Fear of failure among perfectionist students

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ABSTRACT

Fear of failure (FOF) has been reported as a construct that hinders individuals from achieving higher, working harder, and even moving from one stage of development to another. Studies indicated that university students with traits perfectionism tend to develop FOF, which prevented them for achieving better accomplishment in their academic life. In order to obtain further knowledge to curb FOF among this population, this study investigates which one of the three dimensions of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, socially prescribed) is the main predictor of FOF. 351 participants from the target population of 4,000 undergraduate students from UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia were recruited via convenience sampling to provide us with their data through a Google Form. Perfectionism dimensions were measured by the multidimensional perfectionism scale and fear of failure by the performance failure appraisal inventory. The collected data was analyzed via simple and multiple regression by multiple regression technique, and the findings showed that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism did not significantly predict the fear of failure. However, socially prescribed perfectionism was the only significant predictor of the fear of failure among the perfectionism model, therefore indicating that it was the most significantly predictor as well. In conclusion, students are more likely to be afraid to fail when they believe that there is a social standard of perfection that they have to follow.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development explained the importance of succeeding in each stage of psychosocial development, which success at each stage helps individuals develop a better sense of social development. Consequentially, it the importance of the study of failure might be undermined as the value of failure was not considered important or positive in the context of development. Nevertheless, the transition between each stage of Erikson's developmental theory might be hindered by the sense of failure [1]. As the sense of success fueled the positive affect of development, the belief that one will achieve the success is significant in the process of further cognitive and social development [2]. On the other hand, the fear that one's attempt might end in failure would hinder individuals to take an active role in transitioning to the next step of development [3]. It was also reported that individuals with trait perfectionism tend to develop the concern that they might fail at the end of their effort, or the sense fear of failure [4]. As the fear of failure (FOF) can be seen as a hindrance among young individuals with potential future, such as high-achieving,

perfectionist university students, it is significant to understand further how trait perfectionism predicts the development of the FOF. Therefore, this current study aims to investigate the role of three forms of perfectionism, namely self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP).

The term fear of failure was coined by Atkinson in 1987 [5] to describe the nature of individuals who avoid failing due to the concerns of shame or embarrassment as the by-product of failure, or the rationale to steer clear of failure in comparison to the rationale of achieving success [6]. The development of FOF can be explained by the protection motivation theory (PMT). It explains how individuals respond to perceived threats by either engaging in adaptive behaviors that protect them or engaging in maladaptive behaviors that fail to protect them. It proposes that individuals' attitude and behavior is determined by their appraisal of the threat, their perceived ability to cope with the threat, and their efficacy. As the occurrence of failure is commonly regarded as the outcome of the perceived threat, the FOF represents a defensive response intended to safeguard individuals against the negative repercussions associated with failure.

In the context of university students, the PMT can elucidate the manner in which university students react to different types of hazards, including academic failure. For instance, in the face of such a danger, a student's assessment of the risk may encompass an evaluation of the gravity of the potential repercussions, such as poor academic performance, academic probation, or expulsion, as well as the probability of these outcomes occurring, and the personal significance of the threat, such as the effect on future vocational opportunities. Consequently, these students may perceive the threat as capable of engendering more profound deleterious effects, such as mental health complications.

Following that, five distinct types of FOF have been recognized, including: i) apprehension regarding experiencing shame and embarrassment, stemming from the conviction that situations involving assessment will result in public humiliation; ii) concerns about jeopardizing an individual's self-worth, which originates from the belief that one's performance is not within their control; iii) the fear of losing the attention of significant individuals, which arises from the belief that failure will diminish one's social standing and cause others to lose interest in them; iv) apprehensions regarding an uncertain future, which stem from the belief that failing in the present will result in future failures; and v) concerns about disappointing significant others, which arise from the belief that failure will lead to disappointment and a decrease in affection from significant individuals [7]. Consequently, in light of the anxieties related to failure, individuals may endeavor to evade failure as a means of evading the five FOFs. In a similar vein, there are five primary rationales that individuals may utilize to avoid failure. Firstly, one may avoid failure to avoid feelings of humiliation and shame. Second, some individuals may engage in self-criticism, as failure may lead to negative assessments of their abilities and intelligence levels. Thirdly, failure may be perceived as an obstacle that interferes with an individual's future plans. Fourth, some individuals may believe that failure would cause disappointment and humiliation to their significant others [8]. In sum, while the FOF leads to various risks, it is merely a result of the assessment of perceived academic adversities.

Various factors have been reported to contribute to the development of FOF. For instance, individuals with a higher sense of responsibility are prone to developing higher FOF, as the consequences of failure are perceived to be more devastating [9]. Furthermore, personality has also been identified as a contributing factor to FOF [10]. Additionally, it was also indicated that motivation that is formed during an adolescent's development process may play a crucial role as an internal source of effect from FOF, which can then impact students' aversion behaviors and perception towards learning [9]. This is particularly relevant in our context as FOF has been found to be related to psychological stress and the risk of burnout, with positive correlations identified between the aforementioned variables [11].

Some studies in the past had also shed light on the topic of entrepreneurship and FOF; for example, a study by Kong *et al.* [12], who reported that threat perception has a negative correlation with perceived confidence, thus individuals with high levels of perceived competence in entrepreneurship will have a low perception of threat and this will then predict a low FOF. Moreover, the person-environment relationship in entrepreneurship has been reported to be an important factor in understanding FOF as an individual's interaction with people in their entrepreneurial environment will have an impact on their entrepreneurial risk behaviors and FOF [13]. Lastly, there is a positive association between FOF and perfectionism, as perfectionists will strive to be perfect and will become intolerant of failure or mistakes [14].

Perfectionism can be defined as a nature of personality that directs the individual into achieving flawlessness and setting extremely high expectations of oneself, accompanied by a highly critical level of self-criticism [15]. Research divided perfectionism into six trait-dimensions, which are personal standards, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, organization, parental expectations, and parental criticism [16]. It was also reported that perfectionism can be divided into three main types: i) SOP, which is the self-setting of impractical expectations and motivations; ii) OOP, which is the setting of unrealistic and impractical expectation and motivations towards others; and lastly, iii) SPP, which is the belief that our loved ones have

an expectation for ourselves to achieve perfection. Moreover, extensive research into perfectionism has further developed into the idea that perfectionism is a multidimensional trait by which it consists of two main higher dimensions: perfectionistic concerns (PC) and perfectionistic strivings (PS) [17], [18].

Perfectionistic concerns was largely concerned with factors that are in relation to an individual's concerns over the mistakes that perfectionism they make whilst perfectionistic strivings is the factors in relation to the individual's personal strivings to perfection. More recent studies identified that perfectionism can be divided into two general types, which is adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Adaptive perfectionists are characterized by their optimistic outlook and their ability to strive for perfection in a healthy manner. Such individuals are able to handle small failures, set achievable goals, and manage their stressors effectively as part of their self-improvement process. To enhance their personal development, adaptive perfectionists rely on positive reinforcements, which leads to increased levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and positive well-being. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionists are highly self-critical and self-conscious, and often perceive themselves as being inferior, leading to a constant fear of failure and low self-esteem. SOP is related to adaptive perfectionism, while OOP and SPP are related to maladaptive perfectionism [16], [19], [20].

Protection motivation theory can be used to explain their response to various threats such as academic failure. For example, when faced with such a threat, a student's appraisal of the threat might include the severity of the consequences, such as low grades, academic probation, or drop out, as well as the likelihood of the consequences occurring, and the personal relevance of the threat, such as the impact on future career prospects). Their perception that such threat might lead to more meaningful negative effect such as mental health problems [21], [22] would exacerbate the perception of the threat. In other words, PMT suggests that FOF is a normal reaction of an assessed threat. Throughout their developmental process, many individuals often perceive failure as a means of threat, which then led them to develop natural FOF, as failure was commonly associated with negative consequences and evaluations from others; however, it is depending on the individuals' perception whether it might bring benefit or harm [23], [24]. Fear of failure has been impactful upon students' learning abilities and behavior reported that FOF has a significant impact on a student's motivation and intention to learn, self-esteem, learning behaviors and their overall academic performance [25]. In terms of learning motivation. Supporting that, it was also reported that FOF and personality characteristics were significant predictors of academic procrastination such that 37% of academic procrastination can be explained by the effects of FOF and a personality trait called conscientiousness [9].

In line with that, FOF was reported to be the risk factor of academic procrastination, which was detrimental to a student's education. FOF was also known to cause emotional implications such as stress, anxiety and emotional outbursts in students who are pursuing their education [1]. These negative implications of FOF may also affect the student's studying attention, academic performance, educational efforts and satisfaction with an indirect effect in causing the student's reluctance in pursuing out-of-school activities or even to refine their academic qualifications [26], [27].

Other than its impact on the academic aspects, FOF has also been known to have an effect on general behaviors of each individual. By investigating the impact of FOF on individual behavior, we can then understand the role of FOF in relation to being a social construct as well the effects it has in relation to social behavior [28]. A recent study has identified that individuals perceive FOF as an adverse risk and can be conceptualized as a negative emotion or feeling. When individuals face the possibility of failure, they will develop the motivation to avoid the perceived failure and this affects their behaviors and thoughts that are impacted by FOF [3]. While being called adaptive and maladaptive, both types of perfectionism are significantly linked to FOF [1], [29]. Among the perfectionist Generation-Z (Gen-Z) individuals, for instance, the perception that perfection is determined by the social norm and significant others pushed them to believe that failure to adhere to the norm or to conform with others are to be avoided, and therefore the development of the FOF. Although SOP and OOP/SPP are labeled as adaptive and maladaptive, respectively, both types of perfectionism are significantly associated with FOF for instance, among Gen-Z individuals who exhibit perfectionistic tendencies, the belief that perfection is determined by social norms and significant others can lead to an aversion to deviating from such norms or failing to conform to others' expectations, ultimately contributing to the development of FOF [30]. Most likely, their FOF came from the belief that when the society or significant others negatively evaluate them, they would likely to matter less [29].

This study further investigated the relationship between perfectionism and FOF. Research on perfectionism and FOF can result in the development of intervention and coping strategies in order to decrease failure aversion [31]. Moreover, past studies found that when investigating the relationships between perfectionistic concerns, perfectionistic strivings and FOF, most studies confirmed that perfectionistic concerns have a positive correlation with FOF except for one study that showed an insignificant relationship [32]. In another study, it was determined that by examining the bivariate correlations of the relationships involved in perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings, it can provide an accurate comparison of their differential relationships with FOF; however, the study had

limitations in ignoring the effect of correlation size and strength, and does not take into account about the overlapping relationship between perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings [32]. In addition, Flett and Hewitt [15] advocated that perfectionists are often concerned with beliefs that their perceived failures will lead to criticism and negative evaluation from others. This will then lead to a rumination cycle, such that every failure event results in an unending cycle of self-criticism over their own imperfect actions [4]. In other words, perfectionists will repeatedly criticize themselves after each failure situation and this may lead to other severe side effects like various mental health illnesses which includes depression, anxiety and dangerous consequences such as suicidality [33]. According to Khan *et al.* [34], perfectionism can be a mixture of thoughts and behaviors that are in conjunction with exceeding standard and perceptions placed on one's own definition of success and failure. In seeking to achieve these standards, it can result in individuals facing extreme amounts of stress and depressive symptoms [20].

However, there are limited studies on the reversed relationship where perfectionism predicts FOF. reported that perfectionists constantly consider the consequences of their action [35] and strive to achieve their best, having little to no room for mistakes. This suggested that perfectionism could be considered a predictor of FOF. Therefore, this study aimed to provide insight into the relationship between perfectionism and the FOF to contribute towards future developments of research and coping strategies in this area of study.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research design and sampling

Non-experimental method, cross-sectional design was utilized in this study to discover the explanatory relationship between the predictor and the outcome variables. As we seek for the theoretical and practical explanation between the variables, where the data was collected at any given time without any specific control or treatment, experimental method was not chosen, despite the fact that it is able to discover the causal relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Our sample were taken from the population of UCSI University undergraduate students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The data was collected via the non-probability convenience sampling method by which the participants were most conveniently accessible and available at any given time However, although this sampling method benefits us by providing easy data accessibility and low cost procedures, the data might be biased and not generalizable to the rest of the population. In order to tackle that problem, we collected the data from 351 participants as based on the Krejcie and Morgan table, the number is sufficient for population as big as 4,000 undergraduate students.

2.2. Instrumentation

The instrumentation of this study was listed in a Google Forms survey in which the participants were first required to read an information letter and provide consent to participate in the study. Moving on, the survey consisted of three sections, which are: the demographic sheet (age, country of origin, and gender), performance failure appraisal inventory, and Hewitt and Flett multidimensional perfection scale (short form version). The criterion/dependent variable of this study is the FOF, and the performance failure appraisal inventory (PFAI). The PFAI was chosen to measure the variable. Some past studies advocated that the inventory was reliable and suitable inventory in measuring FOF [9], [10], [24], [36]. This inventory consisted of 25 items which measured the five aversive consequences of failure, these are: i) fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment; ii) fear of devaluing one's self estimate; iii) fear of losing important others' interest; iv) fear of an uncertain future; and v) fear of upsetting significant others [7]. Participants rated their answers for each item based on a 5-point Likert Scale in which 1 represented 'Do Not Believe at All' and 5 represented 'Believe 100% of the time'. Sample questions were "When I am not succeeding, people tend to leave me alone" and "When I am failing, my future seems uncertain".

To collect the data on the predictor/independent variable of this study, the Hewitt & Flett multidimensional perfectionism scale (HF-MPS) [37] was used to examine the 3 independent variables: self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially-prescribed perfectionism. This scale was a newer and shorter version of the original 45-item HF-MPS [37] and now consisted of only 15 items, by which participants rated each item based on a 7-point Likert Scale. On the Likert Scale, 1 represented 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 represented 'Strongly Agree'. Sample items include "The better I do, the better I am expected to do" and "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself". According to the short form version of the original HF-MPS is not only sufficient and reliable as compared to the original version, it can also decrease the long, impractical and time-consuming elements of the measure.

2.3. Data collection procedures

Before the actual data collection, a research proposal as well as the actual Google Forms survey was prepared and reviewed by a supervisor. As this research followed the quantitative research approach and

questionnaires, permission was also requested and granted by the original authors of the questionnaire via email. After getting the necessary approvals and permission, the actual study commenced by sending out the Google Forms via social media, such as Facebook, Microsoft Teams, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Participants were first required to read the information sheet, give their consent and fill in their demographic details, before proceeding to complete the PFAI and HW-MPS-SF sections. Each questionnaire would take approximately 5 minutes to complete and confidentiality was assured with no personal identification of each participant. The data collection process took approximately 1 month to reach the intended number of 351 responses and proceeded for data analysis. After all the responses were collected, the data was entered to the IBM SPSS 23, and checked for the missing values, ambiguous responses, ineligible answers and extreme values. Afterwards, a multivariate analysis of multiple regression was carried out to analyze the relationship between the three predictors (self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, socially-prescribed perfectionism) and the criterion (fear of failure). The method was chosen as it is best fulfil the research questions and objectives of this study and it fulfils the requirement of having multiple predictors to only 1 criterion. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis also displayed the unique variance between each predictor and criterion whilst controlling and eliminating the variance for other predictors in the model.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Results

Linear regression was carried out to determine whether SOP will predict FOF. Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis between SOP and FOF. This was not a statistically significant model ($F_{(1, 349)}$=3.703, p=0.055 (95% BCa CI [54.60, 77.17]). The adjusted R^2 indicated that 0.8% of the variance in FOF can be explained by the variance in SOP. Nevertheless, SOP was not a statistically significant predictor of FOF (t=1.924, p=0.55). Furthermore, in Table 2, it is depicted that the one point increase of SOP, predicts 0.44 increase in FOF. Our results suggest that SOP did not significantly predict FOF (p=.055).

Table 1. The contribution of SOP on FOF

Variable	B	SEB	ß
(Constant)	66.093	5.791	
SOP	.436	.227	.102

Note: Adj R^2=.008; F=3.703; p=.055

Table 2. Self-oriented perfectionism on fear of failure

Variable	B	SEB	ß
SOP	.436	.227	.102

Note: Adj R^2=.008; F=3.703; p=.055

Perfectionist individuals who rely on their own perception on perfection are not likely to develop significant FOF, individuals whose the orientation of perfection comes from others (OOP) are more likely to develop higher FOF significantly to the fear of being unsuccessful or making mistakes. The analysis is depicted in Table 3. In other words, the data in Table 2 underscores that individuals with perfectionistic tendencies, particularly those who derive their standards of perfection from their own self-perception, exhibit a reduced propensity to show significant levels of FOF. Conversely, individuals whose orientation towards perfection emanates from external sources, denoted as the orientation of OOP, are significantly more predisposed to experience heightened FOF levels, as depicted in Table 3. This heightened susceptibility to the fear of potential failure is inherently linked to their overarching concerns regarding the prospect of unsuccessful outcomes.

Table 3. Other-oriented perfectionism on FOF

Variable	B	SEB	ß
OOP	.628	.200	.166

Note: Adj R^2=.025; F=9.864; p=.002

Table 3 displays a positive relationship between the increase in OOP level and FOF score, where an increment of one OOP point corresponds to 0.17 increase in FOF score. Although the association is statistically significant (p<.05, 95%BCa CI [52.92, 72.59]), the magnitude of the coefficient is small, indicating a weak contribution of OOP to FOF. Moreover, the adjusted R^2 value of .027 suggests that only

2.7% of the variance in FOF can be explained by OOP. In summary, individuals who prioritize external validation of perfection over their own tend to exhibit fear of failure. The relationship between SPP and FOF is examined through regression analysis as seen in Table 4. SPP is defined as a type of perfectionism where the standards of perfection are based on social consensus. The findings indicate the association between SPP and FOF.

As illustrated in Table 4, when one believes that perfection is determined by the social consensus, they would likely to develop quite a strong fear of making mistakes ($p<.05$) [95%BCa CI 46.63, 65.45]. The coefficient is considered strong at 0.24, and it is considered prevalent as, more than half (54%) of the fear can be explained by such a perfectionism orientation. In other words, one increment of SPP predicts 0.63 point increase of FOF, and it can explain more than 50% of the variance. In other words, our study is in line with the report that other-oriented perfectionism is considered a demanding type of perfectionism [20], as the perfectionist individuals feel the pressure to adhere the demand of significant others around them [24], [29], which drove them to develop stronger FOF.

Table 4. Socially prescribed perfectionism on FOF

Variable	B	SEB	ß
SPP	.927	.202	.239

Note: Adj R²=.054; F=21.094; p<.001

3.2. Discussion

The results indicated that individuals with a tendency towards perfectionism are more likely to experience a fear of making mistakes, committing errors, or failing to meet their standards of perfection. These results align with the theoretical framework of the protective motivation theory, which explains the fear of failure's underlying mechanism. When perfectionist individuals encounter specific situations, they tend to evaluate them based on their standards of perfection. Consequently, as their standards are more inflexible than those of non-perfectionists, they are more likely to develop a more pronounced fear of not adhering to their perceived standards, which can then translate into the FOF [11]. Further analyses have revealed different dynamics among various types of perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism, which is considered an adaptive form of perfectionism [15], did not demonstrate any significant association with the fear of failure. In other words, our findings suggest that individuals are less likely to experience a fear of making mistakes when they base their standards of perfection on their own criteria. This finding aligns with previous research showing that the personality trait of conscientiousness is significantly related to the development of FOF [14]. For example, a student with a high level of conscientiousness tends to engage in social comparison and uses their peers' academic achievements as a standard of perfection, which they perceive as challenging and intimidating. This cognitive response to the perceived threat is the FOF [6].

On the other hand, our next finding suggests different implication for perfectionist individuals who rely more on other-oriented perfectionism (OOP); they are more likely to develop FOF due to the fear of not meeting the standards of other people around them. As seen in the Table 3, the regression coefficient of the OOP type of perfectionism was considered strong. Lastly, the stronger type of perfectionism to predict FOF according to our findings is the SPP; its one point increment predicted almost 1 point of increase in FOF. In other words, when the a perfectionist believe that the social norm is the standard of perfection, they would highly likely to be extremely afraid of making mistakes or experiencing failure, and the fear might even pulled them to experience depression [19], [20].

Our study was aimed to investigate the association between perfectionism and the FOF, and our findings suggest that perfectionist individuals are more likely to experience FOF due to their inflexible standards of perfection. Specifically, when perfectionists encounter situations that do not meet their standards of perfection, they tend to develop a pronounced fear of not adhering to their perceived standards, which can then translate into FOF. Moreover, it was revealed that different types of perfectionism have varying implications for FOF. SOP, which is considered an adaptive form of perfectionism, did not demonstrate any significant association with FOF. While OOP was strongly associated with FOF. The strongest predictor of FOF in our study was SPP, where individuals believe that the social norm is the standard of perfection. One point increment in SPP predicted almost one point of increase in FOF. This finding suggests that individuals who base their standards of perfection on social norms are highly likely to be extremely afraid of making mistakes or experiencing failure, which can even lead to depression. The results align with the theoretical framework of the PMT model, which explains the underlying mechanism of FOF. Additionally, our findings contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating that different types of perfectionism have varying implications for FOF. Future research could explore the potential moderating factors that may influence the association between perfectionism and FOF, such as culture, socio-economic status, or gender.

3.3. Practical implications

The study indicated that when the students' standard of perfection is taken from the perception of others, such as classmates, parents, or teachers, as well as socially-prescribed, such as schools or universities, they tend to be afraid of making mistakes that ends with failures. Eventually, this situation might lead them to other academic issues, such as procrastination, truancy, or inadequate academic achievements. Therefore, it is important for educators to understand that the objective of learning is to get the learners to be better individuals than they were in the past, instead of achieving a situation called perfection; moreover, when the standard of perfection is set by the educators, parents, or even the educational institution. Being embarrassed, humiliated, or marginalized for failed attempts tend to develop higher tendency of fear of failure, which might lead to the worse degree of sinister for the students. It is suggested for the educators to study the individual capacity and personality in order to help them to grow better than they were before. It is highly discouraged to set the benchmark of perfection or success by using the educators' own standard, as it might have negative effect on the students' mental health in the future.

3.4. Limitations and suggestions

This study is not without limitation. First of all, this study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate objective measures or behavioral observations to mitigate these biases. Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of the study, which limits our ability to establish causality between perfectionism and FOF. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine the temporal relationship between perfectionism and FOF. Moreover, our study focused solely on the relationship between perfectionism and FOF and did not consider other potential factors that may contribute to FOF, such as anxiety or self-esteem. Future research could investigate the interplay between perfectionism and these factors in predicting FOF. Overall, future research could build upon our findings by incorporating objective measures, employing longitudinal or experimental designs, and examining the role of other potential factors in predicting FOF.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the role of perfectionism in fear of failure. Self-oriented perfectionism showed no significant FOF association, while other-oriented perfectionism demonstrated a stronger FOF link. The most influential predictor was socially-prescribed perfectionism, tied to societal standards. These findings align with protective motivation theory (PMT) and highlight the need for educators to reconsider perfectionist benchmarks. The study suggests prioritizing individual growth over rigid success standards. Limitations include reliance on self-reports and a cross-sectional design, warranting future objective, longitudinal research. Understanding FOF complexities informs strategies for student well-being and academic performance.

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