

From Perfect to Alone: Examining the Connection Between Perfectionism and Loneliness Among Gen Z

Zuha Fathima¹, Dr. Deepika Nambiar^{2*}

ABSTRACT

Gen Z has grown up in a world that's very different from previous generations, with social media being a constant part of their lives. They also face more pressure in academic as well as social spheres to succeed in ways that were never as intense before. These factors can shape how they view themselves and their achievements, leading some to develop perfectionistic tendencies. These perfectionistic attitudes can have both positive effects, like motivating them to do well, and negative effects, like causing stress and unrealistic expectations. The current study looks at the connection between perfectionism and loneliness among Generation Z, a group that faces unique challenges in today's competitive world. A purposive sample of 304 college students was selected. The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) were employed to measure perfectionism and loneliness, respectively. The sample predominantly showed moderate to high levels of all three types of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed), as well as corresponding levels of loneliness. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between all three dimensions of perfectionism and loneliness. Furthermore, an independent t-test showed no significant gender differences in either perfectionism or loneliness. These findings highlight how perfectionism can affect the mental health of young adults leading to increased feeling of loneliness, suggesting that it's important to address both perfectionistic behaviors and loneliness when providing support for Gen Z.

Keywords: *Perfectionism, Loneliness, Gen Z, College Students*

Generation Z (Gen Z), made up of people born from 1997 onward, is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in technology. This group has had access to the internet, social media, and digital tools from a young age, which has shaped their values, behaviors, and interactions in ways that set them apart from older generations. Today, many members of Gen Z are young adults, with a large portion still in school or beginning their careers in urban areas. This phase of life is full of change, self-discovery, and exploration. Gen Z makes up about 27% of India's population, or around 375 million people (Ramesh, Arundhati & Sarwate, Srushti & Gulaty, Srishti., 2021). Despite their size

¹Research Scholar, Post-graduate department of psychology, Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College, Bangalore, India

²Assistant Professor, Post-graduate department of psychology, Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College, Bangalore, India

*Corresponding Author

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and potential, Gen Z faces significant mental health challenges. Studies show that only 45% of them report having "excellent" or "very good" mental health, the lowest of any generation (Ducharme, 2018).

One of the biggest challenges affecting Gen Z's mental health is perfectionism (Ramesh, Arundhati & Sarwate, Srushti & Gulaty, Srishti., 2021). This personality trait drives people to set extremely high standards for themselves and avoid failure at all costs. While perfectionism can sometimes motivate individuals to succeed, it often leads to harmful outcomes like stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Perfectionists tend to tie their self-worth to their achievements and set unrealistic goals, which can take a toll on their well-being. Social media only adds to the problem by promoting constant comparison with others, leaving many young people feeling dissatisfied with their own lives and more isolated (Curran, 2018). In today's competitive world, Gen Z faces immense pressure to meet societal expectations for success, believing that perfectionism is necessary to feel secure and valued. According to Karen Horney (1950), perfectionism may stem from childhood experiences, particularly when parents have overly high or authoritarian expectations. When children fail to meet these standards, they may internalize feelings of worthlessness, shame, and guilt, often blaming themselves for their perceived shortcomings. Loneliness is another significant challenge for Gen Z, defined as the feeling that one's social relationships don't meet their personal needs in terms of quality or quantity. It's not just about being alone; it's about feeling disconnected or unsupported. According to Ernst & Cacioppo (1999), loneliness stems from the perception that one's social needs are unmet, leading to emotional distress. Negative thoughts and low self-esteem can intensify these feelings. For those with high perfectionistic tendencies, social anxiety can make it difficult to form close relationships, increasing their sense of isolation.

The link between perfectionism and loneliness is a critical area of study, especially for Gen Z. Perfectionists often fear rejection or failure, which can prevent them from building genuine connections and leave them feeling even more alone. This study aims to explore how perfectionism contributes to loneliness in Gen Z, highlighting the unique mental health struggles of this generation. By understanding how perfectionist tendencies disrupt relationships and lead to social isolation, this research hopes to offer insights into supporting Gen Z in developing healthier coping strategies and stronger social bonds.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a correlational design to explore the relationship between perfectionism and loneliness among Gen Z adults aged 18-22 in urban Bangalore. A purposive sampling method was used to select 304 participants (146 males and 158 females) who fit the study's criteria. Data collection was conducted with ethical approval, and participants were approached individually and through colleges and universities. Permission was obtained from college authorities, and data were collected both offline and online via Google Forms between February 4 and June 17, 2024. Before filling out the questionnaires, participants were informed about the study's purpose and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The study utilized the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) by Hewitt & Flett (1991) and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) by Daniel Russell (1996) to gather data.

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Measures

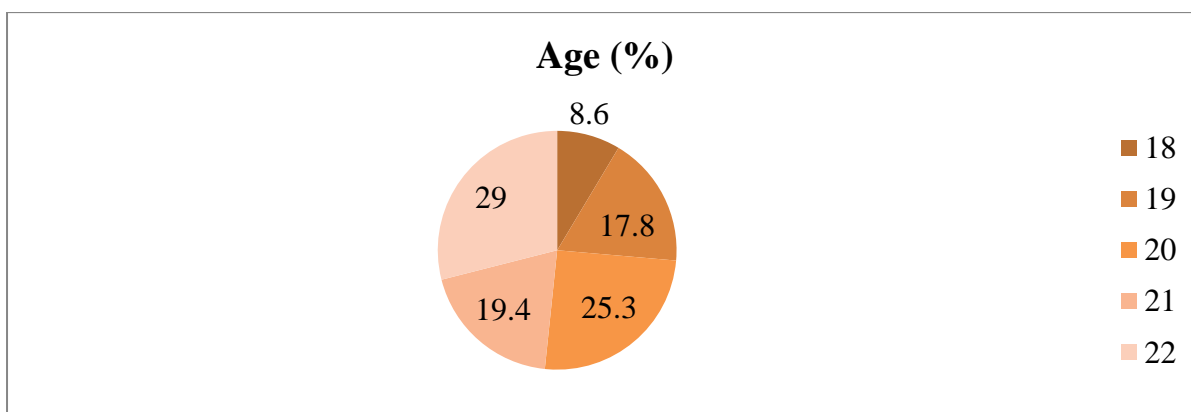
- **Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale:** The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) is a 45-item questionnaire designed to measure three types of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. It uses a 7-point scale for responses. Some items are reverse scored to ensure accuracy (e.g., items 2, 3, 4, 8, etc.). A higher overall score indicates higher levels of perfectionism. The scale is reliable, with reliability scores of 0.87 for self-oriented, 0.83 for other-oriented, and 0.81 for socially prescribed perfectionism.
- **UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3):** The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a 20-item questionnaire that measures how lonely a person feels and their sense of social isolation. Participants rate each item from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often). Some items need to be reverse scored. After reversing, the scores are added up. A higher total score means higher levels of loneliness. The scale is very reliable, with a high internal consistency score of 0.96 and a test-retest correlation of 0.73 over two months.

Ethical Consideration

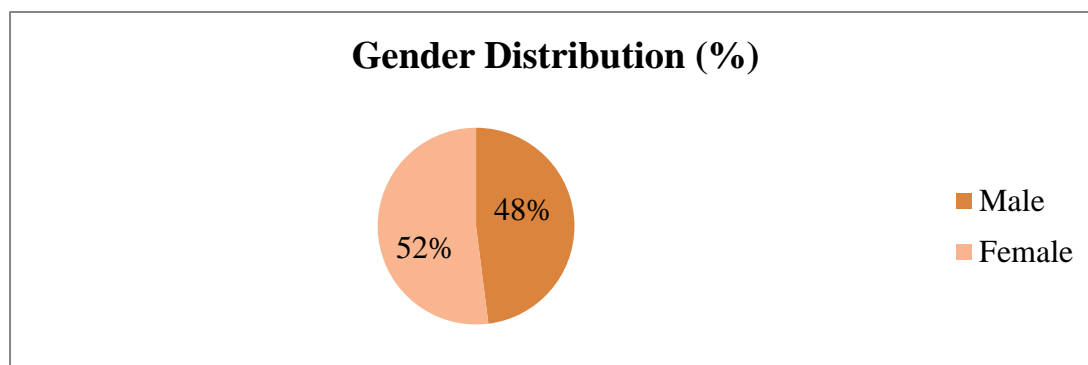
The study followed ethical guidelines. It received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Post-Graduate Department of Psychology at Bishop Cotton College, Bangalore. The Google form included information about the study and the investigator for easy access. Participants were asked to sign a consent form if they agreed to take part. Their anonymity was guaranteed, and they were free to leave the study at any time if they chose to.

Sample demographic

Graph 1 shows the age range distribution in the current sample and graph 2 shows the distribution of gender. Out of the total sample size of 304, 146 were males and 158 were females.



Graph 1: showing the percentage distribution of socio-demographic variable age



Graph 2 showing the percentage distribution of socio-demographic variable gender

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Shapiro-Wilk test ($p = 0.39$) showed that the data was normally distributed. This allowed the use of parametric tests to analyze the relationships between perfectionism and loneliness among Gen Z adults. The significance level was set at 0.05. To check for gender differences in perfectionism and loneliness, an Independent T-Test was used, and Pearson's Correlation Test was used to examine the relationship between perfectionism and loneliness. The study looked at gender differences in perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed) and loneliness among Gen-Z adults. The results showed no significant gender differences in either perfectionism or loneliness, meaning both men and women experience these issues similarly. Previous research has had mixed findings, but studies like Curran and Hill (2019) suggest that societal pressures on success and achievement affect both genders in similar ways. The focus on individual success might explain why men and women had similar levels of perfectionism in this study. Also, significant life changes during young adulthood, such as moving out, starting college, or entering the workforce, can lead to similar feelings of loneliness for both genders due to disruptions in social networks (Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016).

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism) and loneliness among Gen Z adults. The results of Pearson's correlation analysis as seen in table 1 indicated that all three dimensions of perfectionism were positively and significantly correlated with psychological well-being.

Table 1 showing the Pearson Correlation result for relationship between dimensions of perfectionism and loneliness among Gen Z adults.

Loneliness (N=304)	Self-oriented perfectionism	Others-oriented perfectionism	Socially-prescribed perfectionism
Pearson Correlation	0.130	0.127	0.331
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.024*	0.027*	0.00*

*Significant at the 0.05 level

The results of this study show a strong positive link between perfectionism and loneliness in all three types: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism highlighting the complex connection between perfectionistic traits and feelings of social isolation among Gen Z adults.

Self-Oriented Perfectionism and Loneliness

The analysis showed a significant positive relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and loneliness, with a Pearson correlation of 0.130 ($p = 0.024$). This means that Gen Z adults who set very high standards for themselves are more likely to feel lonely. This supports previous research by Smith et al. (2017), which found that self-criticism and fear of failure can lead to social disconnection. Perfectionists often avoid social situations because they fear judgment or not meeting their high standards, which worsens feelings of loneliness. Additionally, research by Rice and Mirzadeh (2000) shows that people with self-oriented perfectionism may have insecure attachment styles, leading to anxiety and difficulty forming close relationships, which increases loneliness and negative self-perception.

Other-Oriented Perfectionism and Loneliness

A significant positive relationship was found between other-oriented perfectionism and loneliness, with a Pearson correlation of 0.127 ($p = 0.027$). This means that Gen Z adults who set high standards for others are more likely to feel lonely. These individuals often struggle to form close relationships because their critical and controlling behavior can push others away. They fear intimacy and vulnerability, focusing more on control than connection, which leads to isolation. Research suggests that those with other-oriented perfectionism may find it hard to trust others or accept support, making it difficult to form meaningful relationships (Stoeber et al., 2017). Studies also show that other-oriented perfectionism is a key predictor of loneliness in young adults, as high expectations can lead to interpersonal conflicts and social isolation (Shafiq, Ali, and Iqbal, 2023). The rise of individualism and a focus on self-esteem in recent generations may have led young people to protect their self-esteem by imposing high standards on others, which can contribute to loneliness.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism and Loneliness

The study found the strongest link between socially prescribed perfectionism and loneliness, with a Pearson correlation of 0.331 ($p = 0.000$). This shows how external pressures and societal expectations can increase loneliness. People with socially prescribed perfectionism feel that others expect them to be perfect, which can make them feel inadequate and isolated. Social media worsens this by encouraging constant comparisons to idealized versions of others (Curran & Hill, 2019). Additionally, high parental expectations can strengthen these perfectionistic tendencies, leading to more loneliness (Smith et al., 2018). The rise in socially prescribed perfectionism reflects increasing anxiety, social disconnection, and difficulty coping with external pressures among young people, compared to earlier generations (Paik & Sanchagrin, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study shows a significant link between perfectionism and loneliness among Gen Z adults in India, a collectivistic culture where social approval and ideal self-presentation are highly valued. The results suggest that striving for perfection—whether through personal standards, expectations from others, or societal pressures—can increase feelings of loneliness. In cultures like India, where social connections and conformity are important, the drive for perfection can lead to social isolation. As individuals focus on maintaining an ideal image to gain approval, they may distance themselves from genuine relationships. This is especially true for students who face academic, familial, and societal pressures. The study highlights the need for interventions to address perfectionistic tendencies, promote self-compassion, and create supportive environments in schools and families.

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Implications of the Findings

The significant connection between perfectionism and loneliness highlights the psychological costs faced by Gen Z adults. This generation experiences increased academic and professional pressures, along with the influence of social media, which promotes comparison and competition. These factors can reinforce perfectionistic behaviors and worsen feelings of loneliness. Understanding this link has important implications for mental health interventions. Approaches that help individuals manage perfectionism, challenge unrealistic standards, and build stronger social connections could reduce loneliness and improve overall well-being. Encouraging self-compassion and authenticity in schools, families, and workplaces can help address the negative impact of perfectionism. Parents, employers, and workplace wellness programs can support healthier attitudes toward achievement, promote realistic goal-setting, and provide mental health support to reduce loneliness and foster compassionate interactions.

Future Directions

While this study offers useful insights, there are several areas for future research. Future studies could look at how the link between perfectionism and loneliness changes over time, especially during major life events like starting a career. Researchers could also investigate factors like self-esteem, social support, and coping strategies that may affect this relationship. Exploring interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral techniques and mindfulness, could provide practical solutions to reduce loneliness among Gen Z. Cross-cultural studies could examine how cultural values and societal norms shape this relationship, helping to identify common and culture-specific patterns. Since Gen Z is highly active on social media, future research could look into how digital technology and social platforms influence perfectionism and loneliness. Lastly, studies could explore how peer relationships and family expectations contribute to the development of perfectionism and loneliness, identifying both protective and risk factors.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Since it is cross-sectional, it can't show if perfectionism causes loneliness or vice versa. Since the data is based on self-reports, there may be biases, like participants trying to answer in a way that makes them look better or forgetting things. The sample doesn't include a wide range of geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, so the findings may not apply to all Gen Z adults. The small sample size and focus on urban, male and female university students aged 18-22 also limit the study's broader applicability.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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