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Age and Gender Differences in Perfection Paralysis and Associated Psychological Functioning

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Abstract

Developmental age groups are widely studied predictors for different psychological constructs. Previously, perfectionistic concerns are significantly higher in young adults as compared to older adults, due to their developmental needs and challenges faced during the transition to adulthood. In the case of psychological flexibility, a few aspects of the construct suggest a direct relation to older age, but an overall direct relationship is not present. Additionally, no significant gender differences are widely reported. Similarly, levels of psychological distress are significantly related to developmental groups, but a direct or inverse relation cannot be stated with certainty. However, while estimating gender differences, significantly higher levels of psychological distress are reported in female respondents. The present study focuses on estimating levels of these previously studied constructs in the presence of a novel variable, Perfection Paralysis, for two age groups (young adults 20-35 years; middle adults 36-64 years) across the two genders. Perfection Paralysis is a psychological condition that presents itself as chronic procrastination caused by perfectionistic concerns, leading to significant behavioral, emotional, and psychological distress. The present study follows a cross-sectional correlational research design. A total of N=584 respondents, belonging to different walks of life, were sampled from different areas of Faisalabad, using convenient sampling. The participants were assessed using Urdu self-report measures of the Perfection Paralysis Questionnaire (PPQ), Psychological distress, and Psychological Flexibility. Data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS V27). The study results for 2x2 factorial ANOVA showed significant main effects for overall model and age group for perfection paralysis and psychological flexibility at $p<0.001$ and for psychological distress at $p=0.001$, whereas a significant main effect for gender was observed for perfection paralysis at $p<0.001$. However, in terms of age x gender interaction, no significant effect was obtained. The study highlights a key concern in the understanding of this psychological problem and, eventually, the development of a management protocol. Additionally, significant main effects for psychological flexibility and psychological distress signify the importance of these variables among the covariates in studies that are longitudinal or follow a cross-sectional design across different age groups.

Keywords: Young Adults, Middle Adults, Gender Differences, Perfection Paralysis, Psychological Flexibility, Psychological Distress

Introduction

Perfection paralysis is a relatively less explored term in psychology literature. Previously, the literature reports its informal use during an organizational meeting (Lencioni, 2008), but no standardized scientific reporting is available. The construct closely resembles perfectionistic

concerns, but extends the adverseness to a behavioral impasse. This means that it not only affects psychological functioning, but also impairs physical progress towards goals. Based on the previous literature, perfection paralysis is defined as a persistent pattern of behavior characterized by marked fear of negative evaluation and unrealistic high-performance standards, resulting in difficulty initiating, sustaining, or completing goal-directed tasks. This pattern may result in clinically significant delay, inefficiency, or avoidance of tasks and is maintained by rigid self-evaluation and impaired ability to determine when performance is sufficiently adequate for completion. In light of this conceptualization, we can relate the construct of perfection paralysis to perfectionistic concerns and expect similar behavioral patterns, but this is not necessary. Perfectionistic concerns alongside perfectionistic strivings are a phenomenon used to explain the construct of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Other explanations of perfectionism include its conceptualization as positive striving and maladaptive evaluative concerns (Frost et al., 1993) and adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Rice et al., 1998). Stumpf and Parker (2000) used the terms healthy and unhealthy perfectionism. Hill et al. (2004) explored perfectionism as conscientious and self-evaluative perfectionism. Perfectionistic concerns significantly negatively predict psychological flexibility (Nguyen & Morris, 2024). The authors show how rigid responses, avoidance, and value-disconnected inaction relate perfectionistic concerns to psychological inflexibility. In a similar study (Cherry et al., 2021), psychological flexibility was significantly studied in terms of the ability to handle distress or interference, take action, and meet goals or values, which purely negates our conceptualization of perfection paralysis. Another study (Fahroedin & Morris, 2025) explores constructs similar to ours and establishes the adverse effects of rigid standards of perfectionism on burnout and mental health in health care professionals, while accounting for the impact of psychological flexibility. Other studies link maladaptive perfectionism to adverse psychological health (Callaghan et al., 2024). Following previous findings, our conceptual framework has a sound empirical basis. The study presently exclusively focuses on the interplay of these three variables, perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress, in terms of age-related and gender based differences.

For studies focusing on age and gender group differences in intensity of perfection paralysis symptoms, we have no available literature, but plenty of work has studied perfectionism across gender and different age groups. We can build our foundation on that. Age groups do not exhibit a linear pattern for the presence of perfectionism; rather, they show peaks at different stages (Smith et al., 2022), which explains the need to study triggers of perfectionism at different developmental stages in human life. Multiple studies highlight how the adulthood phase especially shows an increase in perfectionism due to factors like academic achievement (Curran et al., 2026; Damian et al., 2017). Other studies highlight how, with increasing age, a person shows a decrease in some domains of perfectionism (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). In the same study by Stoeber and Stoeber (2009), significant gender differences in levels of perfectionism were observed. In a recent study, young girls were observed to have higher levels of socially prescribed perfectionism, but no significant differences in levels of self-oriented perfectionism (Sand et al., 2021). Relying on empirical literature, we can propose that different age and gender groups may not only differ significantly in levels of perfection paralysis, but we can also propose that they may have significant main and interaction effects on levels of perfection paralysis. As we study the literature for psychological flexibility, no single pattern for the covariance of age groups and psychological flexibility, as a single construct, is observed; rather, the data show spikes at different developmental stages for different factors of psychological flexibility (Okayama et al., 2024). In some other cases (Plys et al., 2023), psychological flexibility increased with age, and adolescents showed lower levels of psychological flexibility than middle and older adults. For gender differences, there is more evidence of a non-significant relation with psychological flexibility (Muris et al., 2017; Ortega-Jiménez et al., 2021), but there is evidence for significant gender differences as well (Twiselton et al., 2018). This brings us to our present study hypothesis, where

we propose significant main and interaction effects of age and gender groups for psychological flexibility.

Psychological distress is a widely studied construct. Several studies explore the levels of psychological distress predicted by a varied number of variables, which include personality factors like age, gender, and others, and behavioral constructs. While we focus on age group differences for young, middle, and older adults, a recent study (Nicolaisen et al., 2023) highlights lower levels of psychological distress for older adults. Another study (Goulia et al., 2012) similarly showed higher stress levels among the younger population than among older people. Significant gender differences in psychological distress levels are empirically established. Studies (Maestre-Miquel et al., 2021; Salk et al., 2017) highlight significantly higher levels of psychological distress for females as compared to males. Based on the empirical findings on perfection paralysis, the study aims to estimate the presence of differences in levels of perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress among the two gender groups belonging to two developmental stages of life, namely young adulthood and middle adulthood (American Psychological Association, 2023). Additionally, the researchers aim to estimate interaction effects of gender and age groups, essentially creating and comparing four groups (Figure 1).

		Genders	
		Male	Female
Age Group	Young Adults (20-35 yrs.)	Young adult males	Young adult females
	Middle Adults (36-64 yrs.)	Middle adult males	Middle adult females

Figure 1 shows the group details for the proposed 2x2 Factorial ANOVA

The study hypotheses were,

1. There will be a significant main effect of age group on perfection paralysis, such that young and middle adults will differ significantly in perfection paralysis.
2. There will be a significant main effect of gender on perfection paralysis, such that males and females will differ significantly in perfection paralysis.
3. Age group × gender interaction will significantly affect perfection paralysis, such that the difference in perfection paralysis between young and middle adults will vary according to gender.
4. There will be a significant main effect of age group on psychological flexibility, such that young and middle adults will differ significantly in psychological flexibility.
5. There will be a significant main effect of gender on psychological flexibility, such that males and females will differ significantly in psychological flexibility.
6. Age group × gender interaction will significantly affect psychological flexibility, such that the difference in psychological flexibility between young and middle adults will vary according to gender.
7. There will be a significant main effect of age group on psychological distress, such that young and middle adults will differ significantly in psychological distress.
8. There will be a significant main effect of gender on psychological distress, such that males and females will differ significantly in psychological distress.
9. Age group × gender interaction will significantly affect psychological distress, such that the difference in psychological distress between young and middle adults will vary according to gender.

Method

The present study followed a cross-sectional correlational research design. A total of *N=584* were sampled using convenient sampling from different areas of Faisalabad. The sample consisted of comparable gender and age groups, fulfilling the purpose of obtaining valid study results. The

inclusion criteria specified that all individuals from the age of twenty to the age of sixty-four years who have at least matriculation-level education are eligible to participate in the study. Participants with severe mental or physical health issues, physical disabilities, and communication difficulties were not included. The details of demographic variables are provided in Table 1.

Instruments

The study estimates were made using a comprehensive research form. It included an informed consent form, a demographic information questionnaire, and a set of standardized psychological measures. The informed consent form briefed participants about the aims and objectives of the study, assured complete confidentiality, and educated them about their voluntary right to participate and withdraw from the study. The demographic form inquired about the demographic details of the participants, such as age, gender, marital status, education, residential area, family system, and others. The research form consisted of three psychological scales, which are discussed.

Perfection Paralysis Questionnaire (PPQ) was used to assess perfection paralysis. It was developed and validated in the Urdu language in a prior study. The measure has excellent psychometric properties, including Cronbach Alpha α=0.953 for scale internal consistency. The scale uses a 5-point Likert response scale from 0-4, with 0 being never and 4 being always. The scale is divided into two parts. Part I consists of four statements (A, B, C, and D), scored on the same Likert scale, which estimates the presence and intensity of thinking errors (Beck, 2020) in individuals, including Catastrophizing (A), Should and Must Statements (B), Overgeneralization (C), and All-or-None Thinking (D). Part II consisted of 33 items, measuring perfection paralysis in terms of seven subscales, which were Fear of failure (5 items), Overthinking (4 items), Need for Perfection (4 items), Need for control (5items), High Standards (6 items), Hyper independence (5 items) and Procrastination (4 items), all scored on the same Likert scale.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to assess psychological distress among participants. It has excellent psychometric properties and is a classic tool for assessment of Depression (α=.88), Anxiety (α=.82), and Stress (α=.90) (Henry & Crawford, 2005). It is a self-report inventory that uses a 4-point Likert scale from 0-3, with 0 being Did not apply to me at all and 3 being Applied to me very much, or most of the time. It is divided into Depression, Anxiety, and Stress subscales, with seven items each. Urdu version of the DASS-21 (Aslam & Kamal, 2018) was used to assess psychological distress due to perfection paralysis.

Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire (PFQ) (Ben-Itzhak et al., 2014) was used to assess psychological flexibility in the participants. It is a standardized measure of psychological flexibility with a high reliability coefficient (α=.918). It is a self-report inventory that uses a 6-point Likert scale from 1-6, with 1 being Strongly disagree to 6 being Strongly agree. It is divided into five subscales, which are Positive perception of change (5 items), Characterization of self as flexible (5 items), self-characterization as open and innovative (3 items), Perception of reality as dynamic and changing (4 items), and perception of reality as multifaceted (3 items). Urdu version of the PFQ (Waheed et al., 2022) was used to assess psychological flexibility.

Procedure

After a detailed and thorough search of existing literature, the study proposal was designed, with the aim of adding to existing literature about the correlates, group estimates, and behavioral patterns that accompany perfection paralysis. Since the existing literature has very scarce information about perfection paralysis, the study proposal captured a research gap perfectly. The proposal was presented before the departmental research committee. After approval, it was forwarded to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. With approval from the IRB, the study was conducted following a cross-sectional, correlational design. The study had nine major hypotheses, which were to explore age group and gender differences among individuals in the presence of perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress, focusing on the main effects of these demographic variables and their collective interaction effect on the respective constructs. The study was conducted in the city of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. The participants meeting the inclusion criteria were recruited using convenient sampling technique and

were assessed using self-report measures of perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress. After collection and cleaning, data were subjected to statistical analyses using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 27). Demographics of the participants were reported using descriptive statistics, and a 2x2 factorial ANOVA was run to compare the main and interaction effects of age groups and gender on the study constructs. In light of existing literature, it was expected that age groups and gender would have significant main and interaction effects on perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress.

Results

Table 1: *Demographic details of participants*

Variables	*Categories*	*Frequency*	*Percent*	*Cumulative %*
Age	Young Adults (20-35 yrs.)	298	51	51
	Middle Adults (34-64 yrs.)	286	49	100
Gender	Male	297	50.9	50.9
	Female	287	49.1	100
Marital	Unmarried	289	50.5	50.5
Status	Married	295	49.5	100
Education	Matriculation	14	2.4	2.4
	Intermediate	63	10.8	13.2
	Undergraduate	377	64.6	77.7
	Graduate	124	21.2	99
	Doctorate	6	1	100
Occupation	Businessman	51	8.7	8.7
	Government Employee	47	8.0	16.7
	Private Employee	46	7.9	24.6
	Bank Job	5	0.9	25.5
	Teaching Profession	44	7.5	33
	Housewife	63	10.8	43.8
	Other	16	2.7	46.5
	Unemployed	312	53.4	100
Family	Nuclear	355	60.8	60.8
System	Joint	229	39.2	100
Residential	Rural	240	41.1	41.1
Area	Urban	344	58.9	100

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics for Study constructs' estimates by age and gender groups*

Age Groups	*Gender*	*N*	*Perfection Paralysis*		*Psychological Flexibility*		*Psychological Distress*	
			M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Young	Male	128	72.73	21.35	72.58	18.67	30.06	14.64
Adults	Female	170	77.32	20.89	74.98	16.54	31.21	12.76
	Total	298	75.35	21.18	73.95	17.51	30.71	13.59
Middle	Male	169	60.67	23.14	82.17	16.32	25.90	12.02
Adults	Female	117	72.89	23.28	76.58	15.05	28.47	11.86
	Total	286	65.67	23.93	79.88	16.02	26.95	11.99
Total	Male	297	65.87	23.14	78.04	17.99	27.69	13.35
	Female	287	75.52	21.97	75.63	15.94	30.09	12.45
	Total	584	70.61	23.06	76.86	17.04	28.87	12.96

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

Table 2 shows the details of Mean and Standard Deviation values for the study groups as shown in Figure 1. In the table, the mean value for Perfection Paralysis is highest for the group of young females (*M*=77.32), and overall higher for the group of young adults (*M* = 75.35). Similar findings exist for levels of psychological distress, with mean values of *M*= 31.21 and *M*=30.71 for young females and young adults overall, respectively. For psychological flexibility, these values differ interestingly, young females show higher values (*M*=74.98) as compared to young males (*M*=72.58), but overall middle adults had a higher mean value (*M* = 79.88). Male middle adults reported the highest mean value for psychological flexibility (*M* = 82.17).

Table 3 shows detailed results for three 2x2 factorial ANOVAs, estimated for Perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress, respectively. Before discussing the Table 3 results, it is important to discuss a major assumption of homogeneity of error variance for the three dependent variables across the two groups of age and gender. The values of Levene's statistic for all the dependent variables across all groups were not significant at p <0.05. The values for Levene's statistic were 0.913 (*p*=0.434) for Perfection paralysis, 1.432 (p=0.232) for psychological flexibility, and 2.126 (p=0.096) for psychological distress. This allows us to accept the null hypothesis that the error variance for perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress was not significantly different, and therefore the assumption of homogeneity of variance is met.

Table 3: *2x2 Factorial ANOVA for main and interaction effects of age groups and gender for perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress*

Psychological Constructs	*Effects*	*F (df)*	*P*	*ηp^2*	*R^2*
Perfection Paralysis	Age Group	19.691 (1,584)	<0.001	0.033	
	Gender	20.474 (1,584)	<0.001	0.034	
	Age x Gender	4.207 (1,584)	0.041	0.007	
	Overall Model	17.358 (3,580)	<0.001	-	0.082
Psychological Flexibility	Age Group	15.965 (1,584)	<0.001	0.027	
	Gender	1.294 (1,584)	0.256	0.002	
	Age x Gender	8.146 (1,584)	0.004	0.14	
	Overall Model	9.239 (3,580)	<0.001	-	0.046
Psychological Distress	Age Group	10.284 (1,584)	0.001	0.017	
	Gender	2.980 (1,584)	0.085	0.005	
	Age x Gender	0.440 (1,584)	0.507	0.001	
	Overall Model	5.313 (3,580)	0.001	-	0.027

Note. df= Degrees of Freedom, ηp^2= Effect size, R^2 = Coefficient of Determination

The table shows significant main effects for age groups across all three dependent variables, with medium to small effect sizes of 0.033 (*p*<0.001), 0.027 (*p*<0.001), and 0.017 (*p*=0.001) for perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress, respectively. A significant main effect of 0.034 (p<0.001) for gender was also observed for perfection paralysis, but no significant main effects for gender were observed for psychological flexibility and psychological distress. There were no significant interaction effects of age x gender for the three dependent variables. The values for the coefficient of determination estimated a total of 8.2% variance in perfection paralysis as a result of the overall age, gender, and age-gender interaction model (*p*<0.001). For similar overall models, 4.6% (*p*<0.001) and 2.7% (*p*=0.001) variance in psychological flexibility and psychological distress was estimated.

Discussion

The present study explored levels of perfection paralysis, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress across two gender and age groups, namely male and female young adults

(20-34 years of age) and male and female middle adults (35- 64 years of age). The study results followed a basic pattern of increasing perfection paralysis linked to an increase in psychological distress and a decrease in psychological flexibility. The groups were compared for significant differences using 2x2 factorial ANOVA, which generated results for main, interaction, and overall model effects of these groups for the three variables. The main effect of age groups was significant for perfection paralysis. These results prove that age group played a significant role in determining the difference in level of perfection paralysis. These results are consistent with studies relating age group and perfectionism (Curran et al., 2026; Damian et al., 2017). The main effect of gender was only significant for perfection paralysis ($p<0.001$) with a value of $\eta p^2 = 0.034$. This is an interesting finding because this value was the highest effect size among all main, interaction, and overall model effect sizes. This reflects the significance of gender differences in determining the levels of perfection paralysis. This is further supported if we compare mean values for perfection paralysis for all of the study groups. Among the two age groups, young adults showed a higher mean value (M =75.35), and further gender comparison showed that younger females had the highest mean value (M = 77.32). This shows that perfection paralysis exhibits similar study patterns to perfectionism, although it is a completely distinct variable.

For psychological flexibility, a significant main effect of age group was identified ($p<0.001$). This reflects that younger and older adult groups show significantly distinct levels of psychological flexibility. The main effect of gender was not significant. This means that for overall respondents, the mean values for psychological flexibility were not significantly different for males and females. The interaction effect of age x gender was also not significant for psychological flexibility. This means that the comparison of male and female young adults and male and female middle adults for mean values of psychological flexibility returned no significant results. Looking deeper, we find the highest mean value for psychological flexibility for the group of older males (M =82.17), which is relatively more different from the mean value for older females than the value differs between young males and females. This means that younger males and females show almost the same levels of psychological flexibility, but older males have a significantly different mean value than older females. Thus, the highest mean value was observed for older males (M =82.17) and the lowest for young females (M = 72.58). In conclusion, for overall groups, older adults showed significantly different mean values for psychological flexibility from younger adults, which is reflected in the significant main effect of age groups for the variable, but no significant gender main effect was observed. This is consistent with previous studies (Muris et al., 2017; Okayama et al., 2024; Plys et al., 2023), where the researchers propose significant age differences, with higher psychological flexibility predicted for older individuals, but no significant gender differences.

The age group had a significant main effect on determining levels of psychological distress (p =0.001). This means that younger and older individuals have significantly distinct mean values for levels of psychological distress, with young adults suffering from more psychological distress than middle adults. The main effect for gender on levels of psychological distress was not significant. This shows that for overall participants in the study, males and females had no statistically distinct levels of psychological distress solely based on their gender. However, there were significant differences between male young adults, female young adults, male middle adults, and female middle adults for psychological distress when the overall model statistics were studied. Moreover, younger females had the highest mean value for psychological distress among the four groups (M = 31.21), and older males had the lowest mean value (M = 25.90). These findings are consistent with previous literature (Goulia et al., 2012; Nicolaisen et al., 2023). In summary, results for our study hypotheses for the main effect of age and gender groups, and the interaction effect of age x gender for perfection paralysis returned significant results (Hypotheses 1,2 and 3). Secondly, the hypotheses for the main effect of age returned significant results for psychological flexibility ($p<0.001$) and psychological distress ($p=0.001$) (Hypotheses 4 and 7). Lastly, the main effect of gender groups and the interaction effect of age x gender on psychological flexibility and

psychological distress were not significant (Hypotheses 5,6,8 and 9). This concludes the discussion of the study results and brings us to the strengths and weaknesses of the study.

The present study estimated a new variable of perfection paralysis in terms of gender and age group differences, alongside some well-documented variables, psychological distress and psychological flexibility. The results significantly added to the literature and implied that future researchers should frame their studies in the light of this work. Another major strength is a large sample size of 584 respondents, which makes our results well grounded and valid. The presence of comparable age and gender groups was compulsory for the study. The researchers carefully sampled the population, which is another strength. Studying main and interaction effect sizes using factorial ANOVA, rather than exploring simple group differences, provides thorough estimates and improves study implications for predictive models. The study had a few limitations as well. The study population was purely sampled from one city, which leaves room for substantial population representation. Although the study clearly mentions this limitation in the methodology section, population representations from other cities may still add to the external validity of our study findings. Secondly, since the study uses self-report measures for estimating different psychological constructs, there is a possibility of common method variance or self-presentation on behalf of respondents. This was a major limitation, but it was mitigated using structured, standardized scales, which amply account for response bias. Lastly, the study variable perfection paralysis is a less explored construct in general scientific psychology literature. This study explores a few aspects, but there is still a lot to explore about this variable. This implies that new researchers should focus on this new construct and extend the scientific literature on it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study highlights the importance of considering age and gender as demographic contexts in understanding perfectionism, psychological flexibility, and psychological distress. Although these constructs are conceptually related, their patterns across demographic groups may not be uniform, reflecting the multidimensional and developmental nature of psychological functioning. The study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals at different developmental stages belonging to different genders experience maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies, adaptive psychological processes like psychological flexibility, and psychological distress. These findings may contribute to more demographically sensitive conceptualizations and interventions, rather than generically proposed study models.

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