



## Understanding the Pressure to Be Perfect Among Young Adults

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### Abstract:

Young adults at university are expected to do well in their studies, in their social lives and in how they present themselves. This study looks at how family expectations, social media, peer comparison and the gap between the real and ideal self relate to perfectionism and emotional strain. We surveyed 101 university students (95.05% undergraduates) using a convenience sample. Most respondents (74.26%) said their families hold high achievement standards, and 54.46% felt directly pressured to meet them. On social media, 52.48% said they compare their lifestyle with others, 70.30% felt pushed to do better after seeing other people's carefully presented profiles, and 71.29% believed they had to outperform peers to feel valued. In addition, 58.42% held themselves to strict standards, 74.26% felt stressed when they missed their own targets, and 61.39% often felt a gap between who they are and who they think they should be. A chi-square test found no significant association between social media comparison and the size of this gap. The study is descriptive and cannot show cause and effect, but the results suggest that many students carry a heavy load of perfectionist pressure, and that universities should consider offering accessible mental health support.

**Keywords:** perfectionism, young adults, social media comparison, academic pressure, ideal self, self-discrepancy, mental health

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Young adulthood is a period of change. People settle into an identity, choose a field of study and take their first steps toward a career. For many, this period is also shaped by pressure to be perfect. Hewitt and Flett (1991) describe perfectionism as a multidimensional trait that involves very high personal standards together with harsh self-judgment. Striving for excellence can be healthy and can build resilience. When it turns rigid, though, it is linked to anxiety, burnout and constant stress. University life can make this worse, because grades, social standing, online image and job prospects are all visible and constantly compared.

### 1.2 What Might Drive Perfectionism

Perfectionism rarely comes from one source. Four influences are examined in this study.

**Family expectations.** Home is often where young people first learn what is expected of them. When parents set high standards, children may come to feel that their worth depends on what they achieve. Hewitt and Flett (1991) call this socially prescribed perfectionism, the belief that other people expect you to be perfect.

**Social media.** Platforms built around images show a steady stream of other people's successes and polished lifestyles. Festinger (1954) argued that people judge themselves by comparing with others, and later studies link social media use to envy, lower self-esteem and lower life satisfaction (Krasnova et al., 2013; Tandoc et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). Comparing one's ordinary life with someone else's best moments is rarely a fair contest.

**Peer comparison.** In competitive settings, self-worth can become tied to how one ranks against classmates. Success is then measured less by personal progress than by whether one is ahead of others.

**The gap between real and ideal self.** When outside standards are absorbed as personal ones, a distance can open up between the person one is and the person one feels one should be. Higgins (1987) proposed that this mismatch is a source of emotional distress. In that state, even a small setback can feel like proof of personal inadequacy.

### 1.3 Theoretical Frameworks

Two frameworks guide the study. The first is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism, which separates self-oriented perfectionism (setting demanding standards for oneself) from socially prescribed perfectionism (believing that others demand perfection from you). We ask whether pressure from family and peers shows up as strict standards that students place on themselves. The second is Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory, which holds that people become vulnerable to negative emotion when their actual self does not match their ideal self. We use it to look at how comparison and academic pressure might widen that gap.

### 1.4 Research Gap

Academic stress, social media use and family expectations are usually studied one at a time. We found fewer studies that look at family demands and online comparison together as sources of self-directed perfectionism, and we did not find recent figures on how common the real-ideal gap is among university students who live much of their lives online. This study tries to add some evidence on both points. This claim reflects our own reading of the literature and should be checked against a fuller review.

### 1.5 Research Questions and Objectives

#### Research questions

1. Why do young adults feel they have to be perfect?
2. Which factors push young adults toward perfection?
3. Why does the gap between who we are and who we want to be cause so much distress?

#### Objectives

1. To understand why young adults feel compelled to pursue perfection.
2. To identify the main factors (social media, family expectations, academic and career pressure, peer comparison) that add to this pressure.
3. To examine how the difference between real and ideal self affects young adults' mental well-being.

## 2. Research Methodology

This is a quantitative, cross-sectional and descriptive study. We surveyed 101 university students using non-probability convenience sampling. The sample was split evenly between men and women (49.5% each), 76.2% were aged 18-20, and 95.0% were undergraduates. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire of 15 items covering daily habits, family expectations, social media use, peer comparison and self-discrepancy. Most items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The self-discrepancy item used a frequency scale (1 = never, 5 = always). Percentages were tabulated in Python (pandas), and the descriptive statistics and chi-square test were run in IBM SPSS Statistics 26 (IBM Corp., 2019). The questionnaire was written for this study and does not include an established perfectionism scale.

### 2.1 Sample Profile

Table 1 describes the respondents. Most were young (18-20) and enrolled in undergraduate programmes. Social media took up 1 to 4 hours a day for most students (85.1%), while study and career preparation time was spread more widely, from under 2 hours to over 8 hours a day.

**Table 1. Demographic profile and daily time use (N = 101)**

| Variable | Category | % |
|----------|----------|---|
|----------|----------|---|

|                             |                   |       |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Gender                      | Male              | 49.50 |
|                             | Female            | 49.50 |
|                             | Prefer not to say | 0.99  |
| Age                         | 18-20 years       | 76.24 |
|                             | 21-23 years       | 20.79 |
|                             | 24-26 years       | 2.97  |
| Enrolment                   | Undergraduate     | 95.05 |
|                             | Postgraduate      | 3.96  |
|                             | Work-study        | 0.99  |
| Daily social media use      | Under 1 hour      | 4.95  |
|                             | 1-2 hours         | 41.58 |
|                             | 2-4 hours         | 43.56 |
|                             | 4-6 hours         | 9.90  |
| Daily study / career effort | Under 2 hours     | 28.71 |
|                             | 2-4 hours         | 31.68 |
|                             | 4-6 hours         | 21.78 |
|                             | 6-8 hours         | 12.87 |
|                             | Over 8 hours      | 4.95  |

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Social Media Comparison

Table 2 shows responses to the statement "Social media makes me compare my achievements or lifestyle with those of others." The mean was 3.47 (SD = 1.119), and both the median and mode were 4. Overall, students tended to agree with the statement. A little over half (52.5%) chose agree or strongly agree, while 18.8% disagreed to some degree. The standard deviation shows a moderate spread of opinion.

**Table 2. Responses to Q8: social media makes me compare my achievements or lifestyle with others**

| Response              | Frequency | %     | Cumulative % |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| 1 (Strongly disagree) | 6         | 5.9   | 5.9          |
| 2                     | 13        | 12.9  | 18.8         |
| 3                     | 29        | 28.7  | 47.5         |
| 4                     | 34        | 33.7  | 81.2         |
| 5 (Strongly agree)    | 19        | 18.8  | 100.0        |
| Total                 | 101       | 100.0 |              |

### 3.2 Real-Ideal Self Gap

Table 3 reports how often respondents felt a significant gap between who they are and who they think they should be (Q15). Responses leaned strongly toward the upper end of the scale: 35.6% said "often" and 25.7% said "always", so 61.4% felt this gap frequently or constantly. The mean was 3.79 (SD = 0.952), with a median and mode of 4. About a third (33.7%) said they felt it sometimes, and only 5.0% said rarely or never.

**Table 3. Responses to Q15: frequency of feeling a gap between actual and ideal self**

| Response      | Frequency | %     | Cumulative % |
|---------------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| 1 (Never)     | 3         | 3.0   | 3.0          |
| 2 (Rarely)    | 2         | 2.0   | 5.0          |
| 3 (Sometimes) | 34        | 33.7  | 38.6         |
| 4 (Often)     | 36        | 35.6  | 74.3         |
| 5 (Always)    | 26        | 25.7  | 100.0        |
| Total         | 101       | 100.0 |              |

### 3.3 Reaction to Small Failures

For the statement "I feel that even a small failure means that I am not good enough" (Q12), the mean was 3.02 (SD = 1.288), the median was 3 and the mode was 2. On average, then, students were neutral. The larger standard deviation and the lower mode show that opinions were more divided here than on Q15. Some students clearly disagreed with the statement, while others agreed strongly. Table 4 puts the three items side by side.

**Table 4. Descriptive statistics for Q8, Q12 and Q15 (N = 101)**

| Item | Mean | Median | Mode | SD |
|------|------|--------|------|----|
|------|------|--------|------|----|

|                                          |             |               |             |           |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-----------|
| Q8: Social media comparison              | 3.47        | 4.00          | 4           | 1.119     |
| <b>Item</b>                              | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Median</b> | <b>Mode</b> | <b>SD</b> |
| Q12: Small failure means not good enough | 3.02        | 3.00          | 2           | 1.288     |
| Q15: Gap between actual and ideal self   | 3.79        | 4.00          | 4           | 0.952     |

Source: Primary survey data, analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

### 3.4 Chi-Square Test

We used a chi-square test of independence to check whether social media comparison (Q8) and the real-ideal gap (Q15) were associated. Table 5 gives the output. The Pearson chi-square was 4.945 (df = 6,  $p = .551$ ), the likelihood ratio was 5.418 ( $p = .491$ ) and the linear-by-linear association was 2.758 ( $p = .097$ ). None is significant at the .05 level, so we could not reject the null hypothesis of independence. In this sample, we found no evidence that students who compare themselves more on social media also feel a larger gap between real and ideal self.

**Table 5. Chi-square test results**

| Test                         | Value | df | Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|-------|----|----------------|
| Pearson chi-square           | 4.945 | 6  | .551           |
| Likelihood ratio             | 5.418 | 6  | .491           |
| Linear-by-linear association | 2.758 | 1  | .097           |
| Valid cases                  | 101   |    |                |

One caution applies. Seven of the 12 cells (58.3%) had an expected count below 5, and the smallest expected count was 0.15. This breaks the usual rule that at least 80% of cells should have expected counts of 5 or more (Field, 2018), so the p-values are not fully reliable. Merging response categories, or a larger sample, would give a sturdier test. A non-significant result also means only that we found no evidence of a link. It does not prove that the two variables are unrelated, especially with a small sample and sparse cells.

## 4. Discussion

Two points stand out. First, the gap between real and ideal self was common. About six in ten students felt it often or always, which fits Higgins' (1987) idea that the distance between who people are and who they think they ought to be is a familiar source of distress. Second, social media comparison was also common, with just over half of students agreeing that it makes them compare their lives with others. This is in line with earlier work on social comparison and social media (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014).

The two did not line up statistically, however. The chi-square result gives us no basis to say that social media comparison is tied to the size of the self-discrepancy gap in this group. One reason may be that the gap has other sources we did not measure, such as family expectations or academic competition. Another is that our test had little power, given the small sample and sparse cells. We cannot tell which is the case from these data.

Reactions to small failures varied more. The average was neutral and the spread was wide, so the sense that one setback means personal inadequacy is not shared equally. Differences in coping style or resilience may explain this, but we did not measure either, and this remains a suggestion for future work.

The percentages in the abstract (for example, on family standards and on self-imposed perfectionism) come from other questionnaire items. These show that many respondents report high expectations and stress, but they describe how common each experience is. They do not show that family expectations or social media cause perfectionism.

## 5. Conclusion

Many of the students surveyed felt pressure to meet high standards, and most often felt a gap between their actual and ideal selves. Social media comparison was widespread as well, though we found no statistical link between it and the size of the gap. Because the study is descriptive, based on a convenience sample and relies on self-report, it points to patterns worth studying further and does not establish causes. Even so, the figures suggest that universities should make counselling and well-being support easy to reach, and that students may benefit from conversations about unrealistic standards.

## 6. Limitations

Readers should keep several limits in mind. The sample of 101 students is small, which lowers the power of any inferential test. The chi-square test also broke the expected-count assumption, so its result should be treated with care. The data are self-reported, so answers may be affected by social desirability or by how well people can judge themselves. The design is cross-sectional, so it cannot show which factor comes first. The closed-ended Likert items could not capture why students feel as they do or how they cope. The questionnaire was written for this study, and perfectionism was not measured with an established scale such as the Hewitt and Flett scale, which limits comparison with other research. Finally, convenience sampling from a limited group of institutions means the results may not apply to all young adults.

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