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Research Paper

# Perfectionism and Academic Procrastination Among College Students: Mediating Role of Cognitive Flexibility

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination among college students, with cognitive flexibility examined as a potential mediating factor. Perfectionism is recognized as a multidimensional construct that can influence academic behaviors in both constructive and maladaptive ways, yet its association with procrastination remains complex. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 300 undergraduate students aged 18–25 years using the Almost Perfect Scale- Revised (APS-R), the Indian Academic Procrastination Scale, and the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI). The findings indicated that adaptive perfectionism was negatively associated with academic procrastination, suggesting that higher adaptive standards relate to lower tendencies to delay academic tasks. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism did not demonstrate a meaningful association with procrastination. Mediation analysis further revealed that cognitive flexibility did not significantly mediate the relationships between either dimension of perfectionism and academic procrastination, although direct effects were observed. These results underscore the multidimensional nature of perfectionism and highlight its differential impact on academic procrastination, while suggesting a limited explanatory role for cognitive flexibility in this context.

***Keywords:*** *Perfectionism, Academic Procrastination, Cognitive Flexibility, College Students*

College education delineates a crucial developmental stage characterized by academic, psychological and social transitions. Students face multiple academic demands, as well as transitional experiences related to identity development, emotional regulation and thinking about future careers during this time. Academic performance in higher education is not necessarily a direct measure of one's ability. Instead, it reflects a students' self-worth, social validation and long-term opportunities (such as employment and financial stability). As such, students frequently feel increased pressure to meet the high achievement standards placed upon them and suffer considerable psychological stress as a result of their experiences in college.

Within this frame of reference, psychological barriers like self-doubt, motivational difficulties, ineffective coping strategies, and problems in emotional regulation are

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consistently faced by students. Such factors play a key role in forming academic behaviours and outcomes. In the midst of examining different variables in relation to academic achievement, perfectionism and academic procrastination have received significant attention in new age research. Even though, a small percentage of students are able to channel high standards into productive engagement, majority of students feel anxious, avoidant and low academic efficacy suggesting that underlying personality traits and cognitive mechanisms significantly influence academic behavior.

Perfectionism is generally seen as a multidimensional personality trait, which involves striving for perfection and critical self-evaluation. Previous theoretical views of perfectionism were generally negative, relating it to psychological disturbance and dysfunction. For instance, Burns (1980) viewed perfectionism as a purely negative trait. However, with the introduction of new views, perfectionism is seen as having two dimensions: maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Adaptive perfectionism is seen as having high personal standards, being organized, and having high goal-striving, which is associated with positive outcomes.

Conversely, maladaptive perfectionism is characterized by an excessive preoccupation with errors, negative assessments, and self-reproach, which correlates with heightened anxiety, stress, and compromised psychological well-being. Within academic contexts, maladaptive perfectionism is understood to precipitate avoidance behaviors, particularly in circumstances perceived as daunting, and a pervasive fear of failing to fulfill expectations.

One of the most frequently observed behavioral expressions of such avoidance is academic procrastination. Academic procrastination is defined as "the delay of intended actions when it is possible to carry out those actions, and it is characterized by negative consequences such as lower performance and increased stress" (Steel, 2007). It is one of the most frequently observed problems among university students and is no longer considered to be related to poor time management skills. Academic procrastination is considered to be closely related to problems of self-regulation. Academic tasks involve considerable investment of time and effort and also involve uncertainty and delayed gratification. When students feel negative emotions such as anxiety and fear of failure, they may resort to procrastination as a means of dealing with these negative emotions. Even though this may yield temporary relief to the students, it may ultimately lead to negative consequences such as increased stress and poor academic performance. Studies have consistently revealed that maladaptive perfectionism is positively related to procrastination.

Though the relationship between perfectionism and academic procrastination is established, new research indicates cognitive factors may play a vital role in explaining this relationship. In this case, cognitive flexibility has been highlighted as a vital cognitive process in understanding how individuals cope with academic challenges. Cognitive flexibility involves the ability to change perspectives, adapt to new challenges, and develop alternatives in response to complex situations (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). It involves the ability to reinterpret challenges, control emotions, and control cognitive processes in response to challenges.

Cognitive flexibility is vital in academic settings, especially in academic problem-solving, learning, and academic success. Individuals with high cognitive flexibility tend to view challenges and mistakes as opportunities for growth, change unrealistic expectations, and

show high levels of persistence. On the other hand, individuals with low cognitive flexibility exhibit cognitive rigidity, which may result in academic procrastination. Cognitive rigidity involves inflexible cognitive patterns, rumination, and difficulties in adapting to challenges. Cognitive rigidity may result in a magnification of the negative effects of maladaptive perfectionism, leading to academic procrastination.

Despite a great deal of research on perfectionism and procrastination in academia, as well as a significant increase in studies emphasizing the significance of cognitive processes, few studies have managed to incorporate all these factors into a single framework. The majority of existing studies have emphasized emotional and motivational factors such as fear of failure, rumination, and self-efficacy, whereas executive cognitive factors have not been sufficiently examined. It is vital to explore the relationship between cognitive flexibility and perfectionism in terms of procrastination in order to build a more comprehensive framework for understanding procrastination in academia.

This current study attempts to bridge this gap in existing literature by examining the relationship between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism and procrastination in academia among college students, along with cognitive flexibility as a mediating variable. This study aims to provide a more complete understanding of the psychological factors involved in academic procrastination by examining personality traits and executive cognitive functions.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study employed a quantitative approach in order to test the relationship between Perfectionism and Academic procrastination among college students, along with Cognitive flexibility as a mediating variable.

### *Objectives*

1. To investigate the relationship between adaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination among college students.
2. To investigate the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination among college students.
3. To assess the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between adaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination.
4. To assess the mediating role of cognitive flexibility in the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination.

### *Hypotheses*

- $Ho_1$: There will be no significant relationship between adaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination among college students.
- $Ho_2$: There will be no significant relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination among college students.
- $Ho_3$: Cognitive flexibility will not mediate the relationship between adaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination.
- $Ho_4$: Cognitive flexibility will not mediate the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination.

### *Participants*

For the study, there were 300 college students involved in the process. There is an age limit between 18 to 25 years among students participating in the study and belong to diverse programs.

Purposive sampling approach was applied during collecting the data. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study included only those students studying in the undergraduates courses and those who had consented voluntarily. The participants whose information was incomplete were not part of the study.

### *Tools Used for the Study*

**Almost Perfect Scale - Revised (APS-R):** The Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (APS-R) is a multidimensional measure of perfectionism created by Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, and Ashby in 2001. The APS-R contains 23 items answered on a 7-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The APS-R contains three dimensions of perfectionism:

- **High Standards** – the degree to which a person sets and strives to attain their high personal expectations.
- **Order** – the degree to which a person prefers things to be organized and neat.
- **Discrepancy** – the extent to which an individual perceives a difference between their standards and their performance, often leading to self-criticism and emotional discomfort.

The High Standards and Order factors are identified as adaptive perfectionism characterized by achievement motivation and goal striving. The Discrepancy factor represents maladaptive perfectionism, an individual becomes unhappy and emotionally distressed when the individual's standards are not met. A Standards score below 42 suggests a non-perfectionist, while a Standards score of 42 or higher indicates perfectionism, which is further categorized by the Discrepancy score. An adaptive perfectionist has a Discrepancy score below 42, whereas a maladaptive perfectionist has a Discrepancy score of 42 or above. The external validity of the APS-R has been demonstrated through psychometric studies to have good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .85–.92 across subscales. The APS-R is successfully employed in academic and psychological contexts, and is considered a reliable measure of perfectionism.

### *Indian Academic Procrastination Scale (IAPS):*

The Indian Academic Procrastination Scale was developed to measure procrastination among university students in the Indian context. It comprises 30 items across four dimensions:

1. **Time Management:** Ability to plan and regulate time effectively
2. **Task Aversiveness:** Tendency to delay tasks perceived as unpleasant or frustrating
3. **Sincerity:** Seriousness and dedication towards completing academic tasks.
4. **Personal Initiative**: Self-starting and proactive effort in overcoming barriers.

Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The scale was standardized through expert validation, item analysis, and try-out on student samples, and demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0. 763.The Academic Procrastination Scale is scored by categorizing raw scores into seven distinct levels of procrastination, which are further supported by corresponding z-score ranges. A raw score of 119 and above (z = +2.01 and above) indicates an extremely high

level of procrastination, while scores between 108–118 (z = +1.26 to +2.00) reflect a high level. Those scoring 97–107 (z = +0.51 to +1.25) fall in the above average range, whereas a score of 82–96 (z = -0.50 to +0.50) suggests a moderate level of procrastination. Lower ranges include below average procrastination for scores of 71–81 (z = -1.25 to -0.51), low procrastination for 59–70 (z = -2.00 to -1.26), and finally, extremely low procrastination for 58 and below (z = -2.01 and below). This grading allows for a clear interpretation of an individual's procrastination tendencies on a continuum from extremely high to extremely low.

### *Cognitive Flexibility Inventory*

Dennis and Vander Wal (2010) created the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) appraisal of an individual's capacity to modify their thinking during difficult or stressful life situations.

The CFI includes 20 self-report items, which are rated on a 7 point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree and assess cognitive flexibility through two primary areas:

1. **Alternatives** - the capacity of generating multiple meanings for life events and evaluating possible solutions to problems.
2. **Control** - the individual's belief in their ability to influence and control a difficult life situation, which indicates a more internal locus of control.

The total scale score - and these two subscale scores - provide a measure of someone's overall cognitive processing capacity to adapt. Higher scores indicate greater flexibility of thought, and an ability to think about life events and their alternatives, which contributes to coping/adaptation skills. The CFI has been found to be reliable and valid. Test-retest reliability of the total scale was r = .81, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported internal consistency to be high (.91 Alternatives, .86 Control, .90 total). With established psychometric strength, the CFI has become a commonly used instrument to study cognitive flexibility in academic or clinical research, as well.

### Socio-Demographic Data Sheet

A self-constructed socio-demographic form was used to collect basic information such as age, gender, course of study, and duration of enrollment.

### *Procedure*

Prior to the commencement of the study, formal institutional approval was obtained from Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore. After receiving authorization, participants were approached and informed about the purpose and objectives of the research. The study aimed to examine the relationship between perfectionism and academic procrastination and to assess the mediating role of cognitive flexibility among college students.

Participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, estimated time required, assurance of confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any point without any academic or personal consequences. Only those students who voluntarily agreed and provided informed consent were included in the study.

Data were collected using both online and offline modes of administration to ensure wider accessibility and participation. In the online mode, the questionnaires were compiled into a structured Google Form and shared with participants through appropriate academic communication channels. The form included the informed consent section followed by the demographic details and the three standardized instruments: the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (APS-R), the Indian Academic Procrastination Scale (IAPS), and the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI). Participants were required to respond to all items before submission to minimize missing data.

In the offline mode, printed copies of the questionnaires were physically distributed to participants in a classroom setting. Clear standardized instructions were provided prior to administration. Participants were instructed to read each statement carefully and respond honestly. The researcher remained present during the administration of the printed questionnaires to clarify procedural doubts without influencing responses. Adequate time was provided for completion, and short breaks were permitted when necessary to reduce fatigue. The total time required to complete the assessments ranged approximately from 25 to 35 minutes. To ensure comfort during offline administration, participants were provided with adequate seating arrangements and refreshments where feasible.

To maintain anonymity, participants were not required to provide identifying information such as names, phone numbers, or email addresses. For offline responses, each questionnaire was coded with a unique identification number. Online responses were collected without recording personal identifiers. All collected data were securely stored and used solely for academic research purposes.

***Statistical Analysis***

Data were analyzed using Jamovi statistical software. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were computed to summarize the central tendency and variability of the study variables. The Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted to assess the assumption of normality. Since the data were not normally distributed, non-parametric statistical tests were employed. Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between perfectionism and academic procrastination. Furthermore, mediation analysis was conducted in Jamovi to assess the indirect effect of perfectionism on academic procrastination through cognitive flexibility. This analysis enabled examination of both direct and indirect pathways in the proposed model.

## RESULTS

The study had a total of 300 college students as participants with an age range of 18-25 years. The distribution of both genders was almost equal, with 50.7% female and 49.3% male participants.

***Table 1: Socio-demographic Details***

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Male** | 148 | 49.3% |
| **Female** | 152 | 50.7% |

*Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Normality*

| Variable | *N* | *Mean* | *SD* | *W* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Perfectionism** | 300 | 89.3 | 31.10 | 0.921 | <.001 |
| **Academic Procrastination** | 300 | 92.3 | 9.71 | 0.957 | <.001 |
| **Cognitive Flexibility** | 300 | 77.5 | 14.37 | 0.976 | <.001 |

The study revealed moderate to high levels of perfectionism and procrastination, and moderate levels of cognitive flexibility. All the values were found to be significant using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, with $p < .001$, indicating non-normal distribution. Therefore, Spearman's rho was used.

*Table 3: Correlation Analysis*

**3a. Adaptive Perfectionism and Academic Procrastination**

| Variables | *ρ* | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| **Adaptive Perfectionism – Academic Procrastination** | -0.315 | .026 |

**3b. Maladaptive Perfectionism and Academic Procrastination**

| Variables | *ρ* | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| **Maladaptive Perfectionism – Academic Procrastination** | -0.008 | .886 |

There was a significant negative correlation between adaptive perfectionism and procrastination, while maladaptive perfectionism did not have a significant correlation.

**Table 4: Mediation Analysis**

**4a. Overall Perfectionism → Cognitive Flexibility → Procrastination**

| Effect | Estimate | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| **Indirect** | -0.215 | .057 |
| **Direct** | -0.182 | .213 |
| **Total** | -0.398 | .030* |

**4b. Adaptive Perfectionism Mediation**

| Effect | Estimate | *p* |
|---|---|---|
| **Indirect** | -0.0749 | .418 |
| **Direct** | -0.3372 | .020* |
| **Total** | -0.4120 | <.001* |

**4c. Maladaptive Perfectionism Mediation**

| Effect | Estimate | p |
|---|---|---|
| **Indirect** | -0.0216 | .659 |
| **Direct** | 0.2546 | .040* |
| **Total** | 0.2331 | .080 |

Cognitive flexibility did not show any significant mediation effect, but there was a marginal indirect effect in the overall model.

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed at assessing the relationship between perfectionism and academic procrastination, with cognitive flexibility being suggested as a mediator in the process. It became evident from the findings of the research that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of perfectionism – adaptive and maladaptive – as they have specific relationships with academic procrastination. It is especially important to consider the need to differentiate these two forms as otherwise they will be treated as one construct.

There was found to be a notable inverse relationship between adaptive perfectionism and academic procrastination, meaning that the higher the standards a person sets for him or herself that are achievable, the lower the chances are of procrastination. These findings are consistent with other research on the topic (Sepiadou & Metallidou, 2022), as well as with Self-Determination Theory that states that adaptive perfectionism leads to motivation and goal-directed behavior.

Moreover, individuals who score high on adaptive perfectionism could feel more competent and autonomous and thus able to tackle academic assignments confidently and persistently instead of avoiding them. Such a proactive approach would help them avoid delay in task completion.

On the other hand, maladaptive perfectionism did not prove to correlate significantly with academic procrastination. Unlike most other studies, which found a positive correlation between the two variables, our results do not show this connection. There could be different reasons for the difference in our results. First, maladaptive perfectionism can be shown in various ways depending on the situation or population. In our case, students with maladaptive perfectionism may continue working on academic assignments despite their discomfort due to external pressure or the perfectionist tendencies of these students themselves. Procrastination, in this case, is not seen in actions, although stress levels can be elevated and students' efforts inefficient. Alternatively, procrastination can be influenced by other emotional factors that are related to maladaptive perfectionism.

An important conclusion of the research is that maladaptive perfectionism had a significant direct influence on procrastination using mediation analysis, even in the absence of any simple correlation between these two constructs. This means that the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and procrastination can be characterized as more complicated and possibly of a suppressor type. The data suggest that maladaptive perfectionism can be associated with procrastination only in particular situations or in interaction with other psychological factors.

Moreover, it should be noted that the mediator cognitive flexibility had a marginal indirect effect in the general model. Nevertheless, the mediator failed to reach significance in the models for adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism separately. This means that cognitive flexibility does not play an essential role in mediating the perfectionism-procrastination link. One possible explanation is that although cognitive flexibility promotes adaptive strategies and coping behaviors, it may be too weak to overcome the motivational and emotional determinants of procrastination.

The results obtained from the theoretical point of view confirm the multidimensional construct of perfectionism. Regarding adaptive perfectionism, the results indicate that the

multidimensional construct can be related to motivational and regulatory self-regulation processes, while the multidimensional construct of maladaptive perfectionism can be related to emotional and cognitive vulnerability. Thus, the minimal role played by cognitive flexibility implies that emotional regulation and motivation can be considered more relevant in explaining procrastination. Researchers need to include other mediators like emotional regulation skills, academic self-efficacy, and fear of negative evaluation for further studies.

In summary, the results reveal the significance of the idea that adaptive perfectionism has a protective effect, while maladaptive perfectionism can have an indirect and complicated effect. It can be suggested that treatment plans intended at alleviating academic procrastination may prove to be successful by addressing the issues of emotional regulation and motivation rather than cognitive flexibility. Additionally, increasing the level of self-awareness in terms of perfectionism among students can assist in adopting more appropriate ways of achieving success and avoiding maladaptive behaviors.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, the results confirm the theory of perfectionism as a multivariate phenomenon. It seems that adaptive perfectionism can lower academic procrastination, which might be due to motivation, clear goals, and good self-regulation. On the contrary, maladaptive perfectionism has a more complex link with procrastination, but there might be emotional or situational influences that have not been studied in the current research.

The aim to identify the influence of cognitive flexibility on perfectionism and procrastination was partly achieved. In other words, it did not serve as a mediator in explaining the link between perfectionism and procrastination, so there must be some other psychological processes that should be considered.

Overall, perfectionism does not always have a negative impact on people. Adaptive perfectionism can become a positive personal characteristic, and maladaptive perfectionism deserves more attention from psychologists.

### *Implications*

These findings corroborate those studies that characterize perfectionism as a combination of adaptive and maladaptive characteristics. It is clear from the research findings that combining adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism into a single measure may decrease the understandability of behaviors under consideration. This study shows that motivational and emotional aspects may outweigh cognitive flexibility in terms of their importance in procrastination in students with perfectionistic characteristics.

There are practical consequences of these results for educationalists and counselors. The treatment of academic procrastination should be centered around fostering goal setting and establishing reasonable standards. Adaptive types of striving should be cultivated, while self criticism should be avoided.

Though cognitive flexibility was found not mediating the relationship, developing it may enhance adaptation and coping with academic difficulties.

Such antecedents of behavior as anxiety, self esteem or self-efficacy were not considered in this study.

### *Limitations*

Cross-sectional research cannot make causal conclusions. Self-reports can be subjective and have errors. Non-normally distributed data necessitates weaker statistical methods. The sample was drawn from one university alone, thereby limiting external validity. Only some variables were studied; others, such as anxiety and self-efficacy, were not considered.

### *Future Research*

Future research should consider longitudinal and experimental designs to determine causality and implement interventions, such as cognitive flexibility exercises. Objectivity should be added by including grades, while broader samples would increase validity.

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