157 women belonging to different academic disciplines from various public and private institutions in Lahore were obtained. A demographic sheet, followed by The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) and the Forms of Self-Criticizing/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS) were used as assessment tools. Using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, the data was analyzed through descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentages, as well as inferential statistics such as Pearson Product Moment Correlation to investigate the relationship between perfectionism, self-criticism and academic achievement, and Independent Samples t-test to explore gender differences. The findings revealed that perfectionism has a positive and significant association with inadequate self and hated self and a negative relationship with reassured self. Men and women had similar perfectionism and self-criticism scores. Additionally, academic achievement was only associated with hated self. These findings highlight the importance of integrating mental health literacy into the curriculum and developing targeted mental health interventions for students.

Keywords: perfectionism, self-criticism, gender differences, academic achievement, undergraduates..

INTRODUCTION

Every single individual can differ from another in many ways. Students, in particular, can display a broad range of attitudes to their academic pursuits and life philosophies (Gamage et al., 2021). On the one hand, some students keep a relaxed demeanor, skillfully managing their workload without allowing it to interfere

with their mental well-being and self-esteem (Lyons, 2018). These individuals frequently prioritize other facets of life outside academia, recognizing the value of an all-encompassing and holistic approach (Meritnation, 2014). On the other side of this spectrum, are lay individuals who tackle their tasks with unwavering passion

and a steadfast determination to achieve excellence (Aga, 2022). This inclination refers to perfectionism, a personality trait that includes aspiring for excellence while remaining intolerant of one's flaws (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Sarantopoulou (2022) defines it as a mindset characterized by diligent attention to detail, dedication to perfection, and an unshakeable belief in pushing oneself harder to achieve ambitious goals (Sarantopoulou, 2022).

Perfectionism can be understood within the framework of the Cognitive-Behavioral paradigm as perfectionist thoughts encompass several underlying cognitive distortions such as all-or-nothing thinking, mental filters, disqualifying the positives, and labeling (Kelly, J.D. 2015). Perfectionists typically engage in "all-or-nothing thinking", also known as "black-and-white thinking," whereby they consider any error or outcome deemed less than perfect to be an absolute failure and see themselves as either completely successful or completely unsuccessful (Bonfil, 2023). These also use mental filters, focusing on the negative aspects of events while disregarding the broader context. Similarly, they actively reject any positives in any particular occurrence, attributing them to external factors (Hartney, 2023; Nicomochi, 2021). Furthermore, rather than accepting mistakes as an unavoidable part of life, perfectionists are swift to assign negative labels to themselves that do not accurately reflect their abilities (Kelly, 2015; Nicomochi, 2021).

A multidimensional framework regarding perfectionism put forth by Hewitt and Flett (1991) encompasses three types of perfectionism: 'self-oriented perfectionism', 'other-oriented perfectionism', and 'socially prescribed perfectionism'. The self-oriented perfectionist directs idealistic tendencies toward themselves. The other-oriented perfectionist directs perfectionist characteristics outwards by establishing unattainable standards for others. Finally, the socially prescribed perfectionist perceives that their significant others hold unrealistic expectations of them, expecting them to be flawless.

Sometimes parents, whether or not they are aware of it, demand their children to achieve excellence in academics or

extracurricular activities, and are inclined to use harsh tactics, such as verbal abuse and even physical abuse (LCSW, 2015). These early impacts, whether brought about by abusive or negligent parenting approaches or from well-intentioned parents with high expectations, can significantly alter an individual's outlook on perfectionism (Shafir, 2022).

In South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, parents frequently have high expectations

for their children, with the underlying notion that academic success will lead them to a brighter future. These parents also commonly tend to compare their children to their elder siblings and cousins (Athar, 2017). Consequently, young brains become intertwined in the never-ending chase of these expectations.

This concept can be addressed by the Social Comparison Theory, which claims that people evaluate their own social and personal values and competencies by comparing themselves to others (Main, 2023). Such comparisons might cause children to internalize these comparisons, influencing their views on success and failure and contributing to the emergence of self and other-oriented perfectionism (Cherry, 2024).

Striving to accomplish objectives may spark a vicious cycle of self-doubt, and result in individuals becoming harsh with themselves (Chong, 2023; Robins, 2022). This inclination is known as self-criticism, a propensity to harshly critique oneself, giving rise to emotions of inadequacy, failure, and shame when one does not accomplish their goals (Naragon-Gainey & Watson, 2012).

The tendency to be overly critical of oneself can arise from different reasons, including

intrinsic personality traits, learned behaviors, or external factors such as competitive sports or peer dynamics. It can also be reinforced or exacerbated by parental upbringing and expectations. According to Panayotova (2016), individuals who experience rejection, little compassion, and disapproval during childhood are more likely to internalize these negative attitudes.

Self-criticism can be understood through the Reciprocal determinism of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, as internal variables such as opinions regarding oneself, external variables such as societal and familial expectations, and how individuals respond to criticisms behaviorally, all add to self-critical tendencies (Shahar, 2015).

As students cope with the coursework and extra-curricular activities, the competitiveness to achieve excellence intensifies, which can interfere with their academic achievement (Patel, 2018). The present study aimed to explore if perfectionist and self-critical tendencies in undergraduate students are associated with one another in Pakistan, and the variations in the levels of perfectionism and self-criticism for men and women. It also explored whether these constructs are associated with academic achievement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multifaceted phenomenon that entails establishing high personal standards and striving for excellence across various domains of life, including academics, work, athletic endeavors, and interpersonal relationships (Stoeber et al., 2016).

Previous research studies have shown some gender differences in perfectionist tendencies. Sand et al. (2021) discovered that among individuals aged between 16-19 years, women scored relatively higher than men on socially prescribed perfectionism. Similarly, Musumeci et al. (2022) found that women rated greater on 'socially prescribed perfectionism' (SPP) scores compared to men, however, they did not vary in 'other-oriented perfectionism' (OOP) or 'self-oriented perfectionism' (SOP). On the other hand, there has been research that found opposite findings, revealing that men score higher in perfectionism and are more anxious about making mistakes than women (Macsinga & Dobrita, 2010).

Perfectionism may have a significant influence on shaping a student's learning outcomes.

Fernández-Garca et al. (2022) discovered a favorable association across perfectionist tendencies and doing well in academia. However, perfectionism was also negatively associated with psychological well-being (Fernández-Garca et al., 2022). Similarly, Cowie et al. (2018) discovered that "socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP)", characterized by other people's expectations, was consistently associated with a greater incidence of academic anxiety, yet "self-oriented perfectionism (SOP)" or "other-oriented perfectionism (OOP)" did distinctively add to academic challenges experienced by students.

Moreover, research has revealed perfectionism to be negatively associated with

psychological well-being. Hewitt and Flett (1991) suggested that each of the three categories of perfectionism proposed in their model may all result in their own adverse effects including self-pity, self-harm, a lack of confidence, resentment towards other people, rage, depression, and anxiety. Swathi and Upadhyay (2023) discovered an inverse relationship among perfectionist behavior and psychological well-being. In a letter, Nazari (2022) listed many mental health concerns linked to perfectionism, including diminished self-worth, mood disorders, and increased psychological distress. Perfectionists are also susceptible to engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as overworking, poor eating habits, or drug misuse (Filipkowski et al., 2021); (Nazari, 2022); and (Taylor, 2021).

Self-Criticism

Self-criticism or poor judgment of oneself encompasses thoughts and attitudes such as self-hate experienced while failing to comply with self-imposed standards (Özer, 2019). According to research, the most common ways of criticizing oneself include being tough on oneself, having a sense of worthlessness, or feeling like a burden to others (Austin et al., 2021).

Existing literature has revealed some variations in self-critical tendencies among men and women. Asif et al. (2023) reported women displayed greater apprehension of negative evaluation and self-criticism than men, while men had higher levels of

overall self-esteem than women. Similarly, Jerine and Mary (2020) found that self-critical perfectionism is more prevalent in women, is linked with worry over errors, doubts regarding behaviors, and socially stipulated perfectionist tendencies, and can also be affected by cultural and societal norms. In contrast, Harshitha and Sasi (2019) found that men exhibit higher self-criticism compared to women.

According to research, self-criticism has a detrimental impact on a person's life and well-being. Stadlander (2021) discovered that criticizing oneself has a direct link to psychological distress. Harshitha and Sasi (2019) studied 300 individuals, revealing significant negative relationships between self-criticism, self-compassion, and hope, demonstrating that heightened rates of self-criticism correlate to diminished rates of self-compassion and hope (Harshitha & Sasi, 2019).

However, previous research has also revealed positive perceptions of self-criticism. Okan (2023) discovered that Turkish graduate students regard self-criticism as a valuable tool for personal development and growth, associating it with positive concepts such as self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-reasoning.

Perfectionism and Self-Criticism

Self-criticism was identified as an underlying component of perfectionism, covering negative, and critical cognitive reactions to ideas, feelings, or experiences (James et al., 2015). Research has identified positive associations between emotional distress or psychological discomfort and self-critical perfectionism (James et al., 2015). Smith et al. (2017) discovered that self-criticism is a maladaptive perfectionist characteristic that constitutes a strong predictor of mental and personal challenges including anxiety, despair and stress, which results in decreased levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, research has found a favorable association between self-critical perfectionism, burnout and melancholy, demonstrating that individuals who engage in greater judgmental perfectionism, encounter higher incidences of both

burnout and depression (Richardson et al., 2018).

According to research, self-criticism hurts goal progress, but self-oriented perfectionism has a positive effect on goal progress, implying that self-critical individuals tend to make slower progress toward their goals (Powers et al., 2011).

Extensive research has been conducted on both perfectionism and self-criticism separately. However, not much research has been undertaken on the exact relationship of the two variables and their overall association with a student's academic performance. Moreover, the majority of the existing literature appears to be relatively old, dating before 2015. The present study thus intended to address this gap in the existing literature by exploring the interplay between perfectionism and self-criticism among Pakistani undergraduate students and determining if the phenomena have evolved or remained the same through time.

Rationale of the study

In a nation like Pakistan, which has an expanding population of young people and a rapidly developing higher education sector, understanding the mental health difficulties experienced by undergraduate students is of the utmost importance. Insights into the dynamics of these tendencies within this demographic can thus pave the way for specific interventions and individualized care that promote positive self-evaluation and enhance the overall psychological well-being and academic journeys of undergraduate students in Pakistan.

The purpose of the present study was to determine if undergraduate students in Lahore uphold unreasonably high demands and benchmarks for themselves, and if those who aspire for excellence tend to engage themselves more in self-critical behaviors within this South-Asian culture. It also explored whether gender disparities contribute to the prevalence of perfectionism and self-criticism.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a relationship between perfectionism and self-criticism.

H2: There is a difference in perfectionism scores for men and women.

H3: There is a difference in self-criticism scores for men and women.

METHOD

Research Design

A cross-sectional design and correlation study using quantitative measures was employed.

Participants

The present study used a non-probability purposive sampling strategy to gather data from 351 undergraduate students enrolled in various private and public educational

institutions in Lahore. Utilizing an online Sample Size Calculator, a minimum sample number of 285 was generated. The data was collected from both men and women currently enrolled and studying in undergraduate programs. Moreover, students belonging to various academic disciplines and academic years were included. However, the study excluded intermediate and postgraduate students, along with individuals belonging to gender-segregated institutions. Of all the responses gathered, 38 were discarded owing to incomplete answers and the final sample of 313 individuals was used to proceed with the study.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	n	%	M	SD
Age			21.26	1.87
Gender				
Male	156	49.8		
Female	157	50.2		
Academic Institute				
Private	186	59.4		
Public	127	40.6		
Academic Year				
Freshmen	39	12.5		
Sophomore	65	20.8		
Junior	85	27.2		
Senior	124	39.6		

The basic demographic details of the participants are provided in Tables 1. The sample consisted of 156 (49.8%) men and 157 (50.2%) women aged 18 to 27, with a mean age of 21.26 years. 186 (59.4%) participants were students at private institutions while 127 (40.6%) participants were students at public institutions. Moreover, 39 participants (12.5%) were freshmen, 65 (20.8%) were sophomores, 85 (27.2%) were juniors, while 124 (39.6%) were senior students.

Materials and Measures

The information sheet and consent form provided participants with the aims of the study, along with an outline of any associated risks or benefits. It further outlined an overview of the participants' rights, the names and contact information of the researchers, and a consent form.

The instrument booklet then led to the demographic sheet which asked individuals for their age, gender, institution, academic year, and academic major. Participants were also requested to provide their Cumulative Grade Point Averages (CGPA).

The "Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS)" was developed by Dr. Randy Frost and his colleagues in 1990. The FMPS has excellent validity and reliability, with Cronbach Alpha coefficients spanning between 0.87 and 0.91 across diverse studies (Stoeber, 2000). It is a 35-item scale that assesses perfectionist tendencies through four subscales: 'Concern with Precision, Order, and Organization', 'Excessively High Personal Standards', 'Excessive Concern with Parents' Expectations and Evaluation', and 'Concerns about Mistakes and Doubts about Actions' (Buchanan, 2023). A composite score for the subscales, except

the first subscale mentioned, represents the overall level of perfectionism, with high ratings suggesting a greater degree of perfectionistic tendencies. The present study considered the overall level of perfectionism.

The “Forms of Self-Criticising / Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS)” was developed by Paul Gilbert and colleagues in 2004. The FSCRS has excellent validity and reliability, with Cronbach Alpha coefficients spanning between 0.85 and 0.90 for its three sub-scales (Baião et al., 2014). It is a 22-item scale that examines self-criticism through three sub-scales: ‘Inadequate Self’, ‘Hated Self’, and ‘Reassure Self’ (Gilbert et al., 2004). The present study considered all three subscales of self-criticism.

Procedure

Individuals were invited to complete a survey and were initially briefed regarding the main purpose of the study, and that there were no particular risks or benefits involved with them participating. After giving their consent, participants took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete the survey, and any questions from them were addressed right away. Throughout the procedure, strict adherence

to all ethical guidelines was maintained, and the gathered data was encrypted and accessible only to the principal investigator and supervisor. The collected data underwent statistical analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, all ethical considerations were strictly followed.

- The proposal for the study was first submitted to the Board of Studies (BOS), the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the Ethics Review Committee (ERC).
- Permissions for using both measurement tools were obtained from their authors.
- Participants were first briefed on the purpose and aims of this research, as well as their voluntary participation and right to withdraw their data at any time, after which, their written informed consent was acquired.
- Confidentiality of the participants' data was guaranteed and protected, and all concerns about the study were properly addressed.
- There was no deception and no physical or psychological harm to the respondents as an outcome of this research study.

RESULTS

Table 2: Reliability Analyses and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Actual Range (min – max)	M	SD	α
Perfectionism	313	39 - 141	90.61	15.95	.877
Inadequate Self	313	3 - 36	19.36	7.19	.800
Hated Self	313	0 - 20	6.94	5.07	.751
Reassure Self	313	1 - 30	20.94	6.47	.827

The descriptive statistics for the ‘FMPS’ and the three subscales of the ‘FSCRS’ can be seen in Table 2. The two scales were found to have good internal consistencies

in this study, with Cronbach Alpha coefficients of $\alpha=.877$ reported for perfectionism, $\alpha = .800$ for IS, $\alpha = .751$ for HS, and $\alpha = .827$ for RS.

Tests of Normality

Table 3: Skewness and Kurtosis

Variable	N	Skewness	Kurtosis
Perfectionism	313	.010	.497
Inadequate Self	313	-.021	-.431
Hated Self	313	.370	-.842
Reassure Self	313	-.501	-.090

The Skewness and Kurtosis tests of normality were conducted, as shown in

Table 3. The skewness values ranged from -.501 to .370, indicating that perfectionism

and hated self were positively skewed, while inadequate and reassured self were negatively skewed, with all values within the -2 to +2 range. The kurtosis values ranged from -.842 to .497, indicating that the distribution for perfectionism was leptokurtic but platykurtic for hated and

inadequate self, while the distribution for reassure self was close to normal. All values were within the acceptable range of -3 to +3.

Inferential Statistics

H1: There is a significant relationship between perfectionism and self-criticism.

Table 4: Correlation between Perfectionism, Inadequate Self, Hated Self and Reassure Self

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perfectionism	313	90.61	15.95	-				
2. Inadequate Self	313	19.36	7.19	.600**	-			
3. Hated Self	313	6.94	5.07	.416**	.521**	-		
4. Reassure Self	313	20.94	6.47	-.169**	-.331**	-.364**	-	
5. CGPA	313	3.32	.42	.036	.018	-.127*	.037	-

** .p<0.01 level (2-tailed).

* .P< 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A ‘Pearson Product Moment-Correlation coefficient’ was employed to explore the associations between perfectionism and forms of self-criticism as shown in Table 4. The findings revealed statistically significant correlations between the study variables, between perfectionism and IS (r = .600, p< .01), perfectionism and HS (r= .416, p < .01), and perfectionism and RS (r = -.169, p < .01). Moreover, the relationship between these constructs and

CGPA were investigated as a supplementary analysis. The findings revealed insignificant correlations between CGPA and perfectionism, inadequate self, and reassure self. However, a small negative correlation was found for CGPA and hated self (r = -.127, p < .05), with high self-hatred associated with low academic achievement.

H2 and H3: There is a significant difference in perfectionism and self-criticism for men and women.

Table 5: Gender Differences in Perfectionism, Inadequate Self, Hated Self and Reassure Self

Variables	Men (n=156)		Women (n=157)		t (df)	p	Cohen’s d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Perfectionism	90.88	14.18	90.34	17.59	.296	.767	0.034
Inadequate Self	18.59	6.42	20.13	7.82	-1.91	.057	0.215
Hated Self	7.44	4.86	6.44	5.25	1.76	.080	0.198
Reassure Self	21.48	6.27	20.40	6.63	1.48	.140	0.167

An ‘Independent Samples t-test’ was performed to assess potential differences across genders in perfectionism scores and scores on the types of self-criticism, as can be seen in Table 5. A ‘Levene’s Test’ was used to assess the homogeneity of variances for perfectionism (F = 4.59, p = .033), inadequate self (F = 7.97, p = .005), hated self (F = 1.46, p = .228), and reassure self (F = .591, p = .442). The findings revealed no significant gender differences across perfectionism (p = .767), inadequate self (p = .057), hated self (p = .080) or reassure self (p = .140). Thus, both the second and third hypotheses were rejected, suggesting that there were no variations in self-criticism and

perfectionism across men and women in the present sample.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present investigation supported the first hypothesis, exposing a significant relationship between perfectionism and self-criticism. These findings coincide with previous investigations that have found a strong link between perfectionism and self-critical behaviors, such as that conducted by James et al. (2015). According to their findings, people who are more critical of themselves are more prone to participate in perfectionist activities. The present study found significant relationships of

perfectionism with three forms of self-criticism: HS (hated self), IS (inadequate self), and RS (reassure self). The present study is in line with the study by Afshar et al. (2011), who suggested that when confronted with failure, perfectionists associate their performance with their perceived adequacy and competence.

The present study's findings further coincide with the results found by Stevenson and Akram (2022), revealing that both 'socially imposed perfectionism' and 'self-oriented perfectionism' have strong associations with greater degrees of hatred for oneself and inadequacy/Moreover, the present research found a weak negative correlation for perfectionism and reassure self. This is congruent with the study by Gilbert et al. (2006), where researchers discovered that those with a great deal of socially imposed excellence are extremely self-critical and struggle with self-assurance.

They indicated that these individuals have difficulties with comforting themselves when faced with failure or perceived dissatisfaction leading to heightened self-criticism. The study's findings also align with Pakistan's collectivist culture, in which adolescents experience persistent parental and social demands to excel in multiple facets of life (Zaidi, 2014). These frequently lead individuals to internalize those critiques and standards, resulting in them developing their own standards for success, which can cause emotional turmoil if they fall short to live up to both their personal and their parents' expectations (Gittins and Hunt, 2019; Wang & Heppner, 2002). These findings are strengthened further by research by Mahmood et al. (2023), who found that an authoritarian parenting style could lead to the emergence of perfectionism and self-criticism in young adults as they internalize their parents' and society's unrealistic standards.

This present study further investigated gender differences in perfectionism and self-criticism, and the findings rejected both the second and third hypotheses, demonstrating that scores on the two constructs do not vary for men and women in the sample studied. This finding contradicts previous literature, as numerous

studies over the years have identified gender differences in perfectionism. Sand et al. (2021) discovered that girls tend to experience more perfectionism imposed by societal expectations than boys. This disparity could be due to women internalizing societal standards of behavior, appearance, and success, as demonstrated by Habashy and Culbert (2019), who discovered that sociocultural attitudes can significantly influence the growth of maladaptive perfectionist behaviors. Similarly, Jaradat (2013) found that women exhibit more perfectionism compared to men.

Moreover, Livazović and Kuzmanović (2022) found that perfectionism varies among genders. They discovered that women had higher "Parental Expectations" and "Personal Standards," whereas men have more "Doubt in one's own performance". Macsinga and Dobrita (2010) also discovered that men are more concerned with mistakes than women and exhibit higher degrees of perfectionism. On the other hand, the current study corresponds to the remaining results reported by Macsinga and Dobrita (2010), which found no gender disparities in other dimensions of perfectionism.

The present study discovered that there were no variations in Reassure Self (RS), Hated Self (HS) and Inadequate Self (IS) between men and women. This finding contradicts previous studies that revealed that men reassured themselves more and judged themselves less than women (Baião et al., 2014). In contrast, Harshitha and Sasi (2019) reported that among emerging adults, men experienced slightly more self-criticism than women, implying that they can be extremely self-critical, especially when dealing with adverse circumstances. While the higher degree of self-criticism in men was not identified in the current study, the remaining findings from Harshitha and Sasi (2019) are compatible with the present study, as they did not observe any significant differences in self-reassurance, owing to gender.

Additionally, the supplementary analysis done in the present study found academic achievement to be insignificantly associated with perfectionism, inadequate self, and reassure self. This finding

contradicts existing literature that identified a direct link between striving for excellence and academic performance. Fernández-García et al. (2022) observed academic perfectionist tendencies to be favorably associated with academic success among 1287 students. Contrastingly, in their research on the behavioral links of perfectionist tendencies, Bieling et al. (2003) found that perfectionism is not associated with actual achievement or performance, thereby coinciding with the current study.

A meta-analysis of perfectionist behavior and achievement in academic settings by Madigan (2019) revealed perfectionistic concerns to be inversely associated to academic achievement. This finding contradicts the results reported by the present study. However, the inverse negative association found between hated self (HS) and CGPA by the present investigation aligns with the meta-analysis, as it suggests that perceptions of one's incapacity for achieving certain expectations may undermine the academic achievement of pupils.

The discrepancies between previous research and the findings reported by the current study could be attributed to the cultural context. With the growing literacy rates and awareness, both genders are increasingly urged to pursue both facets, and may tend to engage in self-critical thinking in the face of difficulty or failure, possibly decreasing gender differences in perfectionism (Minardi et al., 2021). The current study's data was gathered from co-educational institutes in Lahore, with a nearly equal proportion of men (156) and women (157) participating in the research. This equal representation shows that both genders take an active role in pursuing educational opportunities. This aligns with Hassan et al. (2012), who discovered that both men and women demonstrated equivalent degrees of socially imposed perfectionism as well as perfectionism imposed by themselves when faced with performance expectations and that gender does not influence this relationship.

Additionally, societal factors like social comparisons might inspire both genders to strive for perfection. In their study, Saadat

et al. (2017) discovered social comparisons to be substantially related to perfectionism, implying that individuals who take part in social comparison are more prone to develop perfectionism.

Furthermore, the lack of gender differences could be owed to the instruments used to assess both these constructs. The 'FMPS' and the 'FSCRS' were employed in the present study, both of which are widely used in research, but have not been frequently used in South Asian studies. The investigations that yielded contradictory results used alternative tools to measure self-critical and perfectionist thoughts and behaviors.

Implications

The study provides insight into the prevalence of perfectionist and self-critical tendencies that students in this South Asian culture encounter daily. The Higher Education Commission in Pakistan can adopt measures to develop psychoeducation initiatives within the education system, nationwide. These initiatives can incorporate mental health literacy within the curriculum, scheduling regular classes and workshops on mental health awareness. They can serve as a regular platform for promoting awareness regarding the different barriers to mental health faced by students including academic anxiety, pressures to perform well and conform to societal standards, and balancing between academics, work, and personal life.

Students, particularly undergraduates, employ unhealthy coping mechanisms for dealing with stress. Therefore, access to mental health professionals and both in-person and online sessions should be available throughout the academic year. These sessions need to encourage perseverance and can be employed throughout all educational institutions and levels, helping students adopt healthy coping skills and unlearn their maladaptive behaviors.

In addition, these interventions should be designed to target not just students, but also teachers and parents as it is crucial to build supportive environments for students both within the classroom and at home. The programs will educate parents about the

problems their child may be facing and train them on how to address these problems, keeping in mind the sensitivity of the situation.

In our culture, men often fall victim to stereotypes that expect them to be emotionally strong, making them feel weak when they ask for help. Similarly, women face extreme pressure to conform to standards and behaviors appropriate to their gender role. These initiatives will help destigmatize mental health and emphasize that experiencing problems is normal, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, it is likely that these students encounter numerous other challenges interfering with their psychological well-being, other than perfectionism and self-criticism. The present study, therefore, serves as a platform for future investigations in Pakistan, using a diverse sample, indigenous measures as well as a mixed methods approach.

Limitations

First, the purposive sampling strategy might result in sampling bias since as well as researcher bias. Second, self-report measures are susceptible to response bias, as participants might have given answers that do not accurately reflect their true opinions, as well as social desirability bias, as they may have provided answers which they think will be considered socially acceptable. Finally, the study's instruments, the FMPS and the FSCRS have been developed in Western settings and could fail to adequately represent the Pakistani culture, limiting the validity of the findings.

Conclusion

The present study ascertained the relationship of perfectionism with the three aspects of self-criticism experienced by undergraduate students and as well as whether men and women differ in their scores on these variables. In essence, this study highlights the significance of analyzing students' different psychosocial challenges and barriers to positive mental health in educational settings as comprehending such factors is critical for administrators, teachers, parents, stakeholders, and policy makers seeking to

enhance the educational experiences of students. The study calls for a need to introduce mental health literacy in the curriculum, integrate mental health services and counseling, and create supportive and judgement free environments for students, regardless of their gender. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of advocating for psychological wellness, promoting positivity, and cultivating a more robust student population.

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