

## Relationship between Academic Perfectionism and Depression: Role of Self Concealment among Students

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### Abstract

The mediational role of self-concealment in relationship with Academic Perfectionism and Depression is explored in the present study. A sample of students (N=200) was taken from various departments of the University of Sargodha using a purposive sampling technique. Self-concealment, academic perfectionism and depression were measured by using Urdu translated Self-Concealment Scale (SCS; Malik & Ghayas, 2014) Academic Perfectionism Scale (APS; Malik & Ghayas, 2014) and Urdu translated depression subscale of DASS (Farooqi & Habib, 2010) respectively. Results indicated the academic perfectionism as a significant positive predictor of self-concealment and depression. Furthermore, data analysis revealed that self-concealment was a significant positive predictor of depression among university students. The results of this study also indicated that self-concealment also plays the role of a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and depression. Non-significant gender differences were found in depression among university students. Moreover, the current study yielded that the level of self-concealment was higher among males than females, whereas the level of academic perfectionism was higher among females as compared to males.

**Keywords:** academic perfectionism, depression, self-concealment, depression, mediation

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## Introduction

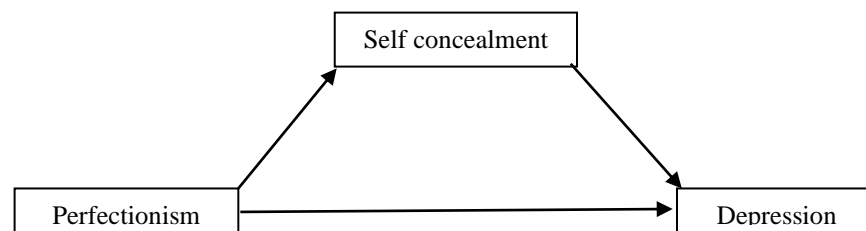
It is believed that perfectionism is a personality type characterized by a need for perfection, a very high bar for achievement, and a tendency to berate oneself harshly for one's own deeds (Flett & Hewitt, 2020). Slaney, Ashby, and Trippi also identified the link between perfectionism and hesitation in 1995. Before the 1990s, researchers used to define perfectionism as possessing "excessively high personal standards" (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007). Perfectionism can be helpful or harmful, as has recently become increasingly clear. (Ganske & Ashby, 2007). Setting high personal standards can be adaptive, i.e., result in happiness, excellence, and professional benefits. It is said that perfectionism can be sometime healthy, or productive (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Additionally, there is evidence that perfectionism increases the chance of developing depression (Asseraf & Vaillancourt, 2015). Also discovered is a link between higher levels of perfectionism and eating disorders (Gautreau, et al., 2017). These investigations revealed that perfectionism may be harmful to one's health. However, other studies believe that elements of perfectionism that refer to identity reflecting high personal standards and ambitions, generally referred to as "perfectionistic strivings," contribute to favorable results (Madigan, 2016).

Depression is distasteful feelings or emotions that may cause problems. A good deal of previous studies has indicated the perfectionism as a significant predictor of mental indications and depression among students (Katsunori & Koji, 2002; Kawamura, Hunt, Frost & Di Bartolo, 2001). Moreover, there was a positive relationship in perfectionism and depression regarding somatic healthfulness and anger, whereas it is negatively correlated with positive affects (Chang & Sanna 2001; Saboonchi & Lundh, 2003; Scott, 2007; Butt, 2010).

Several factors are involved in the relationship between perfectionism and depression like, self-esteem, negative attributional style, and social support. Similarly, Self-Concealment is found to be an important factor that creates an association between perfectionism and depression. Based on previous body literature, the present study is also aimed at finding the relationship of perfectionism with self-concealment and depression. Self-concealment is essentially overcoming one's private stressful information from others. Selfconcealment is defined as "the general and continuous tendency of the individual to conceal his / her thoughts, emotions, behaviours and experiences from other individuals that he / she perceives specifically about him / herself (Demir, Murat & Bindak, 2020). It is found that self concealment leads towards a lot of negative consequences (Celik, 2016; Serim, 2015). Most of the

perfectionist students mostly try to hide their academic failures and difficulties in achieving their goals from the people around them. Because they think that they fear if they will disclose their academic problems to others they will make fun of them and resultantly they will feel insecure. Researches have been done on perfectionism and self-concealment in European countries. Self-concealment is sighted as a personality variable, dissimilar from maintaining a secret, which is an action (Kelly & Yip, 2006). Several studies support the concept that perfectionist individuals conceal their problems from others because they don't want to hear negative remarks from them. When they think that imagine people will thinking of them negatively, they get scared and thus hide their secrets (Mills & Blankstein, 2000). Regarding self-concealment and help-seeking attitudes, a study determined that individuals with an immense level of self-concealment mostly avoid seeking needed psychological services ( Abdollahi et al., 2017), and was significantly related to general psychological distress (Kawamura & Frost ; 2004). Research conducted by Kawamura and Frost (2004) revealed a Significant correlation among perfectionism, self-concealment and distress.

### **Self-Concealment as a Mediator between Perfectionism and Depression**



*Figure 1.* Kawamura and Frost (2004)

Self-concealment worked as a mediator between perfectionism and depression (Kawamura & Frost, 2004). Hewitt and Flett (2002) hypothesized that psychopathology is the cause of maladaptive perfectionistic thoughts and behaviors generated in stressful situations. The literature recommended that the main issue associated with stress continuation is the reluctance of perfectionistic persons to confess to others when they are having personal complexities. This need to appear flawless and conceal personal flaws has been described as perfectionistic self-presentation and connected to low eating disorders, refusal to seek

social supports and self-esteem (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Some studies observed that individuals try to hide their depressing personal information in strive to maintain a perfect look.

Literature suggested that people who tend to be perfectionistic don't express themselves to others, they hide their depressed personal information, usually, they lean to composed themselves in front of others to avoid the negative judgment of society. They are fearful of the unfavorable views of others due to their faults, as a consequence, they prioritize to hide their information from others (Kawamura & Frost, 2004). In this way, the perfectionist can save themselves from short-term harm by preventing the evaluative risk, yet unluckily, the long term effect of self-concealment may be an elevated level of psychological disturbance.

Perfectionism was found significantly correlated with self-concealment and distress in earlier zero-order correlations (Kawamura & Frost, 2004). A significant association among self-concealment and distress was found even after controlling for perfectionism. No longer a further significant correlation was found between maladaptive perfectionism and distress once self-concealment was controlled as the final proof for the role of self-concealment as a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and distress.

An extensive literature review indicated that females have a higher level of depression than males (Abu, 2010; McDonough & Stroschein, 2003; Barlow, 2002; Hoeksema, 2001; & Hilt, 2009; Ryba & Hopko, 2012). The study proclaimed that females reported a higher level of depression as compared to males and that this space difference increases with age. Campbell, (2002) reported that others would dispute that the mentioned gender differences in previous studies are somewhat physically determined. Gender differences are also reported in perfectionism. Research conducted by Lubica (2012) found significant gender differences in perceived parental expectations (PE). Male students scored considerably higher than females on this subscale of perfectionism. According to Ghazal (2012) study, gender differences were present only on the personal standard subscale.

A research was done by Kawamura and Frost (2004) found that a difference between genders in self-concealment was present. According to McDonough and Stroschein (2003) Barlow (2002) and Hoeksema (2001) level of self-concealment is higher among females than males.

Literature illustrated the importance of perfectionism in academic settings. So, the reason for the present study is to examine how perfectionist students conceal their problems with their friends and family and how it causes depression. Because when perfectionist individuals see that the work, they have done is not proper and flawless;

they try to conceal their mistakes from others with the fear that others will make fun of them, which leads to depression. It was claimed that people who lean to be perfect are fearful about sharing their mistakes because they thought that after that people's performance about them would be negative (Barry & Mizrahi, 2005). . The tendency to hide their self brings short term benefits i.e. the non -evaluative and non-judgmental societal views but self-concealment brings long term psychological distress for them

### **Method**

The study intended to find out the relationship between Academic perfectionism and Depression and the meditational role of Self-Concealment was intended to find in this study.

### **Objectives**

The following objectives were set for the current study:

- 1) To find out the relationship between academic perfectionism and Depression
- 2) To find out the mediating role of self-concealment in association with perfectionism and depression.
- 3) To examine gender differences in perfectionism, self-concealment and depression.

### **Hypotheses**

To meet the objectives of the study following hypotheses were made.

1. Perfectionism would be a significant positive predictor of depression among university students.
2. Perfectionism would be a significant positive predictor of self-concealment among university students.
3. Self-concealment would be a significant positive predictor of depression among university students.
4. Self-concealment would mediate the relationship between perfectionism and depression among university students.
5. Girls will have a higher level of academic perfectionism, depression and self-concealment than boys.

### **Sample**

The sample of the current study was comprised of 200 students from the University of Sargodha, including both girls ( $n=94$ ) and boys ( $n=106$ ) and was recruited through the purposive sampling technique. The age

range was between 19-25 years ( $M = 20.60$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), and only regular students were included in the study. Subjects were approached in their classes. Students enrolled in Maters degree programs were included in the study.

## **Instruments**

After getting permission from original authors following three different scales were used to collect data:

### **Academic Perfectionism Scale (Malik & Ghayas, 2017)**

The academic Perfectionism scale was developed by Malik and Ghayas (2017). It contained 41 items along with 6 subscales parental expectations (6 items), doubts and concerns on performance quality (13 items), organization (5 items) personal standards (6 items), parental criticism (4 items), socially prescribed perfectionism (5 items) and 6 negative items. The response format of the scale was a five-point rating scale using 1 as (Strongly Disagree) and 5 as (Strongly Agree). Higher scores on the academic perfectionism scale higher the level of academic perfectionism. The alpha coefficient of the scale was .82 (Malik & Ghayas, 2017), and the internal consistency of the scale was .68, .61, .56, .72, .64, and .67 respectively for all the sub-scales of academic perfectionism.

### **The Self-Concealment Scale (SCS; Malik & Ghayas, 2014)**

Larson and Chastain (1990) developed a self-report measure of the Self-Concealment scale comprising of 10-items and this was translated in the Urdu language by Malik & Ghayas (2014). The response format of the scale was a 5-point Likert type (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5= “strongly agree”). The total score ranges from 10 to 50. Higher scores of the participants on the scale show a higher self-concealment level. Internal consistency of the scale was .78 and retest reliability was ( $r = .95$ ) which was satisfactory (Malik & Ghayas, 2014).

### **Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-42) (Farooqi & Habib, 2010).**

The tool was originally developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) and Farooqi and Habib (2010) translated this scale in the Urdu language. This scale measures the distress quantitatively on three domains depression, anxiety and stress. The response format of the scale ranges from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (most of the time). Two versions of DASS are available (42-items and 21-items) for the researchers, both versions were Internally consistent i.e. .91 to .97. In the present research, the Urdu version was used by the researcher and seven items from the

shorter version of the depression sub-scale were used. Whereas internal consistency for the translated version of DASS-42 was .97, .91 and .94 respectively for all the subscales.

## Procedure

A purposive sample was approached at their classes and was instructed about the objectives of the study. Before data collection, informed consent was taken from the participants and was guaranteed about the confidentiality of their data. Questionnaires were applied to the participants and they were thanked after data collection.

## Analysis and Results

Table 1  
*Mean, Standard Deviation and Alpha reliability of Academic Perfectionism Scale (APS), Self Concealment (SCS), and Depression (N=200)*

*Note.* *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	APS	SC	Depression
Total Academic Perfectionism Scale	141.48	16.17	.86	-	.16*	.17*
Self-Concealment Scale	26.81	8.53	.78		-	.35**
Depression	5.81	4.34	.76			-

\*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

Table 1 depicted the mean standard deviation, alpha reliability and correlation matrix of the Academic Perfectionism scale, Self-Concealment and Depression. Academic Perfectionism Scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) indicates a higher level of reliability coefficients. The reliability of the Self-concealment scale was ( $\alpha = .78$ ). Similarly, the reliability of the Depression was ( $\alpha = .76$ ). These coefficients indicate high internal consistency, therefore are reliable for use. Results of the Pearson correlation show that the academic perfectionism scale (APS) has a significant and positive correlation with all scales.

Table 2  
*Linear Regression predicting academic perfectionism as a Predictor variable of Self-concealment and Depression (N = 200)*

Variable	B	<u>SE B</u>	B	R <sup>2</sup>
		<u>Self Concealment</u>		
Academic Perfectionism	.09	.03	.17**	.03*
		<u>Depression</u>		
Academic Perfectionism	.05	.02	.18**	.03**

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

The result of the linear regression shows that Academic Perfectionism, which was computed independently to predict self-concealment and depression. The result suggested that academic perfectionism was a significant positive predictor of self concealment and depression.

Table 3  
*Linear Regression predicting self-concealment as a Predictor of Depression (N = 200)*

Variable	B	<u>SE B</u>	B	R <sup>2</sup>
		<u>Depression</u>		
Self Concealment	.18	.04	.35***	.12***

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$

The result of the linear regression shows that Self Concealment, which was computed independently to predict depression. The result suggested that self-concealment was a significant predictor depression.

Table 4  
*Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Academic Perfectionism Scale (APS) and Self Concealment (SCS) Predicting Depression (N = 200)*

Model	Predictors	$\Delta R^2$	B	F
1	Step 1 (R <sup>2</sup> = .03)	.03		6.50**
	Academic Perfectionism		.17**	
2	Step 2 (R <sup>2</sup> = .14)			
	Academic		.12	



Perfectionism			
Self	.14	.33***	15.89***
Concealment			
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.17		

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Results of the model indicated that in step 1 Academic perfectionism (independent variable) was the significant positive predictor of depression (dependent variable) ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t = 2.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In step 2 due to the entry of Self-concealment which was a mediator variable Academic Perfectionism becomes non-significant ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $t = 1.84$ ,  $p < .07$ ). The mediational model was further supplemented by Sobel (1986) test, which determines the significant indirect effect of academic perfectionism on depression through self-concealment at the critical value of  $Z = \pm 1.96$  under the assumption of two-tailed hypotheses 31 % explained variance of academic perfectionism in depression was attributable to the indirect effect of self-concealment. Self-concealment fully mediated the relationship between academic perfectionism and depression, which was supporting the hypothesis (Sobel's  $Z = 2.60$ ,  $p < .09$ ).

Table 5

*Mean, Standard Deviation, Significance level and t-values of Gender Differences on Self-Concealment, Depression and Academic Perfectionism (N = 200)*

Variables	Male (n = 94)		Female (n = 106)		t(314)	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD		LL	UL	
Self concealment	30.13	7.37	24.19	8.13	4.66***	3.43	8.44	.35
Depression	5.69	3.57	5.56	4.38	.20	-1.18	1.45	.02
Academic Perfectionism	140.29	16.61	142.53	15.58	.32	-6.73	2.25	-0.14

\*\*\* $p < .001$

The t value indicated that there were significant gender differences found in Self Concealment { $t(314) = 8.13$ ,  $p < .000$ }.

## Discussion

The current study was aimed at seeing the meditational role of self-concealment in the relationship between academic perfectionism and depression. Analysis of data supported the first hypothesis of the study as it was suggested that academic perfectionism is a significant positive predictor of depression among university students. These results are in line with already existing studies which illustrated that perfectionism is linked with a broad variety of psychological problems, such as depression (Shafran & Mansell, 2001; Katsunori & Koji, 2002; Saboonchi & Lundh, 2003; Kawamura, Hunt, Frost & Di Bartolo, 2001; Chang, 2002; Hewitt & Dyck, 2005; Chang & Sanna 2001; Scott, 2007)

According to Butt (2010), a clear association is examined among perfectionism and mental health reflecting a significant positive relationship with psychological distress in Pakistan. The reason behind these results might be the tendency of a perfectionist which made them overly conscious upon their mistake, about organization and meeting standards, etc. In strive of achieving all these goals, the person doesn't feel ready to accept anything less than his standards. In the context of student's life, the achievement of students is not based upon the effort of students there can be dozens of other factors which do affect on affect the attainment of scores so it is possible that despite a lot of efforts a student might not be able to achieve his goal with the desired standard. Naturally, no one cannot be perfect but perfectionist doesn't try to understand this reality therefore ultimately, they do develop distress.

The second hypothesis of the current study is accepted as the linear regression indicated academic perfectionism as a significant positive predictor of self-concealment (see Table, 2). Perfectionists are more likely to conceal daily mistakes from others because they place great significance on making mistakes and develop a fear that others would think faulty of them for their mistakes (Kawamura & Frost, 2004). Similarly, Mills and Blankstein (2000) researched university students. Results of their study exposed that perfectionists exhibit a fear that others would evaluate them negatively for poor academic performance and therefore are fearful of taking academic help and eventually they hide their problems from others. In an academic setting, perfectionism is usually valued therefore students feel ashamed discussing their problems and feel that their dignity will be at stake if they will share their problematic issues and as a result, they develop different psychological issues.

The third hypothesis of the study was accepted which was self-concealment would be a significant positive predictor of depression among university students (see Table, 3). Regression analysis

represented that self-concealment is a strong positive predictor of depression shortly it can be said that self-concealment leads towards depression. According to Williams and Cropley (2013), self-concealment and all the components of psychological distress are positively correlated.

Self-concealment was also positively correlated with general physical and psychological distress (Kawamura and Frost, 2004). When a person faces problems and failures in his life, he tries to conceal them from others, so that others cannot evaluate him negatively and instead of using different coping strategies, self-concealment push him towards depression and many other psychological problems. Negative psychological outcomes by thwarting the growth of more adaptive handling expertise such as support of others and learning to utilize the comment may be a product of self-concealment.

Constantly monitoring and restraining the assertion of personal information may also be an additional internal stressor that aggravates mental distress. People mostly try to self-conceal their problems because they think that if others will know about their problems and mistakes, they will negatively evaluate them. So, this hiding of personal information will lead to depression.

Discussion and sharing of the problem is a key tool to avoid psychological problems and it is the natural tendency of human beings. It is obvious that when students conceal their problems, they think that it is good for them to hide their problems from others but in the future when they did not find the solution to their troubles, they become depressed, anxious and stressed. Similarly, when students face academic problems or failures and hide them from others, rather than adapting coping strategies and positive skills they become psychologically disturbed.

Examination of data proved that self-concealment mediates the relationship of perfectionism with depression among university students (see table 4). The same results were found by the study of Kawamura and Frost (2004), they revealed that self-concealment is a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and distress, perfectionism was no longer significantly correlated with distress once self-concealment was controlled. Perfectionist individuals find it hard to admit in front of others that they have faced failure or flaw in their task, so move towards self-concealment, which in turn leads to many psychological problems including depression. When students will use a healthy form of perfectionism to attain their goals, they will never face depression. Perfectionism is a personality trait and none can achieve total perfectionism in his or her life. Self-concealment will always lead them to negative health outcomes and depression.

Self-concealment guaranteed the short-term benefits for perfectionists, it saves them by the judgmental views of the society, but on the other hand, it becomes the cause of long-term distress, and depression. Perfectionistic individuals are unwilling to utilize social support, which causes many health and psychological problems including depression. They mostly conceal their issues with friends and family, because they think that if they will know about their failure and flaw, they will think of them badly and they will lose their respect. So, to avoid all these worries they self conceal.

The fifth hypothesis of the study was rejected as results proved no gender difference in depression (see table, 5). Shamsuddin and colleagues conducted research (2013) on Malaysian University students and found no significant differences in depression across the gender. The same results have already been found in a study, conducted on Karachi medical students (Khan, Mahmood, Badshah, Ali & Jamal, 2006).

Similarly, students of this age group face almost the same academic, health, domestic and other issues, and when facing difficulty and failure in achieving the desired target, it leads toward depression. The sample was collected from Sargodha University, so mostly the majority of the students were from similar backgrounds and have similar issues, such as financial trouble, poor transport system, language difficulty, the problem in getting admission in the desired university, confusion regarding selection selecting of subjects and lack of computer knowledge. Because of all these reasons they have a similar level of depression.

The last hypothesis of the study that the level of self-concealment will be higher among female students as compared to male students was also rejected (see table, 5). The result shows that boys have a higher level of self-concealment than girls. In Pakistani society, males are stigmatized as emotionally strong and powerful. So to avoid the threat of negative expectations and positive perceptions of others, that they will lose control of themselves in problematic situations, they have more emotional control and avoid sharing their problems with others. They give a shoulder to others to solve their problems but avoid sharing their problems with others. It might also be that in our society males are egoistic they think that if they will disclose their problems with others they will evaluate it critically. So rather than sharing their problems, they hide them. Another reason might also be that boy's strength is less in class as compared to girls, so rather than asking a question to clear their ambiguities; they remain quiet in class, with the thought that others will make fun of them.

## **Conclusion**

The present study yielded that perfectionism is a positive predictor of depression and self-concealment among university students. Furthermore, results pointed out that self-concealment is a positive predictor of depression among university students. Results also suggested that self-concealment works as a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and depression. On the other hand, the results of the present study also revealed that there were no significant gender differences in depression. Moreover, the results of the current study also showed that level of self-concealment is higher among boys as compared to girls.

## **Limitations and Suggestions**

The Sample taken for the current study is taken from only Punjab and it is recommended that future researchers should collect from the data from other provinces as well. Qualitative researches related to these variables would enhance this area. In the current study, all scales were self-reported so there is a margin of social desirability therefore it is suggested that future researchers should use the social desirability assessment tool before data collection.

## **Practical Implications**

There is cultural variation in the level of academic perfectionism. So, the newly developed academic perfectionism scale will be useful for Pakistani teachers, educationalists, and psychologists that how in our culture, failure to achieve academic perfectionism affects students' performance. Through these results, educational psychologists will try to lower the level of depression among both genders. It will help them to develop an adaptive form of perfectionism and if face with any failure, or flaw, seek help from others to solve it, rather than concealing and facing distress in the future. For perfectionists, psycho-education will help them to think that perfectionism is an ideal phenomenon and total or true perfectionism can never be achieved.

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