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Perfectionism and Self-Esteem in Students: An Integrative Systematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Students face various academic demands that can significantly affect their psychological well-being. Self-esteem plays a crucial and influential role in determining how students respond and adapt to these pressures, while perfectionism often emerges as a behavioral response to low self-esteem. This research aims to comprehensively examine the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism among students through a systematic literature review, involving 50 articles which were then filtered down to 15 articles deemed most relevant to the topic under investigation, and subsequently included as 6 journal articles focused on the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism, specifically targeting the student population as the main subjects, with sources obtained from Google Scholar and ResearchGate. The findings of the review indicate that maladaptive perfectionism has a significant negative correlation with self-esteem, meaning that the higher the maladaptive perfectionism, the lower the self-esteem of students, while adaptive perfectionism shows varying results, namely that adaptive perfectionism has a positive relationship with self-esteem, which means that the higher the adaptive perfectionism, the higher the self-esteem of the individual; however, other studies have found that adaptive perfectionism can also lower self-esteem. Several studies also reveal that self-esteem can act as a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and depression. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening students' self-esteem to prevent the negative impact of perfectionism on mental health.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Perfectionism, Student.

INTRODUCTION

During their college years, students have the opportunity to develop their academic potential, enhance professional skills, and build strong personal character (Mustajib et al., 2024). They are faced with increasingly complex and diverse learning demands, such as a dense curriculum, the

need to acquire new skills, as well as academic and social pressures (Silmi et al., 2024). Throughout this period, students are expected to carry out their duties and responsibilities with full commitment to optimize their academic potential, achieve maximum learning outcomes, and develop themselves optimally (Ainunnahr et al., 2024). A common demand experienced by students in relation to coursework is the necessity of completing multiple assignments within a short time frame, often coupled with difficulties in understanding the material being studied while working on these tasks (Luqyana, 2023). Furthermore, the expectations of lecturers and parents add to the academic challenges that students must navigate (Mulya & Indrawati, 2017).

These demands can cause stress in students. The academic workload is often viewed as an academic burden that is considered difficult to achieve, leading to feelings of doubt (Fitriani et al., 2022). Feelings of doubt can negatively impact motivation and achievement potential, resulting in lower outcomes (Sari & Purwaningsih, 2018). A lack of self-confidence often influences how students perceive their own abilities. Students with low self-esteem tend to doubt their abilities, feel pessimistic, and are unable to assess themselves, creating feelings of incapacity in meeting the demands of the tasks they face (Izzati, 2021). Thus, individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to experiencing stress (Putra & Irawaty, 2024). According to Winarso (as quoted in Putra & Irawanty, 2024), individuals with high self-esteem tend to look positively and are more able to overcome them, thus allowing them to manage stress more effectively.

Individual with low self-esteem tend to feel less confident, doubt their abilities, and give negative evaluations of themselves (Fitri et al., 2024). They tend to experience rejection, receive less acceptance, and have difficulty accepting failure in every opportunity (Liliyana & Razali, 2023). This is in line with the explanation by Lees and Ellis (in Luo et al., 2016, as cited in Santoso et al., 2020), which states that the fear of failure is a key aspect of perfectionism and is closely related to low self-esteem. According to Hewitt and Flett (1991), perfectionism involves setting high standards for outcomes, but also being overly focused on mistakes and shortcomings in those outcomes. Perfectionistic individuals have very high expectations for their work and feel dissatisfied if the results are not perfect. When they fail to achieve perfect results, they tend to feel inadequate. This is consistent with research findings by Azizah and Kardiyem (Mistica et al., 2023), which reveal that individuals with perfectionist traits tend to strive to complete tasks perfectly and on time, driven by a desire to achieve perfection in everything they do.

The tendency for perfectionism among students can be observed in both academic and non-academic tasks. According to Sarwono (Putri et al., 2021), students with high self-esteem tend to be able to complete these tasks optimally as they are driven to showcase their best achievements, while those with low self-esteem often appear more passive and less competitive (Narotama & Rustika in (Akbar & Ningsih, 2024). Perfectionists often feel like failures if they do not achieve their goals or make mistakes, and they frequently regard these mistakes as weaknesses, which ultimately impacts their self-esteem (Al Farisi et al., 2024). Perfectionistic individuals tend to blame themselves when they experience failure or make mistakes in their actions (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). These struggles often reinforce negative self-perceptions, causing individuals to question their competence (Rosenberg, 1985). Individuals with perfectionism often show negative responses when facing failure, such as fear of being criticized by others, stress, or even depression (Hewitt et

al., 1996). There is a strong drive within them to consistently achieve perfect results and avoid failure in every action they take (Flett et al., 1991).

According to Moore and Barrow (in Santoso et al., 2020), the level of self-esteem in perfectionistic individuals is greatly influenced by their achievements or performance. Perfectionists are also more vulnerable to experiencing health issues, decreased productivity, difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships, and having low self-esteem (Flett & Hewitt, 1991). As a result, they are often beset by doubt, feel incapable, and struggle to accept personal shortcomings (Rosenberg, 1965). This condition makes them more vulnerable to anxiety, withdraw from social environments, and experience barriers in building healthy relationships (Rosenberg, 1962). Unlike individuals with high self-esteem, those with low self-esteem generally find it more difficult to face failure constructively and often get trapped in negative thought patterns that hinder personal development (Rosenberg, 1965).

Low self-esteem is often associated with various problems, such as unsatisfactory academic performance, depression, eating disorders, and deviant behavior (Rosenberg, 1986). Self-esteem becomes an important aspect for students, especially when carrying out and completing various college assignments. This is based on the understanding that students with high self-esteem will feel confident in their abilities and believe that they can complete their college tasks (Laras, 2025). Self-esteem is considered an important factor in enhancing motivation and achievement in individuals, thereby fostering enthusiasm and passion for learning (Naswan, 2022). This is because self-esteem also encompasses the desire for personal growth and self-improvement. Individuals with high self-esteem are not only satisfied with themselves but also have hopes of improving their quality (Rosenberg, 1965).

Previous research has shown diverse results regarding the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism in students. Khossosi also found a negative relationship, where higher concerns about perfectionism are associated with lower self-esteem. However, the study also indicated a very small positive relationship, suggesting that individuals with high self-esteem tend to have more adaptive perfectionism. Meanwhile, Santoso found a significant negative relationship among all three types of perfectionism with self-esteem. These differences in results indicate a continuing diversity in understanding the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism. This article aims to unify the findings that are still separate from the 6 articles to be reviewed by referring to the findings of various previous studies.

METHOD

Search Strategy

This research uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with a bibliographic research approach, which consists of a series of data collection activities through literature sources, followed by reading and note-taking (Supriyadi, 2017). The literature search process is conducted through Google Scholar and ResearchGate. The keywords used include: self-esteem, perfectionism, and college students. To ensure the relevance of the research, the articles searched are limited to

publications from 2015 to 2025. From the initial search results, a total of 50 articles related to the research theme were identified.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for articles are those that discuss the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism, whether the relationship is direct or mediated by other variables. The articles should involve populations of students or young adults and be published between 2015 and 2025. Articles will be excluded if they do not focus on the discussion between self-esteem and perfectionism, involve populations other than students or young adults, or have publication years earlier than 2015. Based on these criteria, from an initial 50 articles, only 15 articles were selected for further review as they were deemed relevant to the research topic. After the final screening process, six truly relevant articles were obtained and used as the main materials for analysis.
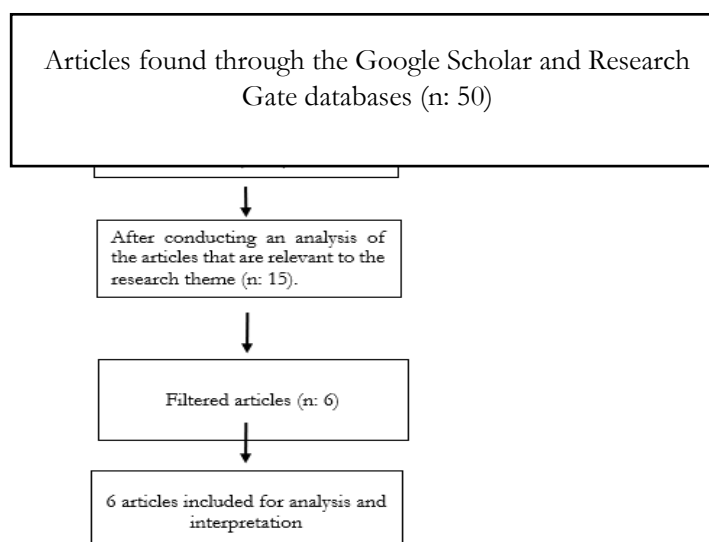
Data Extraction

From each selected article, the researcher extracts data that includes the identity of the authors and the publication year, the number and characteristics of the samples used, the instruments used to measure self-esteem and perfectionism, the types of perfectionism discussed, and the main findings regarding the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism.

Analysis Procedure

Data obtained are qualitatively analyzed by comparing findings across studies to identify patterns, differences in results, and research gaps. The analysis is conducted thematically to observe the consistency and variation of the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism among students. The six articles that passed the selection serve as the basis for discussion and the formulation of conclusions for this study. This process is illustrated in a flowchart that shows the inclusion and exclusion stages in the Systematic Review method (n: number of articles).

Figure 1. Flowchart related to the Systematic Literature Review Steps

Articles found through the Google Scholar and Research Gate databases (n: 50)

After conducting an analysis of the articles that are relevant to the research theme (n: 15).

Filtered articles (n: 6)

6 articles included for analysis and interpretation

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The review results from six articles show a relatively consistent pattern that maladaptive perfectionism is negatively related to self-esteem. Students who have maladaptive tendencies are characterized by excessive fear of making mistakes, worry about criticism, and high self-doubt. This condition has been shown to lower self-esteem and make individuals vulnerable to psychological issues, including depression. These findings repeatedly emerged, both in studies conducted in Indonesia, Korea (Park & Jeong, 2015), China (Chai et al., 2020), as well as in Fearn's research (Fearn et al., 2022), which indicates that maladaptive perfectionism consistently predicts low self-esteem in cross-cultural studies. It was also found that the habit of self-critical rumination has the strongest correlation with self-esteem, indicating that the more one is trapped in negative thoughts about themselves, the lower their self-esteem tends to be.

Conversely, the relationship between adaptive perfectionism and self-esteem shows more varied results. Some studies, such as those conducted by Taylor et al., (2016) and Chai et al. (2019), found a positive relationship, where adaptive perfectionism, in the form of the drive to set high standards for oneself, can enhance motivation and support self-esteem. However, other studies instead show negative outcomes, such as the findings of Santoso (2020), which indicate that perfectionism in any form still reduces self-esteem. Meanwhile, in the study by Khossousi et al., (2024), a very small positive relationship was found between self-esteem and perfectionism, meaning that the drive to establish high standards or perfectionistic efforts has almost no impact on improving self-esteem. This variation is likely influenced by differences in educational systems and cultural contexts. In countries with high academic pressure, even adaptive perfectionism may function as a psychological burden, whereas in other contexts it may serve as a motivational factor for achievement. This variation is likely influenced by differences in education systems and culture; in countries with high academic pressure, even adaptive perfectionism can become a psychological burden, whereas in other contexts it can serve as a motivation for achievement.

In addition, several studies also emphasize the role of self-esteem as a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and other psychological impacts. Chai et al. (2019) found that self-esteem can strengthen or weaken the influence of perfectionism on depression. This means that students with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to internalizing maladaptive perfectionism as a source of stress that can predict depression, while those with high self-esteem can manage adaptive perfectionism more healthily. According to Chai, adaptive perfectionism can actually protect against symptoms of depression. This may be due to the tendency of adaptive perfectionists to value high standards, orderliness, and achievements more highly. These characteristics are essentially positive qualities that can support success, strengthen relationships, and enhance the emotional well-being of students, thereby explaining why their influence differs from maladaptive perfectionism. In terms of sample size and research scope, studies with a large number of participants, such as the research in China (918 students), produce more stable and generalizable patterns. Conversely, studies with smaller samples, for example, in Korea (200 students) or Indonesia (429 students), show more diverse results, especially related to the role of adaptive perfectionism. This illustrates that differences in sample size, respondent heterogeneity, and educational context can influence the consistency of research results.

Based on a review of six journal articles, the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism among students and young adults shows a consistent pattern. The results of this review affirm that maladaptive perfectionism is consistently negatively correlated with student self-esteem, while adaptive perfectionism shows more varied results. This pattern appears in various cross-country studies, although with different nuances. In general, students with maladaptive perfectionism tendencies exhibit an excessive fear of making mistakes, self-doubt, and worry about criticism, which ultimately lowers their positive self-perception. On the other hand, adaptive perfectionism is often positioned as a drive to achieve high standards, but the results obtained show that its influence is not always consistent on self-esteem.

The differences in these findings can be explained by cultural factors and the education system. In East Asian countries, such as China and Korea, the strong academic pressure and high social expectations often turn even adaptive perfectionism into a psychological burden. In East Asian countries, such as China and Korea, excessively high academic pressure can overwhelm students to the point of causing depression and stress (Munawaroh & Umami, 2025). This makes perfectionism, even adaptive perfectionism, transform into a source of stress, so its positive relationship with self-esteem is not always apparent. In contrast, in contexts that emphasize personal achievement over external pressure, adaptive perfectionism can support learning motivation and maintain self-esteem (Chai et al., 2020). Additionally, cultural differences among the samples can also influence the results obtained, as differing social standards, educational norms, and family expectations can lead to varying outcomes.

Another important finding concerns the role of self-esteem as a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and other psychological outcomes, such as depression. Chai et al. (2019) demonstrated that low self-esteem amplifies the negative effects of maladaptive perfectionism on depression. Conversely, students with high self-esteem are better able to set standards flexibly, allowing adaptive perfectionism to function as a source of healthy motivation without compromising well-being. This highlights that self-esteem is not only influenced by perfectionism but also serves as a protective factor that shapes the psychological consequences of perfectionism.

A major challenge in perfectionism research lies in the accurate measurement of its dimensions. Widely used instruments, such as the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) and the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HF-MPS), attempt to differentiate between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. However, in practice, these two dimensions often overlap. For instance, behaviors involving the pursuit of high standards may be interpreted as adaptive in some contexts, where they foster motivation. Yet, in other contexts, the same behaviors may manifest as excessive pressure that is maladaptive. This conceptual ambiguity contributes to inconsistent interpretations of findings across studies.

Self-esteem is an essential element in human life that plays a significant role in shaping motivation, behavioral patterns, life satisfaction, and the ability to cope with various life situations (Habsy in (Hidayat & Thalia Nursyifa, 2020). For university students, healthy self-esteem has a substantial impact on both their academic journey and personal development. Firstly, academic success is not solely determined by cognitive abilities, such as intellectual intelligence, but is also influenced by psychological factors, first of which is self-esteem. Findings from various studies in educational psychology indicate that self-esteem plays a crucial role in fostering learning motivation, self-confidence, and resilience in the face of academic pressures (Silitonga, n.d.). Second, self-esteem can foster optimism. According to Seligman (in Safitri et al., 2022), high self-esteem provides the motivation needed to cultivate an optimistic attitude, whereas low self-esteem may lead to a decline or even the complete loss of optimism. Campus life is often filled with challenges, ranging from difficult course materials and heavy workloads to social and environmental pressures. Students with high self-esteem typically maintain a positive view of their abilities, are better prepared to face challenges, and are more capable of persevering when encountering setbacks. Conversely, students with low self-esteem tend to doubt their abilities, avoid challenges, and are more prone to anxiety, which can negatively affect academic performance (Safitri et al., 2022). Lastly, according to (Ardaningrum & Savira, 2022), positive self-esteem regarding one's self-image encourages individuals to more readily display assertive behavior when expressing their feelings and opinions comfortably and honestly. This is because such individuals possess confidence in their potential, have a clear understanding of themselves, and are unafraid of negative judgments from others. Consequently, when facing problems, they are able to find solutions more effectively, enabling students to manage their academic lives successfully.

However, when someone has low self-esteem, they tend to doubt their abilities and become trapped in failure (Rosenberg, 1965). Missildine (in Flett et al., 1991), proposed that low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with oneself are key components underlying the emergence of perfectionist behavior. Perfectionist attitudes characterized by constant dissatisfaction and feelings of failure due to the inability to achieve perfect results can make someone feel unworthy and lose their sense of self-worth, which ultimately lowers their level of self-esteem (Santoso et al., 2020).

This strengthens the idea that maladaptive perfectionism and the tendency to constantly criticize oneself and focus on mistakes or failures play a significant role in lowering a person's self-esteem. Thus, the six journals consistently show that perfectionists, particularly those with maladaptive traits, have a negative relationship with self-esteem and can be predictors of psychological risks such as depression, as discussed in the study by Chai et al., (2020), which states that the higher the maladaptive perfectionism, the lower the self-esteem, and it can positively predict depression.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to examine in greater depth the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionist tendencies among students. Analysis of six selected articles reveals a significant association between self-esteem and perfectionism, particularly within the student population. In general, maladaptive perfectionism characterized by a fear of making mistakes, heightened concern about others' evaluations, and an excessive tendency toward self-criticism, shows a strong negative correlation with self-esteem. This suggests that higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism are associated with lower self-esteem. In contrast, findings regarding the relationship between adaptive perfectionism and self-esteem vary across studies. Furthermore, the research highlights that negative self-reflection (self-critical rumination) and negative metacognitive beliefs about one's thought processes significantly contribute to the deterioration of self-esteem. Thus, the high internal pressure and the tendency to self-blame not only damage self-esteem but can also be a serious risk factor for an individual's mental well-being, such as depression. Therefore, students and young adults need to recognize that setting high standards is not inherently detrimental, however, such standards should be accompanied by self-acceptance and the ability to manage realistic expectations.

Academically, this research contributes by uniting previously separated findings and showing a general pattern in the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism, particularly among students. From a practical standpoint, the results of this study can serve as a reference for educators, counselors, and campus psychologists in designing interventions that emphasize the enhancement of students' self-esteem. A self-esteem-strengthening-based counseling approach can help students manage maladaptive perfectionism so that it does not develop into stress or depression.

Although this research provides valuable insights into the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism among students, several limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the study only reviewed six articles, which still limits the data coverage. Additionally, the subject coverage is confined to the population of students and young adults. This means that the findings may not necessarily be generalized to other age groups, such as teenagers, the elderly, or individuals with different work backgrounds and life experiences.

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