

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## PERFECTIONISM AND SOCIAL ANXIETY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between perfectionism and social anxiety among university students. **Methods:** A cross sectional study was conducted among 250 students from the Management and Science University. The respondents were selected by random using numbering method. Their participation is voluntary and answers given were anonymous. **Results:** A total number of 250 university students participated in this study. The majority of them were female (69.6%), 21 years old or younger (52.4%), Malay (71.6%), single (97.6%), from medical and health faculty (60.4%), with Cumulative Grade Point Average, CGPA (40.4%), with monthly income less than 5000 Ringgit Malaysia, 42.8% suffer from severe anxiety and 70.8% have high perfectionism. Univariate and Multivariate analysis showed that social anxiety significantly associated with perfectionism among university students ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) respectively. **Conclusion:** We conclude that social anxiety among university students is due to high perfectionism. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 14 (1): January – June 2013: XX XX.*

**Keywords:** Perfectionism, Social Anxiety

### Introduction

Frost and colleagues [1] defined perfectionism as “the setting of excessively high standards for performance accompanied by overly critical self-evaluation”. Such high standards are associated with a fear of failure [2-4]. The evidence suggests a robust and significant relationship between some subscales of perfectionism and suicidal ideation. Studies have found that both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism are associated with increased suicidal ideation in student and psychiatric samples [5-7]. Preventing suicide and suicidal behaviour is a primary concern of the mental health system, and the risk of suicide

and parasuicide is elevated amongst people with depression [8].

A report from the National Co-morbidity Survey indicated that social anxiety is the third most common mental illness, following depression and alcohol abuse [9]. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines social anxiety (social phobia) as an intense fear of negative evaluation from others, and a chronic concern and self-doubt about one's social ability and social performance.

Social anxiety in its most severe form can emotionally and physically paralyze the sufferer, with many struggling to cope with other psychological challenges, finding or maintaining

employment. For instance, research has found that approximately one half of people suffering from social anxiety have a co-morbid mental, drug, or alcohol problem [10]. Likewise, in a review study by Bruce and Saaed, (1999) [11] found that up to 16% of patients with social anxiety disorder have alcohol abuse problems. In fact, patients presenting for substance abuse treatment often also meet the criteria for social anxiety. Other research has found that the disorder increases a patient's lifetime risk of depression approximately four-fold [12], and that this and other co-morbid conditions increases the lifetime incidence of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts [13]. Left untreated, social anxiety can be chronic and pervasive, not only due to the aforementioned co-morbid conditions, but due to the reliance on social avoidance common for those living with the disorder. Although avoidance and isolation may temporarily minimize or even eradicate the anxiety related symptoms, the underlying fears will often remain. This is demonstrated in the research which has shown that approximately 85% of patients with the disorder experience academic and occupational difficulties caused by their inability to meet the social demands of securing and maintaining employment or relationships [11].

Socially anxious individuals have been found to have high expectations with regards to their social performance, and become overly self-critical when they fail to reach those expectations. For this reason, many of these key components of social anxiety are also central to the definition of perfectionism, which has been defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards and to engage in overly critical self-evaluations [1]. For instance, early studies viewed perfectionism as solely the "setting of excessively high personal standards" [14]. Frost et al. (1990) [1] proposed that perfectionism is best understood across several dimensions that include: having excessively high personal standards; a chronic concern over mistakes; a need for, and pursuit of, organization; and frequent doubts about one's actions.

Perfectionism has been found to have strong ties with several forms of psychopathology. Studies

showed that perfectionism is associated with depression [15], obsessive compulsive disorder [16] trait anxiety [17] anorexia and bulimia [18], and panic disorder [19]. Likewise, studies have also shown that social anxiety sufferers have some of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours associated with perfectionism among a clinical population [20-22]. In fact, a common feature of social anxiety is the presence of a significant disparity between perceived self-ratings of social performance versus the actual ratings by attending others such as the public, friends, family, and spouse [23].

A great deal of recent attention has been given to the mental health of university students. Although it was once assumed that university students experienced little, if any, psychological disturbance, research from university students counseling centre are telling quite a different story. In a recent national survey, 60% of university counseling centre directors reported record numbers of students using their centre, and for more extended periods of time [24]. Most researchers believe that the root of this crisis is fueled in good part by increasing levels of competitiveness across several systems of the child's life [25 & 26], and that university students today are often expected to be perfect in many ways. They are expected to get into a good college, make athletic teams, maintain a certain grade point average, make friends, choose an academic major and stay with it, find a job after graduation, and pay off student loans.

Nearly half of all university students report feeling so depressed and anxious during their college experience that they have trouble functioning [27], and according to a study, nearly half of all university students surveyed drank four or five drinks in one sitting within the previous two weeks. In fact, a recent study found that the prevalence of binge drinking and "pre-partying" on campus is most related to social anxiety than any other disorder [28]. Furthermore, university students who rated themselves as perfectionists also had a greater number of depressive episodes and lower self-esteem scores, than students who rated themselves as non-perfectionists [29&30]. Hewitt et al. (1994) [6] found an alarming

connection between university students who consistently set high standards for themselves or believed that others expected only excellence in their performance reported significantly higher scores on measures of suicidal ideation.

## **Methods**

A cross sectional study was conducted among 250 university students at the Management and Science University, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. In the class we distribute, the questionnaires to the tables of students in an alternate method. Random sampling technique was employed where the respondents were selected by random using numbering method. Their participation is voluntary and answers given were anonymous.

The data collected are keyed into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 13.0. Before giving the questionnaires to the respondents, we obtained consent from them. If they agreed to be a respondent, an introduction about the objective of this research was given before they answered the questions. After answering the questions, we promised confidentiality on the answers which will be known to the lecturers are the only one that can read the answers provided by the respondents. Last but not least, we thank the respondents for giving such cooperation to answer the questionnaires and help us in bringing out this research.

## **Instruments**

*Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS):* The MPS [1] is a 35 item self-report measure which generates an overall perfectionism score as well as scores for the following six dimensions of perfectionism: (1) concern over mistakes (CM); (2) doubts about actions (DA); (3) personal standards (PS); (4) parental expectations (PE); (5) parental criticism (PC); and (6) organization (OR). The subscale CM includes items such as “people will probably think less of me if I make a mistake,” and “if I fail at work/school, I am a failure as a person.” The subscale DM includes items such as “it takes me a long time to do something right” and

“even when I do something very carefully, I often feel that it is not quite right.” Frost [1] found that these critical self-evaluation subscales are key components of pathological perfectionism. The PS subscale is the more commonly understood form of perfectionism and refers to the setting of high expectations, and described by the following item examples, “it is important for me to be thoroughly competent in everything I do” and “I expect higher performance in my daily tasks than most people.” The *Organization* (OR) scale assesses the tendency to be orderly and tidy, as reflected by the following items, “organization is very important to me” and “I am a neat person.” The *Parental Expectations* (PE) subscale includes items such as “my parents wanted me to be the best at everything” and “my parents set very high standards for me,” and the *Parental Criticism* (PC) subscale include items such as “my parents never tried to understand my mistakes” and “as a child, I was punished for doing things less than perfectly.”

The high frequency with which the MPS is used in the psychological literature is influenced by the strong reliability and validity of this scale. Internal consistency has ranged from good to excellent for each of the subscales (Cronbach alpha ranging from 0.77 to 0.93) and for the total perfectionism score (Cronbach alpha = 0.90) [1]. The total perfectionism score, equal to the sum of all subscales except OR, was significantly correlated with other measures of perfectionism [1]; as cited by Juster et al. (1996)[21]. Participants in the clinical groups had a mean age of 36 years ( $SD = 9.59$ , range: 18-65), and 49.70% were women. The sample was predominantly White (80.1%) and spanned a range of income levels. Cut-off point for the questionnaire on perfectionism was (1-30) consider low perfectionism, (40-49) moderate perfectionism, (50-69) high perfectionism, >70 very high perfectionism. For social anxiety the cut-off point was (0-10) no phobia, 11-29 moderate, >30 phobia.

*Social anxiety Instruments:* This project administered two social anxiety measures to each student. These included the *Social Interaction Anxiety Scale* (SIAS) [31] which

assesses types of anxiety experienced in social situations (e.g. “I become tense if I have to talk about myself or my feelings;” and “I get nervous when I have to speak to someone in authority (teacher, boss) and the *Social Anxiety Scale* (SPS) [31], which primarily addresses anxiety while being watched (“I become self-conscious when using public toilets;” and “I fear I may blush when I am with others.” These scales are frequently used together in the research literature as both demonstrate high internal consistency with a racially diverse sample (SAIS: Cronbach alpha = .89; SPS: Cronbach alpha = .93) [31]. In addition, Heimberg et al. (1992) [32] found moderate to strong validity with related measures such as the Leibowitz Social Anxiety Scale (ranging from .60 to .92),

as well as strong test-retest reliability (Alpha = .91). These findings have been found with a diverse sample of Blacks (12%), Whites (72%), Latin Americans (11%), and Asian Americans (5%) [32].

## Results

A total number of 250 university students participated in this study. The majority of them were female (69.6%), 21 years old of age or younger (52.4%), Malay (71.6%), single (97.6%), from medical and health faculty (60.4%), with CGPA (40.4%), with monthly income less than RM 5000 and 42.8% suffer from severe anxiety (Table 1).

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics and factors influence the perfectionism of the study participants (n=250)**

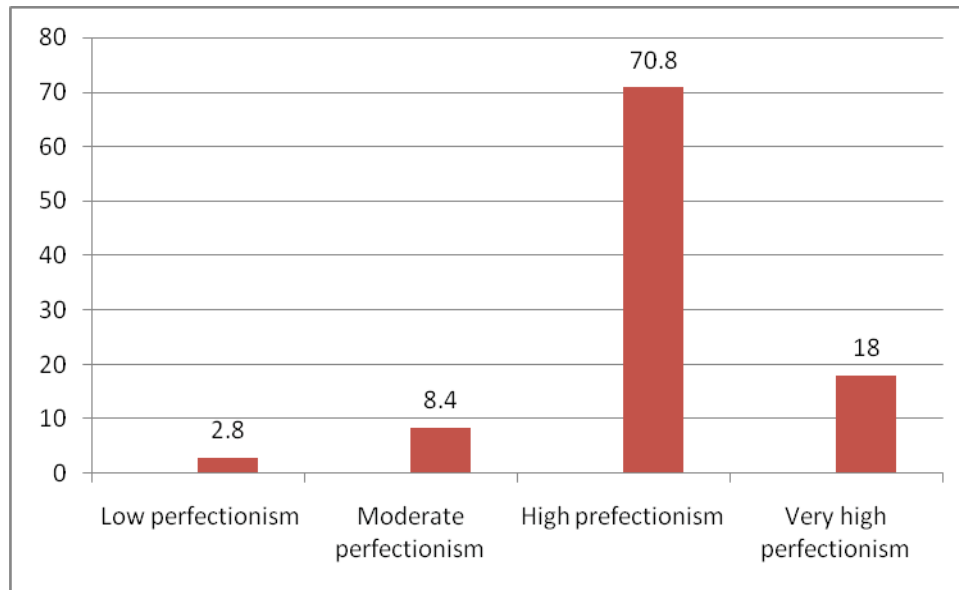
Variable	Categories	Number	Percentage %	p-value
Gender *	Male	76	30.4	0.815
	Female	174	69.6	
Age (years) *	≤ 21	131	52.4	0.862
	>22	119	47.6	
Race *	Malay	179	71.6	0.411
	No-Malay	71	28.4	
Marital status *	Single	244	97.6	0.192
	Married	6	2.4	
Faculty *	Medical and health	151	60.4	0.137
	Non-medical and health	99	39.6	
CGPA**	A 3.67-4.00	48	19.2	0.522
	A- 3.33-3.66	59	23.6	
	B+ 3.00-3.32	101	40.4	
	B 2.67-2.99	30	12.0	
	B-2.33-2.66	12	4.8	
Semester **	1	29	11.6	0.451
	2	54	21.6	
	3	63	25.2	
	4	36	14.4	
	5	29	11.6	
	6	36	14.4	
	7	3	1.2	
Monthly Income (RM)	<5000	150	60	0.172
	≥ 5000	100	40	
Parent marital status *	Married	230	92.2	0.428
	Divorced	20	8.0	
Father educational status *	Secondary	160	64.0	0.887
	Tertiary	90	36.0	
Mother educational status*	Secondary	204	81.6	0.103
	Tertiary	46	18.4	
Social anxiety **	Normal	29	11.6	<0.001
	Moderate anxiety	114	45.6	
	Severe anxiety	107	42.8	

#1 USD=3 Ringgit Malaysia (RM), \*t-test, \*\*ANOVA test

Univariate analysis showed that social anxiety is significantly associated with perfectionism among university students ( $p < 0.001$ ). Other variables such as gender, age, race, marital status type of faculty, CGPA, semester, monthly income, parent marital status and parent education did not show any statistical differences ( $p = 0.815$ ,  $p = 0.862$ ,  $p = 0.411$ ,  $p = 0.192$ ,  $p = 0.137$ ,  $p = 0.522$ ,  $p = 0.451$ ,  $p = 0.172$ ,

$p = 0.428$ ,  $p = 0.887$ ,  $p = 0.103$ ; respectively) (Table 1).

Regarding the perfectionism among university students, the majority of them have high perfectionism (70.8%), followed by very high perfectionism. The lowest percentage (2.8%) of students reported that they have low perfectionism (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. The perfectionism among university students.**

Multivariate analysis using multiple linear regression showed that only social phobia significantly associated with perfectionism among university students ( $p < 0.001$ ). That's

mean every unit increase in social phobia (according to social phobia scale), perfectionism is expected to increase by 0.276 (Table 2).

**Table 2. Factors associated with perfectionism among university students using multiple linear regression (n=250).**

Variable	B	SE	Beta	P-value
Constant	1.530			
Social phobia	0.276	0.055	0.301	<0.001
CGPA	0.044	0.034	0.076	0.208

F=24.8,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.097$

## Discussion

Socially anxious individuals have been found to have high expectations with regards to their social performance, and become overly self-

critical when they fail to reach those expectations. For this reason, many of these key components of social anxiety are also central to the definition of perfectionism, which has been defined as the tendency to set excessively high

standards and to engage in overly critical self-evaluations [1].

Perfectionism has been found to have strong ties with several forms of psychopathology [15]. The literature has shown that perfectionism is associated with depression [15] obsessive compulsive disorder [16], trait anxiety [17], anorexia and bulimia [18] and panic disorder [19]. Likewise, studies have also shown that social anxiety sufferers have some of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with perfectionism among a clinical population [20-22]. In fact, a common feature of social anxiety is the presence of a significant disparity between perceived self-ratings of social performance versus the actual ratings by attending others such as the public, friends, family and spouse [23]. In other words, socially anxious individuals inaccurately evaluate their own performance and misinterpret the expectations and signs of others. Both of these perfectionist related tendencies are central in the cause and maintenance of social anxiety.

Studies suggest that perfectionism may be important in social anxiety disorder [21]. Juster et al. [21] make several points regarding social anxiety and perfectionism, including: (a) Perfectionism might be a risk factor for social anxiety or exacerbate it and (b) individuals with social anxiety may display perfectionism by holding unreasonably high standards for performance in social settings, interpreting any deviation from those standards as failure. [33] also contend that unrealistically high standards are a common, if not universal feature of people with excessive and disabling social anxiety. Empirical findings, however, have been inconsistent or contrary to this hypothesis [34].

The limitations of this study were that the design of the study is cross-sectional study, self-report questionnaires is another limitation whereby we may the participants overestimate their situation.

## **Conclusion**

Social anxiety among university students is due to high perfectionism. This study showed that social anxiety significantly associated with

perfectionism among university students. This problem needs an urgent attention to universities to address this issue through counseling and identify the problem earlier.

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