



Perfectionism & Procrastination as Predictors of Psychological Distress

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Abstract: Procrastination refers to the intentional putting off of tasks despite being cognizant of the possible consequences, while perfectionism is the tendency to have unrealistically high standards for oneself. Psychological distress refers to the broad spectrum of emotional experiences that include feelings of stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. The relationship between psychological distress, procrastination, and perfectionism among university students was the focus of this study. A convenience sampling technique was used to select 170 young adult university students, both male and female, aged 18 to 30 years. The Pearson correlation analysis was conducted using the SPSS software. Procrastination and psychological distress were found to have a significant positive correlation ($r = .308$, $p < .01$), and perfectionism and psychological discomfort were found to have a significant positive correlation ($r = .331$, $p < .01$). There was no significant correlation between procrastination and perfectionism ($r = -.003$, $p > .05$). The findings of the study indicate that perfectionism and procrastination are independent predictors of psychological distress among university students.

Keywords: *Procrastination, Perfectionism, Psychological Distress, Young Adult University Students*

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The issue of mental health in young adults has garnered increasing attention within psychology, particularly during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, a period marked by significant academic, social, and personal responsibilities (Arnett, 2016; Kessler et al., 2015). This transition necessitates high performance and self-control, often amplified by expectations from peers, family, educational institutions, and oneself (Compas et al., 2021;

Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Rice et al., 2012). While striving for success can promote personal growth, excessive performance pressure has been linked to a higher likelihood of psychological issues and emotional challenges (Shahar et al., 2016).

Psychological distress encompasses a wide range of symptoms, such as feelings of sadness, anxiety, irritability, and cognitive strain, representing an individual's emotional discomfort without necessarily indicating a specific disorder (Kessler et al., 2002; Mirowsky & Ross, 2002; Horwitz, 2007). Factors like personality traits and behavioral tendencies, especially in competitive academic environments, can heighten vulnerability to distress (Flett et al., 2016; Steel, 2018). Notably, perfectionism and procrastination have been among the most extensively researched traits linked to this susceptibility (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013; Stoeber, 2018).

Perfectionism, particularly maladaptive perfectionism, is characterized by setting excessively high standards, a fear of failure, and conditional self-acceptance. It is associated with significant internalized pressure and emotional instability, despite often being socially encouraged due to its ties to achievement and diligence. Individuals who prioritize perfect performance may experience diminished emotional resilience and increased distress. Procrastination, which involves deliberately postponing tasks, can serve as a temporary anxiety reduction strategy; however, chronic procrastination tends to elevate psychological distress, leading to heightened feelings of stress, guilt, and self-criticism.

Research indicates that perfectionism and procrastination are interconnected, with individuals exhibiting high perfectionistic concerns likely to procrastinate to protect their self-esteem and avoid failure. This behavior can lead to increased time pressure and emotional distress, creating a maladaptive cycle where avoidance is reinforced by unrealistic expectations. Understanding the relationship between these constructs is essential for identifying predictors of psychological distress in young adults.

1.2 Definition

1.2.1 Psychological Distress

Anxiety, hopelessness, anger, mental fatigue, and feelings of being overwhelmed characterize psychological distress, a broader concept representing general emotional discomfort rather than a specific psychiatric disorder. It exists on a continuum from mild to severe, encompassing both temporary and chronic forms of emotional distress and reflects how individuals interpret and tackle everyday challenges.

The complexity of psychological distress involves maladaptive cognitive styles, such as rumination and catastrophizing, which can lead to manifestations like chronic anxiety and irritability. Additionally, behavioral expressions, including avoidance and procrastination, often create a vicious cycle that exacerbates mental suffering, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon.

Young adults face significant distress related to identity formation, academic pressures, job insecurity, and evolving social dynamics. Their self-esteem is closely linked to achievements and social acceptance, making them particularly vulnerable to discomfort when societal expectations are unmet (Hewitt et al., 2017). Importantly, not all individuals in distress experience profound suffering, indicating that internal factors such as personality traits and coping mechanisms play a critical role in shaping emotional experiences (Compas et al., 2017; Aldwin & Igarashi, 2015).

1.2.2 Perfectionism

The establishment of unrealistic standards and self-criticism are characteristic of perfectionism, which is a complex personality trait (Flett & Hewitt, 2016; Smith et al., 2018). Although the pursuit of excellence is common in academic and professional environments, perfectionism is distinct in that it involves rigidity, fear of failure, and a link between self-worth and outcomes (Stoeber & Otto, 2018; Limburg et al., 2017).

Although contemporary studies make a distinction between adaptive and maladaptive aspects, the initial conceptualizations treated perfectionism as a unidimensional negative trait (Stoeber, 2018; Curran & Hill, 2019). Maladaptive perfectionism is defined by excessive preoccupation with errors, dissatisfaction, and fear of negative evaluation, whereas adaptive perfectionism is associated with persistence, organization, and high self-expectations (Flett & Hewitt, 2016; Smith et al., 2018).

Psychological distress like anxiety, hopelessness, and emotional exhaustion has been consistently found to be associated with maladaptive perfectionism (Smith et al., 2016). It has been shown that socially prescribed perfectionism, specifically, increases the vulnerability to psychological suffering due to the perceived external pressure and fear of rejection (Hewitt et al., 2003; Shahar et al., 2016). Emotional distress is also generated by rigid cognitive styles, hypersensitivity to criticism, and rumination following failure (Smith et al., 2016).

1.2.3 Procrastination

The intentional delay of planned behaviors despite knowledge of the consequences is termed procrastination (Steel & Klingsieck, 20016). It is not merely a consequence of laziness or poor time management skills but also reflects problems with self-regulation and mood

management (Sirois & Pychyl, 2016). Avoidance is often driven by tasks that are considered self-evaluative, boring, or threatening; this provides temporary relief from pain but increases suffering in the long run (Pychyl & Sirois, 2016).

There are different forms of procrastination, including behavioral, decisional, active, and passive procrastination (Chu & Choi, 2005). It has been found that procrastination, both behavioral and passive, is more strongly associated with psychological suffering (Sirois, 2016). Time pressure, disrupted habits, feelings of guilt, and loss of control are some of the ways through which procrastination can increase suffering (Sirois & Pychyl, 2016).

1.3 Factors Contributing To Psychological Distress

The discomfort in one's psychology arises from a combination of biological, psychological, social, and situational factors. Stress is common, but its intensity is influenced by individual coping strategies and sensitivity. Biological aspects, such as physical health, sleep issues, neurochemical regulation, and genetic factors, impact emotional stability. Stress-sensitive individuals are more reactive to everyday problems (Slavich, 2016; Kalmbach et al., 2018).

Psychological elements also contribute significantly to emotional distress. Maladaptive cognitive patterns like excessive self-criticism, catastrophizing, and rumination can heighten perceived stress levels. High standards, low self-esteem, and fear of failure exacerbate emotional turmoil (Aldao et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2018). Individuals with inadequate emotional regulation or avoidant coping styles are prone to chronic stress (Compas et al., 2017; Schäfer et al., 2017).

Young people are particularly affected by academic pressures, with factors including heavy workloads, competitive assessments, performance anxiety, and uncertainty about future goals contributing to chronic stress (Pascoe et al., 2020; Stallman & King, 2016). The link between success and self-esteem can lead youth to view failures as personal shortcomings (Curran & Hill, 2019; Madigan, 2019).

Interpersonal and social influences also play a role in distress, with perceived criticism, family expectations, social comparisons, and a lack of support increasing emotional vulnerability (Lee et al., 2019; Thoits, 2017; Wang et al., 2020). In achievement-focused contexts, the drive for external success can intensify internal distress. This study particularly examines procrastination and perfectionism as internal traits affecting responses to stress.

1.4 Relationship Among Perfectionism, Procrastination & Psychological Distress

Psychological distress, procrastination, and perfectionism are theoretically related concepts that affect young people's emotional functioning. Even if each factor influences psychological consequences on its own, their combination may produce a pattern that exacerbates emotional stress.

Psychological distress and perfectionism, especially its maladaptive aspects, are strongly related. Those who tend to constantly judge themselves and set high standards for themselves are likely to feel dissatisfied with themselves, experience anxiety related to failure, and be very sensitive to errors (Limburg et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018). If an individual's sense of self-worth is contingent on being perfect, even small failures can trigger anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional depletion. Specifically, socially prescribed perfectionism may be more closely related to anxiety because it can create a sense of being under pressure to live up to impossible standards (Hewitt & Flett, 2021; Madigan, 2019).

Procrastination is also very closely related to psychological discomfort. Even though procrastination can start as a way to cope with a situation in the short term, it can often result in a piling up of tasks, deadlines, stress, guilt, and a lack of control (Sirois & Pychyl, 2016). Deadlines are sources of stress, which in turn increase the discomfort and feelings of inadequacy. Thus, both direct and indirect discomfort are caused by procrastination (Beutel et al., 2016; Rozental et al., 2018).

It is necessary to consider the relationship between procrastination and perfectionism. As both perfectionism and procrastination are related to overachieving, and procrastination is related to waiting, they seem to be mutually exclusive. But research has found that maladaptive perfectionism can actually lead to procrastination (Sirois et al., 2017; Stoeber, 2018). If individuals are concerned about their performance not meeting their standards, they may procrastinate to avoid the possibility of failure. In this way, procrastination acts as a shield against failure (Sirois & Pychyl, 2016; Rozental et al., 2018).

A cyclical pattern may result from this interaction. Unrealistic expectations exacerbate the fear of failing, which in turn causes people to avoid tasks (Sirois & Pychyl, 2016; Limburg et al., 2017). This avoidance raises pressure, which in turn exacerbates psychological suffering. This pattern may eventually lead to ongoing emotional stress (Smith et al., 2018; Stoeber, 2018).

As a result, procrastination and perfectionism may both be direct and indirect predictors of psychological suffering. A more thorough understanding of how behavioral tendencies and personality traits interact to affect young people's emotional well-being can be obtained by looking at these factors collectively.

2. Review of Literature

Akbağ, M. (2024) explored the relationship between procrastination, psychological well-being, and two types of perfectionism (adaptive and maladaptive) among 335 undergraduates. Utilizing various scales, the analysis revealed that general procrastination partially mediated the impact of maladaptive perfectionism on psychological well-being and was the sole mediator for adaptive perfectionism. Academic procrastination did not mediate any relationships. The findings highlight the distinct psychological effects of maladaptive versus adaptive perfectionism.

Sommantico et al. (2024) found that procrastination correlated solely with society-based perfectionism, which was associated with narcissistic traits and perceived parental criticism. The study highlighted that parental expectations and criticism, along with narcissistic vulnerability, were positively connected to society-based perfectionism. Notably, narcissistic vulnerability mediated the link between procrastination and perfectionism, underscoring the influence of parenting and sociocultural factors.

Sirois, F. M. (2023). underlines the close connection between procrastination and stress, while also noting that there is not enough research on the impact of the environment on this connection. From the mood-regulation perspective, the article states that stressful contexts cause individuals to procrastinate because the tools used for coping are exhausted, and the tolerance to emotions is reduced. The stress-context vulnerability model of procrastination, which emerged from the integration of coping and emotion regulation theories, proposes that procrastination is a low-resource strategy used to avoid unpleasant emotions associated with a task. This model was used to describe the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been developed for other high-stress contexts, with proposals for interventions.

Ahmad, Z., & Munir, N. (2022). examined the relationship between academic procrastination, perfectionism, and the psychological health of university students, emphasizing the fact that procrastination is a common problem that negatively affects the well-being of students. A cross-sectional survey was conducted, and convenience sampling was used. The study included 300 students from universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. The data was collected using the Academic Procrastination Questionnaire, the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. The findings revealed a significant relationship between perfectionism and academic procrastination, and that procrastination negatively affects the psychological well-being of students. The study also found that male students scored higher in academic procrastination than female students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

The aim is to determine whether procrastination and perfectionism are major predictors of psychological distress in college students.

3.2 Objective

1. To evaluate university students' psychological distress, procrastination, and perfectionism.
2. To investigate the connection between psychological distress and perfectionism.
3. To investigate the connection between psychological distress and procrastination.
4. To determine procrastination and perfectionism as significant predictors of psychological distress.

3.3 Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between perfectionism and psychological distress among university students.

H2: There will be a significant positive relationship between procrastination and psychological distress among university students.

H3: Perfectionism and procrastination will significantly predict psychological distress among university students.

3.4 Variables

Independent Variable: Perfectionism, Procrastination

Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress

3.5 Sample

A sample size of 179 volunteers, ranging in age from 18 to 30 years, was used for this study. Convenience sampling was used to select the sample, taking into account the researcher's accessibility and availability. Two standardised questionnaires and a form for gathering demographic information were used in this study.

3.5.1 Inclusion Criteria

- Students who are presently enrolled in college or university • Age range (provide your precise range, for example, 18–25 years)
- The capacity to comprehend English (if the tools were in English)
- Consent to engage voluntarily

3.5.1 Exclusion Criteria

- People who are not enrolled as students at the moment

- Inadequate answers
- Individuals who fall within or above the specified age range

3.6 Research Design

Correlational Research design

3.7 Description Of The Test

3.7.1 Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale – Short Form (MPS-SF): The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale – Short Form (MPS-SF), created by Hewitt and Flett (1988; 2008 modification), was used to measure perfectionism. The 15 items on the measure are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 7 denoting "strongly agree." The answers to pertinent questions are added up to determine scores. Higher levels of perfectionism are indicated by higher overall scores. The scale has shown strong validity and reliability across student populations and has been used extensively in research.

3.7.2 Procrastination Scale (Lay, 1986): The Procrastination Scale, created by Lay (1986), was used to measure procrastination. A 5-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "extremely uncharacteristic of me" and 5 denoting "extremely characteristic of me," is used to score the measure's 20 items. A number of the items have reversal scores. Responses are added up to determine the final score once the designated items have been reversed. Greater procrastinating tendencies are indicated by higher scores. The measure has demonstrated strong internal consistency in earlier studies and is especially tailored for student groups.

3.7.3 Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10): The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), created by Kessler et al., was used to measure psychological distress. The K10 is a 10-item self-report survey that gauges anxiety and depressive symptoms during the previous 30 days. A 5-point rating system, with 1 denoting "never" and 5 denoting "always," is used for each item. Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological anguish; total scores range from 10 to 50. The scale is frequently used as a screening tool and has proven to be highly valid and reliable in a variety of demographics.

3.8 Procedure

Before beginning the study, prior approval from the relevant authorities was acquired. Informed consent was acquired after participants were briefed on the nature and goal of the study. Clear instructions were given, and the questions could be completed offline or online. Participants received assurances that participation was entirely voluntary and that their answers would be kept private and anonymous. Following completion, the answers were graded in accordance with the standards, and SPSS was used to analyze the data statistically.

3.9 Statistical Analysis

The statistical analyses used for this test was Pearson's Correlation using SPSS.

4. Result

The above research study was conducted to assess how procrastination and perfectionism predict psychological distress. A sample size of 170 volunteers, ranging in age from 18 to 30, was used for this study. The participants voluntarily participated in the research. From the data it revealed that there is a positive correlation between perfectionism and coping mechanism & procrastination and psychological distress.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perfectionism	170	15	101	66.86	14.923
Procrastination	170	25	84	59.38	11.381
Psychological Distress	170	10	45	25.52	8.037
Valid N (listwise)	170				

Table 2: Correlations

Correlations		Perfectionism	Procrastination	Psychological Distress
Perfectionism	Pearson Correlation	1	-.003	.331**
	Sig. (2 -tailed)		.964	.000
	N	170	170	170
Procrastination	Pearson Correlation	-.003	1	.308**
	Sig. (2 -tailed)	.964		.000
	N	170	170	170
Psychological Distress	Pearson Correlation	.331**	.308**	1
	Sig. (2 -tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	170	170	170

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

Table 3: *Variables Entered/Removed*

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Procrastination, Perfectionism		Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress

Table 4: *Model Summary^b of Regression Analysis*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
1	.453 ^a	.205	.196	7.207	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
					.205	21.585	2	167	.000

a. Predictors: (constant), Procrastination, Perfectionism

b. Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress

Table 5: *ANOVA^a of Regression Analysis*

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	2242.276	2	1121.138	21.585	.000 ^b
Residual	8674.30	167	51.941		
Total	10916.406	169			

a. Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress

b. Predictors: (constant), Procrastination, Perfectionism

Table 6: *Coefficients^a of Regression Analysis*

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.588	3.859		.152	.879		
	Perfectionism	.179	.037	.332	4.817	.000	1.000	1.000
	Procrastination	.218	.049	.309	4.485	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress

5. Discussion

The study investigates the relationship between psychological distress, procrastination, and perfectionism among university students, hypothesizing that procrastination and perfectionism are positively correlated with psychological suffering. Descriptive statistics indicate moderate to high perfectionism ($M = 66.86$) and prevalent procrastination ($M = 59.38$), with notable psychological distress ($M = 25.52$). Findings from the Pearson correlation matrix support the hypotheses: a significant positive correlation exists between psychological distress and perfectionism ($r = .331, p < .01$), and between procrastination and distress ($r = .308, p < .01$). However, no significant correlation was found between procrastination and perfectionism ($r = -.003, p > .05$), suggesting they influence distress independently. Limitations include reliance on convenience sampling and self-reports, preventing causal inference. Implications emphasize the importance of addressing both procrastination and perfectionism in mental health interventions, suggesting workshops on time management and coping strategies for students.

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