

Perfectionism, Perceived Social Isolation, and the Adverse Impact on Mental Health in Today's Highly Competitive Generation

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Abstract: *Perfectionism is broadly defined as a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Previous research has associated different forms of perfectionism, including trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation, with various personal and interpersonal difficulties. In contemporary society, characterized by constant social comparison, readily available social feedback, and increasing pressure to excel across multiple domains, perfectionistic tendencies may be intensified. This paper aims to conceptually examine the relationship between perfectionism, perceived social isolation, and adverse mental health outcomes. Drawing upon existing empirical studies and relevant psychological theories, the paper discusses how perfectionistic traits may contribute to interpersonal disconnection and loneliness, which in turn may increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and reduced well-being. The discussion also situates these relationships within the modern socio-cultural context marked by social media exposure and increasing reliance on artificial intelligence (AI). The review highlights the potential psychological costs of heightened performance pressures in contemporary competitive environments and underscores the importance of further research and applied interventions targeting perfectionism and social connectedness.*

Keywords: Perfectionism, Social Isolation, Mental Health, Social Comparison, Artificial Intelligence, Loneliness

1. Methodology

The present paper adopts a **conceptual and literature-based analytical approach** to examine the relationship between perfectionism, perceived social isolation, and mental health outcomes.

Research Design

This study follows a **qualitative, theoretical review design**, synthesizing findings from previously published research in psychology and related fields.

Sources of Data

The discussion draws upon **peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical papers, and empirical studies** addressing perfectionism, social disconnection, loneliness, and mental health outcomes.

Selection Criteria

Studies were selected based on their relevance to the following themes:

- Trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation
- Interpersonal outcomes associated with perfectionism
- Perceived social isolation and loneliness
- Psychological theories explaining social comparison and motivation
- Contemporary influences such as social media use and artificial intelligence

Analytical Approach

The selected studies were **conceptually organized and synthesized** to explain potential relationships between variables. The analysis integrates theoretical frameworks such as the **Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, Social Comparison Theory, and Self-Determination Theory** to explain the psychological processes linking

perfectionism, interpersonal disconnection, and mental health outcomes.

2. Results and Discussion

Conceptualizations of Perfectionism

One of the most influential conceptualizations of perfectionism is the model proposed by Hewitt and Flett, which identifies three subtypes of **trait perfectionism**:

- 1) **Self-Oriented Perfectionism (SOP)**- characterized by internally driven beliefs that one must strive for perfection and meet extremely high personal standards. Individuals high in SOP tend to be highly self-critical when they fail to meet their own expectations.
- 2) **Other-Oriented Perfectionism (OOP)**- involves the belief that others should strive for perfection. Individuals high in OOP may become highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations.
- 3) **Socially Prescribed Perfectionism (SPP)**- reflects the perception that others expect one to be perfect and will criticize or reject them if they fail to meet those expectations (Stoeber et al., 2017).

While self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism primarily concern personal expectations, socially prescribed perfectionism has a strong **interpersonal component**, as it involves beliefs about others' evaluations and expectations.

Research indicates that socially prescribed perfectionism can place individuals under persistent pressure to appear flawless, often leading to stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Shim & Go, 2025). Another related concept is **perfectionistic self-presentation**, which refers to the active attempt to appear perfect to others. While trait perfectionism reflects what perfectionism *is*, perfectionistic self-presentation reflects what perfectionism *does* (Hewitt et al.,

2003). Both forms have been associated with adverse mental health outcomes.

Perfectionism and Perceived Social Isolation

The **Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (PSDM)** proposed by Hewitt and Flett suggests that individuals high in perfectionism may engage in interpersonal behaviours that gradually disrupt relationships and lead to feelings of social disconnection.

Although the model initially focused on socially prescribed perfectionism, subsequent research indicates that all three perfectionism dimensions may contribute to problematic interpersonal outcomes. For example, a study examining perfectionism and interpersonal functioning found that individuals with strong perfectionistic tendencies often display **lower empathy and reduced prosocial behaviours**.

The findings indicated that:

- **Other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism** were associated with negative relationships with prosocial behaviours and positive relationships with antisocial characteristics.
- **Self-oriented perfectionism**, however, showed positive associations with prosocial behaviours and negative associations with antisocial characteristics.

This suggests that the social disconnection pathway may be particularly relevant for **other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism**. Nevertheless, individuals high in self-oriented perfectionism may still experience distrust and hostility due to overlaps with other perfectionism dimensions (Stoeber et al., 2017).

Perceived Social Isolation and Mental Health Outcomes

A substantial body of research indicates that individuals experiencing **perceived social isolation** are more likely to report adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Evans and Fisher (2022) highlight that the presence of **non-directive emotional support** can help reduce depressive symptoms among individuals experiencing social isolation. This suggests that a supportive environment characterized by acceptance and empathy may be crucial for mitigating psychological distress.

However, perfectionistic individuals may struggle to benefit from such support. Beliefs such as *"I cannot let my imperfections be seen"* or *"I must always appear in control"* may discourage them from expressing vulnerability or seeking help. Consequently, these individuals may experience increasing relational distance and loneliness (Chen et al., 2024).

Perfectionism and Social Isolation in the Contemporary Context

In the current socio-cultural context, increased reliance on digital technologies, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence has intensified social comparison and competitive pressures.

The widespread availability of AI tools has altered the academic and professional landscape, often creating a perception that individuals must consistently outperform

others in order to succeed. As a result, perfectionistic tendencies may be amplified, and individuals may feel compelled to present an image of flawless competence.

Such pressures may strengthen the belief that **others expect perfection**, thereby reinforcing socially prescribed perfectionism. In some cases, these attempts to appear perfect may paradoxically make individuals appear inauthentic or distant in social interactions.

Research also suggests that self-oriented perfectionism may correlate with distrust, largely due to its association with socially prescribed perfectionism (Stoeber et al., 2017). These overlapping beliefs- *"I must be perfect"* and *"others expect me to be perfect"*- may contribute to chronic psychological strain.

3. Theoretical Explanations

Social Comparison Theory

Leon Festinger's **Social Comparison Theory** explains that individuals evaluate their abilities by comparing themselves with others. In the digital age, platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook provide constant exposure to others' achievements and successes.

Frequent exposure to curated success narratives may increase pressure to meet unrealistic standards and heighten fear of negative evaluation. Over time, individuals who perceive themselves as falling short may withdraw from relationships where others appear more accomplished, contributing to **social isolation and reduced support systems**.

Self-Determination Theory

According to **Self-Determination Theory** (Deci & Ryan, 1985), individuals are motivated by three fundamental psychological needs:

- **Autonomy**
- **Competence**
- **Relatedness**

Optimal psychological functioning requires that these needs be satisfied simultaneously. However, when competence is equated with unrealistic perfection and perceived as conflicting with relatedness, individuals may experience reduced motivation and psychological distress.

In such cases, the pursuit of perfection may undermine relational connections, resulting in **reduced well-being and greater emotional distress** (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

The Role of Artificial Intelligence

Recent research has begun to explore how increased reliance on artificial intelligence may interact with perfectionistic tendencies.

Maladaptive perfectionism has been associated with **greater dependence on AI technologies** among college students (Sun et al., 2026). At the same time, studies indicate that although AI tools may improve academic performance, they may also negatively affect social interactions.

Crawford et al. (2024) found that students who relied heavily on AI reported **greater loneliness and reduced feelings of social support** compared to those who relied on friends and family for assistance. While AI interactions sometimes created a sense of support, they were also associated with **lower perceived support from real people and poorer overall well-being**.

These findings suggest that increasing technological reliance may inadvertently intensify feelings of social isolation, particularly among individuals already prone to perfectionistic tendencies.

4. Conclusion

The present conceptual review sought to examine the relationship between perfectionism, perceived social isolation, and adverse mental health outcomes within the contemporary socio-cultural context. Drawing upon previous empirical findings and theoretical frameworks, the discussion suggests that perfectionistic tendencies- particularly socially prescribed and other-oriented forms- may contribute to interpersonal difficulties and feelings of social disconnection.

In environments characterized by heightened competition, pervasive social comparison, and increasing technological mediation of social interactions, these dynamics may become even more pronounced. The integration of theories such as the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, Social Comparison Theory, and Self-Determination Theory highlights how perfectionistic beliefs can undermine social connectedness and psychological well-being.

Given the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns among younger populations, further empirical research examining these relationships in contemporary contexts is essential. Additionally, developing interventions aimed at reducing maladaptive perfectionism and strengthening authentic social support systems may represent an important step toward improving psychological well-being in today's fast-paced and competitive society.

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