



The Phenomenology of Self-Alienation in People With High Perfectionistic Traits

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Chaudhary, A. U., & Reddy, S. (2025). The Phenomenology of Self-Alienation in People With High Perfectionistic Traits. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling*, 7(2), 245-254.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.7.2.28>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the lived experience of self-alienation among individuals with high perfectionistic traits.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 24 participants (13 females, 11 males) aged 21–39 from various regions in India. Participants were purposively sampled based on high perfectionistic tendencies, as determined through a brief screening using items adapted from the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Interviews focused on internal emotional processes, identity-related experiences, and interpersonal functioning. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software (Version 12) in accordance with a phenomenological approach. Open codes were systematically categorized into subthemes and overarching themes through iterative coding and peer debriefing.

Findings: Four major themes were identified: (1) Disconnection From Authentic Self, characterized by emotional numbing, identity confusion, and suppression of personal desires; (2) Internalized Criticism and Unrealistic Standards, encompassing harsh self-talk, fear of failure, and obsession with flawlessness; (3) Emotional Isolation and Disconnection From Others, marked by relational avoidance, superficial connections, and loneliness; and (4) Existential Emptiness and Loss of Meaning, involving achievement void, value confusion, and lack of intrinsic purpose. Participant narratives revealed a cycle of emotional suppression and performative self-presentation that deepened their sense of alienation and inner fragmentation.

Conclusion: Self-alienation is a central psychological consequence of perfectionistic self-presentation, affecting identity, emotional regulation, and social connection.

Keywords: Perfectionism; Self-alienation; Phenomenology; Emotional suppression; Perfectionistic self-presentation; Identity disconnection.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism, once regarded primarily as a personality trait marked by high standards and meticulousness, has evolved into a nuanced and multifaceted psychological construct with significant implications for mental health. While adaptive aspects of perfectionism—such as goal orientation and conscientiousness—can serve as assets, its maladaptive dimensions have been repeatedly linked to emotional distress, disordered identity, and social dysfunction (Nakano, 2009; Stoeber & Roche, 2014). Among these maladaptive dimensions, perfectionistic self-presentation has emerged as a particularly salient contributor to chronic psychological discontent (Besser et al., 2010; Hewitt et al., 2011). Defined as the compulsive need to appear flawless in the eyes of others, perfectionistic self-presentation fuels a dissonance between inner experience and outward expression, often culminating in feelings of self-alienation—a subjective sense of being estranged from one's authentic self.

Self-alienation is characterized by an inner disconnection, where individuals feel detached from their true values, emotions, and identity. This experiential rupture is not merely philosophical but has profound psychological consequences, including increased susceptibility to depression, anxiety, identity confusion, and social withdrawal (Burkitt, 2024; Park & La, 2024). For individuals high in perfectionism, particularly those exhibiting perfectionistic self-presentation, the risk of self-alienation is magnified due to persistent pressure to suppress vulnerabilities, mask imperfections, and achieve unrealistic standards (Hashmi et al., 2022; Read et al., 2016). This curated self, while socially reinforced, can become a psychological prison that restricts spontaneous expression and undermines authenticity (Grugan & Wright, 2025; Javed et al., 2023).

Recent empirical efforts have emphasized the distinction between trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation. While trait perfectionism reflects internal cognitive schemas centered on standards and evaluations, perfectionistic self-presentation is inherently interpersonal, manifesting through self-promotion, concealment of imperfections, and refusal to disclose flaws (Ubaradka et al., 2023; Vicent et al., 2022). This outward orientation makes individuals particularly vulnerable to external judgment and validation-dependence, exacerbating psychological fragmentation and emotional detachment. The constant surveillance of self, driven by fear of inadequacy or

rejection, aligns closely with mechanisms underlying self-alienation (Altstötter-Gleich et al., 2025; Kawamoto et al., 2022).

Self-alienation among high perfectionists may not be immediately observable through conventional psychopathological measures. Instead, it manifests in more subtle existential domains: a chronic sense of being “out of sync” with one's inner experience, dissonance between values and actions, and a mechanized approach to life that prioritizes image over authenticity (Khossousi et al., 2024; Nam & Lee, 2020). These individuals may function effectively in social or professional domains, yet internally report a hollow sense of disconnection. The internalization of perfectionistic norms often leads to emotional suppression, lack of self-compassion, and estrangement from internal needs—a constellation that mirrors what many describe as living behind a mask (Kehayes & Mackinnon, 2019; Lo & Abbott, 2019).

Studies across cultural and age contexts have reinforced this connection. In adolescents and university students, for example, perfectionistic self-presentation has been strongly linked to loneliness, self-concept instability, and internalized shame (Choi & Lee, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2024). These findings are consistent across genders and sociocultural settings, suggesting a broad and universal risk for self-alienation when perfectionism is rigid and performative. Moreover, self-presentation motives among perfectionists often intersect with developmental and sociocultural pressures that reinforce conditional worth—e.g., academic achievement, physical appearance, or social media validation—which further deepens the divide between the perceived self and the authentic self (Lundqvist et al., 2024; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

The psychological toll of such internal fragmentation is not limited to diminished well-being. Research has shown that perfectionistic individuals are more likely to experience depressive symptoms, reduced self-esteem, and existential despair, particularly when their perfectionistic strivings are incongruent with their emotional needs or fail to yield anticipated outcomes (Elion et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2014). In this sense, perfectionism does not merely coexist with self-alienation—it actively constructs and reinforces it. The relentless pursuit of flawlessness demands a suppression of spontaneity, failure, and emotional authenticity, which are core to a cohesive sense of self (Burkitt, 2024; Khossousi et al., 2024).

Despite this growing recognition, few studies have qualitatively explored how individuals with high

perfectionistic traits *experience* self-alienation in their everyday lives. Quantitative measures, while valuable, often fail to capture the lived emotional and existential texture of this condition. For instance, high scorers on perfectionistic self-presentation scales may differ significantly in how they internalize and navigate their perfectionism, depending on personal history, coping mechanisms, and self-concept clarity (Hewitt et al., 2011; Stoeber et al., 2016). There is a pressing need for phenomenological inquiry that prioritizes the subjective realities of such individuals—how they describe their inner world, the metaphors they use to express estrangement, and the subtle processes through which self-alienation unfolds over time.

Furthermore, the intersection of perfectionistic self-presentation and cultural expectations in collectivistic societies—such as India—adds an additional layer of complexity. In these contexts, social harmony, family honor, and achievement are deeply entwined, amplifying the need to appear infallible and suppress emotional vulnerability. This creates a fertile ground for perfectionistic tendencies to not only emerge but become entrenched and socially reinforced (Grugan & Wright, 2025; Hashmi et al., 2022). When perfectionism is not merely personal but also culturally valorized, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to recognize or critique the self-alienating aspects of their behavior, thereby normalizing emotional suppression and identity fragmentation (Kawamoto et al., 2022; Stoeber & Roche, 2014).

Moreover, recent theoretical models suggest that perfectionistic self-presentation is maintained through a feedback loop of social performance and internal invalidation. Individuals may receive admiration or success as a result of their perfectionism, but simultaneously experience guilt, emptiness, or imposter feelings, perpetuating a cycle of inauthentic striving (Read et al., 2016; Ubaradka et al., 2023). This incongruence between outer success and inner disconnect often leads to psychological exhaustion and questions of meaning—hallmarks of existential self-alienation. Research on maladaptive perfectionism has increasingly focused on its emotional and interpersonal tolls, but less attention has been given to the deeper ontological implications of a self built on performance rather than presence (Khossousi et al., 2024; Lo & Abbott, 2019).

Given the conceptual overlap between perfectionistic self-presentation and alienation from one's authentic self, it is essential to investigate how this phenomenon is lived and articulated by those most affected. What does it feel like to

perform perfection while feeling inwardly fragmented? How do individuals negotiate moments of perceived failure? What internal conflicts arise when one's identity is fused with performance, and how is that experienced emotionally and relationally?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of self-alienation in individuals exhibiting high perfectionistic traits. Phenomenology was selected as the most suitable approach given its emphasis on capturing subjective meanings and internal psychological states as described by participants themselves. The study aimed to uncover deep, nuanced insights into how perfectionism might contribute to feelings of estrangement from one's authentic self.

Participants were recruited from urban and semi-urban regions of India using purposive sampling techniques. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 20–40) who self-identified or were clinically recognized as exhibiting high levels of perfectionistic tendencies, based on their responses to a brief screening questionnaire adapted from the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS). A total of 24 participants (13 females, 11 males) were ultimately included in the study. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed participants the flexibility to elaborate on their personal experiences while also enabling the researchers to maintain thematic consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed to explore core dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., self-criticism, fear of failure, compulsive striving) and their perceived links to self-alienation (e.g., detachment from emotions, disconnection from personal values, role conflict). Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and logistical feasibility.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis within the framework of descriptive phenomenology. The analysis was supported by NVivo software (version 12), which facilitated systematic coding, theme development, and cross-case comparison. The process involved multiple stages: familiarization with the transcripts, generation of initial codes, clustering of codes into subthemes, and finally abstraction of overarching themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process by documenting analytic decisions in a reflective journal and holding regular peer debriefing sessions among the research team. Member checking was also conducted with a subset of participants to ensure the credibility and authenticity of the interpreted meanings. The final themes reflect a composite understanding of how individuals with high perfectionistic traits perceive, experience, and make sense of their self-alienation.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 24 participants (13 females and 11 males) ranging in age from 21 to 39 years ($M = 29.3$, $SD = 4.8$), all residing in various urban and semi-urban regions of India. The majority of participants ($n = 16$) held postgraduate degrees, while the remaining 8 held undergraduate degrees. In terms of occupational status, 10 participants were employed in corporate sectors (e.g., finance, consulting, marketing), 7 were graduate or doctoral students, 4 worked in creative professions (e.g., writing, design), and 3 were in academic or teaching roles. All participants self-reported high levels of perfectionistic traits as screened through a short-form adaptation of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Participants represented diverse linguistic and regional backgrounds but shared fluent English proficiency, which was required for participation in the interview process. The sample included individuals from multiple Indian states including Maharashtra ($n = 6$), Delhi ($n = 5$), Tamil Nadu ($n = 4$), Karnataka ($n = 3$), West Bengal ($n = 3$), and Kerala ($n = 3$).

Table 1

Thematic Structure of Self-Alienation in Individuals With High Perfectionistic Traits

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Disconnection From Authentic Self	Suppression of Personal Desires	Neglecting hobbies, choosing careers to please others, avoiding spontaneity
	Emotional Numbing	Feeling hollow, inability to cry, muted joy, emotional shutdown
	Identity Confusion	"I don't know who I am," shifting self-image, fragmented sense of self
	Social Masking	Pretending to be okay, wearing a facade, hiding true feelings
	Overidentification With External Roles	Being "the achiever," inability to detach from performance identity
2. Internalized Criticism and Unrealistic Standards	Lack of Self-Validation	Relying on others' approval, absence of internal reassurance, doubt after success
	Conflict Between Inner and Outer Self	Feeling fake, inner turmoil, discrepancy between desires and behavior
	Harsh Self-Talk	"I'm never good enough," inner bully, berating minor errors
	Fear of Failure	Paralysis before tasks, avoiding risk, dread of disapproval
	Obsession With Flawlessness	Rechecking tasks, excessive editing, perfection paralysis
3. Emotional Isolation and Disconnection From Others	Comparison and Envy	Constant comparison, social media distress, feeling inferior
	Rejection of "Good Enough"	Dissatisfaction with adequate outcomes, revising even after praise
	Reluctance to Share Vulnerabilities	Keeping emotions inside, fear of being judged, difficulty opening up
	Superficial Social Relationships	Shallow conversations, feeling unknown, emotional detachment in groups
	Self-Imposed Loneliness	Avoiding intimacy, isolating when stressed, pushing others away
	Lack of Empathic Resonance	Feeling misunderstood, people not "getting" them, emotional mismatch

4. Existential Emptiness and Loss of Meaning	Overachievement as a Substitute for Connection	Seeking attention through success, proving worth, substituting admiration for closeness
	Achievement Void	Emptiness after success, fleeting satisfaction, “What now?” feeling
	Disconnection From Purpose	Working without meaning, questioning goals, “Why am I doing this?”
	Time-Space Dissociation	Feeling detached from present, life feeling mechanical, disoriented routine
	Absence of Joy in Daily Life	Losing interest in activities, bland daily routine, no excitement
	Existential Fatigue	Emotional exhaustion, “soul tired,” losing will to strive
	Craving Transcendence	Longing for deeper connection, desire for spiritual or existential fulfillment
	Crisis of Values	Abandoning core beliefs, mismatch between actions and values, living a borrowed life

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded four overarching themes: Disconnection From Authentic Self, Internalized Criticism and Unrealistic Standards, Emotional Isolation and Disconnection From Others, and Existential Emptiness and Loss of Meaning. Each theme comprised multiple subcategories that reflected distinct but interrelated experiences of self-alienation among participants with high perfectionistic traits.

Theme 1: Disconnection From Authentic Self

Many participants described a chronic **suppression of personal desires**, often setting aside intrinsic interests to conform to external expectations. Participants shared how they sacrificed hobbies, artistic inclinations, or career aspirations in favor of socially validated goals. One participant explained, *“I used to love painting, but somewhere along the way, I convinced myself it was a waste of time unless it could make me successful.”*

Emotional numbing was a recurrent experience, with individuals describing themselves as emotionally muted or indifferent, particularly in moments where joy or sorrow would be expected. As one participant noted, *“Even when good things happen, I feel nothing—it’s like I’m emotionally flatlined.”*

Experiences of **identity confusion** emerged as participants expressed difficulty in articulating who they truly were beyond their accomplishments. One respondent stated, *“I’m not sure who I am without my achievements. Strip them away, and I don’t recognize myself.”*

Social masking was another prominent subtheme, where participants deliberately curated an external persona to gain acceptance or avoid rejection. They described wearing emotional “masks” in both professional and personal contexts. As one individual put it, *“Everyone thinks I’m confident, but inside I’m constantly terrified they’ll see the real me.”*

A strong **overidentification with external roles**—such as “the achiever,” “the perfectionist,” or “the responsible

one”—was prevalent. These identities, while rewarding in terms of recognition, led to alienation from personal values and spontaneous self-expression. *“I don’t know how to exist if I’m not excelling,”* one participant admitted.

Many also voiced a persistent **lack of self-validation**, constantly seeking external affirmation to feel worthy. *“Even after doing well, I wait for someone to tell me it was enough. On my own, it never feels like it is,”* shared a participant.

Finally, there was a pervasive **conflict between the inner and outer self**, described as a psychological divide. This internal dissonance contributed to feelings of inauthenticity and distress. *“It’s like I’m performing my life rather than living it,”* said one interviewee.

Theme 2: Internalized Criticism and Unrealistic Standards

Participants described intense **harsh self-talk**, often characterized by internal dialogues laden with judgment, condemnation, and unrealistic demands. *“I talk to myself in ways I would never speak to anyone else,”* shared one respondent, reflecting a deeply ingrained inner critic.

Fear of failure was described as paralyzing, often preventing participants from engaging in new opportunities. Several expressed anxiety around disappointing others or not meeting their own standards. *“Sometimes I don’t even try—because if I fail, it would confirm my worst fears about myself,”* said one participant.

The **obsession with flawlessness** led to compulsive behaviors such as constant revisions, overchecking, and intense dissatisfaction with anything deemed imperfect. One interviewee stated, *“I spent five hours rewriting a two-paragraph email. Nothing ever feels quite right.”*

Comparison and envy were common, particularly in the context of social media or peer achievements. Participants reported that comparing themselves to others often led to a diminished sense of self-worth. *“I can’t scroll through*

Instagram without feeling like everyone else has it together but me,” explained one.

The **rejection of 'good enough'** was a recurring barrier to satisfaction and self-acceptance. Participants dismissed achievements that didn't meet their impossibly high criteria. *“Even when I get compliments, I brush them off—I know I could have done better,”* one person shared.

Theme 3: Emotional Isolation and Disconnection From Others

Several participants disclosed a **reluctance to share vulnerabilities**, driven by fear of being seen as weak or imperfect. Emotional privacy served as a protective mechanism but also reinforced isolation. *“I've learned to keep things to myself. People respect me more when I don't show cracks,”* one participant explained.

The result was often **superficial social relationships**, in which conversations and connections lacked emotional depth. Many described friendships that were functional but emotionally empty. *“I have people to go out with, but not really people I can be myself with,”* said one individual.

Participants also reported patterns of **self-imposed loneliness**, deliberately withdrawing from others during times of stress. *“When things get overwhelming, I push everyone away. I can't bear the thought of being seen like that,”* one interviewee admitted.

Another significant subtheme was **lack of empathic resonance**, where participants felt chronically misunderstood or emotionally out of sync with others. *“Even when I try to open up, people don't get it—they say I'm being dramatic or overthinking,”* noted one participant.

Finally, several described **overachievement as a substitute for connection**, relying on success and admiration to meet emotional needs. One respondent reflected, *“If I'm not loved, at least I'll be respected—that's how I've lived my whole life.”*

Theme 4: Existential Emptiness and Loss of Meaning

The most existential dimension of self-alienation appeared in the form of **achievement void**, where participants described a deep emptiness following accomplishments. Success, rather than fulfilling, often left them disoriented. *“The minute I achieve something, the satisfaction disappears—I'm already worrying about the next thing,”* one participant remarked.

Many also reported a **disconnection from purpose**, describing their routines and pursuits as mechanical or devoid of passion. *“I'm working so hard, but I don't know why anymore,”* shared one individual.

Several expressed **time-space dissociation**, noting a sense of floating through life, detached from the present moment. *“Days pass, and I don't remember them. It's like I'm not fully here,”* explained a participant.

Absence of joy in daily life was a consistent theme, with participants noting a decline in pleasure or enthusiasm for formerly enjoyable activities. *“Even the things I used to love—music, nature—don't move me anymore,”* one said.

The feeling of **existential fatigue** was common, often described as emotional and spiritual exhaustion. One participant called it *“a tiredness that sleep can't fix.”*

In contrast, some participants revealed a **craving for transcendence**, expressing a desire for deeper meaning, spirituality, or inner peace. *“I feel like I'm missing something... like there's a higher part of life I haven't touched yet,”* shared one interviewee.

Lastly, a **crisis of values** was identified, as participants described behaving in ways that contradicted their core beliefs. *“I've built my life around standards that aren't mine. I don't even know what I believe anymore,”* one individual lamented.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the lived experience of self-alienation in individuals with high perfectionistic traits using a phenomenological approach. The findings revealed four overarching themes—Disconnection From Authentic Self, Internalized Criticism and Unrealistic Standards, Emotional Isolation and Disconnection From Others, and Existential Emptiness and Loss of Meaning. These themes illustrate how perfectionistic self-presentation, while externally reinforced and socially rewarded, internally erodes one's sense of authenticity, self-worth, and emotional connection. The findings offer both confirmation of existing theoretical models and valuable new insights into the subtle dynamics of self-alienation among perfectionistic individuals.

The theme of Disconnection From Authentic Self aligns with prior literature on the performative nature of perfectionism. Participants in this study consistently reported suppressing their desires, needs, and emotional expressions in favor of projecting an idealized version of themselves. This is consistent with previous findings that perfectionistic self-presentation involves the concealment of perceived flaws and an overinvestment in social approval (Hewitt et al., 2011; Stoeber & Roche, 2014). Individuals feel pressured to maintain a façade of competence and emotional stability, even at the expense of psychological

well-being (Burkitt, 2024; Kehayes & Mackinnon, 2019). The conflict between internal emotional states and external behavioral demands led many participants to describe their lives as fragmented or "performed," echoing the notion that perfectionism often severs the bridge between the real self and the ideal self (Grugan & Wright, 2025; Lo & Abbott, 2019).

Within this disconnection, emotional numbing and identity confusion emerged as key indicators of self-alienation. Consistent with existing research, participants described a chronic inability to access or express emotions, even in moments of success or intimacy (Hashmi et al., 2022). This emotional suppression is reinforced by cultural and interpersonal norms that valorize composure and control—values often internalized by those with perfectionistic tendencies (Khossousi et al., 2024; Lundqvist et al., 2024). As a result, individuals lose touch with their evolving sense of identity, becoming overidentified with roles such as "the achiever" or "the competent one," leading to rigidity and internal dissonance (Javed et al., 2023; Ubaradka et al., 2023).

The second major theme, Internalized Criticism and Unrealistic Standards, reflects well-documented cognitive features of perfectionism. Nearly all participants described intense self-criticism, fear of failure, and an obsession with flawlessness—factors that perpetuate self-monitoring and self-rejection (Altstötter-Gleich et al., 2025; Stoeber et al., 2016). These experiences mirror the perfectionistic cognitive triad: high personal standards, conditional self-worth, and excessive concern over mistakes (Besser et al., 2010; Nakano, 2009). Participants frequently minimized their achievements and invalidated their progress, a process that contributes to feelings of emptiness and worthlessness even in high-functioning individuals. Moreover, the constant comparison to others—especially through social media—further entrenched their sense of inadequacy and shame, echoing previous findings on perfectionism and social evaluation anxiety (Nam & Lee, 2020; Vicent et al., 2022).

Emotional Isolation and Disconnection From Others, the third theme, highlights the relational cost of perfectionism. Participants described their relationships as shallow, emotionally unfulfilling, or characterized by a fear of vulnerability. This resonates with research suggesting that perfectionistic self-presentation predicts loneliness, low empathy, and difficulty forming authentic connections (Choi & Lee, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2024). The desire to be perceived as flawless inhibits emotional openness and reinforces avoidance of intimacy, resulting in isolation even in the

presence of social activity (Kawamoto et al., 2022; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Notably, many participants substituted achievement and admiration for genuine emotional closeness—a dynamic that supports findings linking perfectionism with narcissistic compensatory strategies (Javed et al., 2023; Park & La, 2024).

The final theme, Existential Emptiness and Loss of Meaning, adds depth to the psychological understanding of perfectionism by framing it not only as a behavioral or cognitive phenomenon, but as an existential dilemma. Participants reported feelings of futility, disconnection from purpose, and emotional fatigue despite their outward success. These findings echo earlier work demonstrating how perfectionistic individuals often experience a void following achievement, as their goals are rooted in external validation rather than intrinsic values (Elion et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2014). The mechanistic, achievement-driven lifestyle described by participants aligns with research showing that maladaptive perfectionism is associated with lower life satisfaction, reduced vitality, and existential despair (Burkitt, 2024; Read et al., 2016). Furthermore, several participants expressed a desire for spiritual or transcendent connection, reflecting a deep yearning to recover a sense of inner wholeness—an area rarely explored in perfectionism research but deserving of greater attention.

These findings contribute to the growing recognition that perfectionism is not merely an issue of high standards but a deeply embodied psychological state with relational, emotional, and existential consequences. Previous research has often focused on perfectionism's association with anxiety, depression, and academic burnout (Hashmi et al., 2022; Kawamoto et al., 2022), but this study shows that self-alienation may be an underlying mechanism linking these outcomes. The dissociation from self—described through terms like "feeling hollow," "wearing a mask," or "not recognizing myself"—points to a loss of self-coherence, which undermines resilience and mental health across multiple domains (Grugan & Wright, 2025; Khossousi et al., 2024).

A key insight of this study is the cyclical nature of perfectionistic self-alienation. Many participants described achieving success, feeling momentarily validated, then quickly returning to self-doubt and striving. This repetitive loop reinforces both the perfectionistic behaviors and the accompanying sense of disconnection. Such dynamics are supported by structural equation modeling studies which show that perfectionistic self-presentation mediates the relationship between trait perfectionism and psychological

symptoms (Altstötter–Gleich et al., 2025; Grugan & Wright, 2025). This suggests that interventions targeting self-presentation motives may be particularly effective in reducing self-alienation.

The study also highlights the culturally specific ways in which perfectionism is internalized. In collectivistic contexts like India, achievement and social reputation are often emphasized within familial and educational structures, reinforcing the idea that worth is contingent on performance. This cultural backdrop may normalize perfectionistic self-presentation and obscure the subjective cost of alienation. It is crucial for clinicians and researchers to consider these contextual factors when assessing and addressing perfectionism-related distress (Hashmi et al., 2022; Lo & Abbott, 2019).

Finally, the phenomenological approach used in this study provides an important methodological contribution. While quantitative scales can identify levels of perfectionism and associated symptoms, they often fail to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences that give rise to emotional suffering. Through open-ended, in-depth interviews, this study uncovered metaphors, memories, and emotional textures that reveal the lived reality of perfectionistic self-alienation. Such insights are essential for designing interventions that go beyond symptom reduction to promote genuine self-connection and psychological integration.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The sample, while diverse in regional and occupational representation within India, consisted entirely of English-speaking participants with at least an undergraduate education, which may limit generalizability to non-English speakers or individuals from lower educational backgrounds. Additionally, the study relied on self-report and self-identification of perfectionistic traits, which may introduce selection bias. While phenomenological analysis yields rich and meaningful data, it is inherently subjective, and the interpretive lens of the researchers may have influenced the thematic structure. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits conclusions about how self-alienation develops over time or responds to change.

Future studies should explore longitudinal trajectories of perfectionistic self-alienation to understand how it evolves across different life stages and in response to critical

transitions such as career change, parenthood, or illness. Expanding the sample to include individuals from diverse socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds would enhance the understanding of how perfectionistic norms are internalized across contexts. Additionally, integrating qualitative methods with neurocognitive or physiological data could illuminate the biological underpinnings of emotional disconnection in perfectionistic individuals. Research could also investigate protective factors—such as self-compassion, mindfulness, or emotional literacy—that may buffer against the alienating effects of perfectionism.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing self-alienation in therapeutic work with perfectionistic clients. Interventions should prioritize fostering emotional expression, identity integration, and authentic self-connection rather than merely challenging irrational beliefs. Techniques from schema therapy, existential psychotherapy, and mindfulness-based approaches may be particularly beneficial. Clinicians should also be aware of the cultural reinforcement of perfectionism and strive to create therapeutic environments that validate vulnerability and redefine success beyond performance. Psychoeducational programs in schools and workplaces that highlight the costs of perfectionistic self-presentation and promote emotional openness could play a preventive role in mitigating long-term psychological harm.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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