

PERFECTIONISM AND ACADEMIC STRESS AS PREDICTORS OF DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The study examined perfectionism and academic stress as predictors of depressive symptoms among undergraduate students. Two hundred and fifty (250) students (116 males, 46.4%; 134 females, 53.6%) aged 17–26 years ($M = 20.46$, $SD = 2.25$) were selected using convenience sampling. Instruments included the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS), and the Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS). A predictive survey design was adopted, and data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. Results indicated that perfectionism significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms ($\beta = .121$, $p = .041$). Academic stress also significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms ($\beta = .434$, $p < .001$), emerging as the stronger predictor. The findings suggest that maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies and elevated academic stress significantly increase vulnerability to depressive symptoms among undergraduates. The study recommends structured campus-based psychological interventions focusing on cognitive restructuring and stress management strategies.

Keywords: perfectionism, academic stress, depressive symptoms, undergraduate students, Nigeria

Introduction

Depressive symptoms have become increasingly prevalent among university students worldwide. The World Health Organization (2023) identifies depression as one of the leading causes of disability globally, with young adults representing a particularly vulnerable population. University students face developmental transitions, academic pressures, social adjustments, and uncertainty about future careers, all of which may heighten psychological vulnerability.

Depressive symptoms are characterized by persistent sadness, diminished interest in activities, cognitive distortions, impaired concentration, and fatigue. Among students, such symptoms have been associated with reduced academic achievement, impaired interpersonal functioning, and increased risk of long-term psychosocial difficulties. The cognitive model of depression developed by Beck (1967, 2011) suggests that maladaptive beliefs and negative self-evaluations contribute significantly to depressive states. Within competitive academic environments, certain psychological and environmental factors may activate these vulnerabilities.

Perfectionism represents one such cognitive vulnerability. Defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards accompanied by overly critical self-evaluation (Frost et al., 1990), perfectionism can be adaptive or maladaptive. Maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by concern over mistakes and doubts about actions, has been consistently linked to depressive symptoms. Students who equate self-worth with flawless academic performance may experience intense self-criticism when expectations are unmet, thereby increasing depressive risk.

Academic stress constitutes another significant risk factor. Academic stress refers to psychological strain arising from perceived academic demands that exceed coping resources (Lin & Chen, 2020). It includes examination pressure, workload demands, time constraints, competitive grading systems, and external expectations from lecturers and parents. Empirical evidence suggests that persistent academic stress is associated with emotional exhaustion, burnout, and depressive symptomatology.

Although perfectionism and academic stress have independently been linked to depression, fewer studies within Nigerian university contexts have examined their simultaneous predictive contributions. Given the competitive academic climate and systemic challenges within higher education institutions, understanding these predictors is essential for targeted mental health interventions. Therefore, this study examined perfectionism and academic stress as predictors of depressive symptoms among undergraduate students in a Nigerian University.

Hypotheses:

1. Perfectionism will significantly and positively predict depressive symptoms.
2. Academic stress will significantly and positively predict depressive symptoms.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 250 undergraduate students (116 males and 134 females) from NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka. Their ages ranged from 17 to 26 years ($M = 20.46$, $SD = 2.25$). A convenience sampling technique was employed in recruiting them.

Instruments

Depressive symptoms were measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) developed by Beck (1961). Perfectionism was assessed using the Frost et al, (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS). Academic stress was measured using the Student Academic Stress Scale (SASS) by Busari (2011) All instruments have demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity in prior studies.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate departmental authority. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality. Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings, and participation was voluntary.

Research Design and Statistics

The study adopted a predictive survey design. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perfectionism and academic stress significantly predicted depressive symptoms.

Results

Table 1 presents the regression coefficients examining the predictive contributions of perfectionism and academic stress to depressive symptoms.

Table 1

Linear Regression Analysis of Perfectionism and Academic Stress as Predictors of Depressive Symptoms Coefficients^a

Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-3.616	5.671		-.638	.524
	Perfectionism	.088	.043	.121	2.053	.041
	Academic Stress	.335	.045	.434	7.379	.000

Dependent Variable: Depressive symptoms

Note: $R^2 = .236$, $F(2, 247) = 38.253$ $p < .05$

The results in Table 1 indicate that perfectionism and academic stress jointly predicted depressive symptoms among undergraduate students. The model explained 23.6% of the variance in depressive symptoms ($R^2 = .236$), and the regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 247) = 38.253$, $p < .05$. This suggests that the predictor variables significantly contributed to explaining depressive symptoms among the participants.

Further examination of the regression coefficients showed that perfectionism significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms ($\beta = .121$, $t = 2.053$, $p < .05$). This implies that higher levels of perfectionistic tendencies are associated with increased depressive symptoms among undergraduate students.

Similarly, academic stress significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms ($\beta = .434$, $t = 7.379$, $p < .05$). This indicates that students who experience higher levels of academic stress are more likely to report higher levels of depressive symptoms.

Summary of Findings

Based on the regression analysis, the following findings were obtained:

1. Perfectionism significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms among undergraduate students.
2. Academic stress significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms among undergraduate students.

Discussion

The present study examined perfectionism and academic stress as predictors of depressive symptoms among undergraduate students. The findings revealed that both variables significantly predicted depressive symptoms among the participants.

Perfectionism and Depressive Symptoms

The findings revealed that perfectionism significantly predicted depressive symptoms among undergraduate students. This suggests that students who set excessively high personal standards and engage in self-critical evaluation are more likely to experience depressive symptoms. Perfectionistic individuals often perceive minor mistakes as personal failures and may constantly feel dissatisfied with their performance, which can contribute to emotional distress and depressive tendencies.

This finding is consistent with the study of Xiong et al. (2024) who reported that perfectionism significantly contributes to depressive symptoms. Their findings indicated that individuals with strong perfectionistic tendencies often experience increased psychological pressure and emotional exhaustion, which may lead to depression.

Similarly, several other studies have reported comparable results. For example, Tsatsulin & Kholmogorova (2024), Larionow (2024), Zhang et al. (2022), Gil et al. (2023), all found that perfectionism is strongly associated with depressive symptoms, particularly among student populations who experience high academic expectations.

However, the findings of the present study differ slightly from those reported by Kang (2019), who found that adaptive perfectionism was negatively related to depression while maladaptive perfectionism was positively related to depression. Adaptive perfectionism involves setting high but realistic goals and striving for excellence without excessive self-criticism. Individuals with this form of perfectionism may experience lower depressive symptoms because they are able to cope with challenges in a healthy manner.

In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by unrealistic standards, fear of failure, and excessive self-criticism, has been consistently associated with higher levels of depression. Similarly, Rice et al. (2013) found that self-oriented perfectionism was positively associated with depression, whereas other dimensions of perfectionism may have different psychological effects depending on how individuals interpret and respond to performance expectations.

These findings suggest that perfectionism is a complex personality construct that can either increase vulnerability to depression or, in some cases, function as a motivational trait depending on its form and expression.

Academic Stress and Depressive Symptoms

The findings also revealed that academic stress significantly predicted depressive symptoms among undergraduate students. This indicates that increased academic demands, pressure to perform well, examinations, workload, and fear of academic failure may contribute to emotional distress and depressive symptoms among students.

This finding supports earlier studies such as Liu et al. (2013) Jiang et al. (2022), who reported that academic stress significantly predicts depressive symptoms among university students. Similar results were reported by Jiang et al. (2022), Zhang et al. (2022), all of whom found that high academic stress levels are associated with increased depressive symptoms among students.

These studies suggest that academic environments characterized by heavy workloads, competitive academic standards, and pressure to succeed may increase students' vulnerability to depression.

Theoretical Explanation of the Findings

The findings of this study can be explained using the Diathesis–Stress Theory of depression. According to this theory, psychological disorders such as depression occur when individuals with certain vulnerabilities (diatheses) are exposed to stressful life experiences.

In the context of this study, perfectionism can be viewed as a vulnerability factor, particularly when it takes the form of maladaptive perfectionism. Individuals with perfectionistic tendencies may have rigid expectations for success and may react strongly to perceived failures.

On the other hand, academic stress serves as the environmental stressor that interacts with this vulnerability. When students who possess perfectionistic tendencies encounter high academic pressure, their inability to meet unrealistic personal standards may increase feelings of inadequacy, failure, and hopelessness, thereby increasing depressive symptoms.

Thus, the interaction between perfectionistic vulnerability and academic stress may significantly increase the likelihood of depressive symptoms among undergraduate students.

Conclusion

The study concluded that perfectionism and academic stress are significant predictors of depressive symptoms among undergraduate students.

Recommendation

These findings highlight the need for universities to implement psychological support programs aimed at helping students develop healthy coping strategies, realistic goal setting, and effective stress management techniques in order to reduce the risk of depressive symptoms among undergraduate populations.

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