What Influences the Human Desire to Achieve Perfectionism?

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper, we sought to understand some of the driving forces behind the unhealthy struggles of perfectionism. Previous research has shown that perfectionism may be influenced by factors such as: low self-esteem, social media use, and Social Anxiety Disorder. In our correlational study, we tested the strength of these relationships by examining naturalistic daily changes in their variables longitudinally over a two-week period. We measured the levels of self-esteem, social comparison, social anxiety, and perfectionism by self-report on separate 0-100 point scales. Data pooled across participants in our correlational study showed significant correlations of perfectionism with self-esteem, social comparison, and social anxiety.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

Perfectionism can cause unwanted suffering and we want to understand what influences this in some people. Foremost, we seek to understand if low self-esteem manifests as perfectionism. In addition, we want to know if social media influences perfectionism and to identify any possible relation between perfectionism and social anxiety. Therefore, we wish to know the influences of perfectionism so that we may discover any emotional tools to help prevent further damage that this mental state often causes.

1.2 Literature Review

In examining the influences of perfectionism, we considered the association between perfectionism and low self-esteem as measured by self-acceptance. In a study by Flett et al. (2003), 94 students rated themselves on a 7-point Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS), reflecting self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially prescribed perfectionism. The students also answered an Unconditional Self-Acceptance Questionnaire. This questionnaire contained statements such as "I believe that I am worthwhile simply because I am a human being" and "I feel I am a valuable person even when other people disapprove of me." The study found correlations between all three perfectionism dimensions and low levels of unconditional self-acceptance. The

strongest of these correlations was between low unconditional self-acceptance and socially prescribed perfectionism. In conclusion, this study found that although the highest connection was between socially prescribed perfectionism and low self-acceptance, all dimensions of perfectionism occur almost exclusively with low levels of self-acceptance.

Additionally, another possible element that was found to influence perfectionism was social media use, specifically upwards comparison to Instagram models. In an experiment with 142 female York university students, Mccomb (2019) had participants use a visual analogue scale (VAS) to record their personal sense of confidence, levels of depression, and weight/appearance dissatisfaction before and after viewing photos of models on Instagram; Scores of the participants were calculated, by the researchers, before and after viewing the Instagram photos. It was found that the weight and appearance dissatisfaction scores, along with depression scores, both increased, whereas confidence scores decreased. The results imply that viewing these photos had a negative effect on the young women's body image, and confidence, while simultaneously increasing levels of depression. These factors were shown to have a direct relation to physical appearance perfectionism, through the changes in body image and mood. Based on the results of this study, Mccomb (2019) illustrated that there is a direct, measurable, effect on a person's perception of themselves from observing and comparing idealistic body images off Instagram, thus resulting in a form of physical appearance perfectionism.

A possible answer concerning the relationship between Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and its influence on Perfectionism could be the fear of being negatively evaluated which in turn causes the need to achieve perfection or avoid failure in the presence of others. A study done in 2014 consisted of 180 participants with SAD diagnosis (Levinson 2014). They were instructed to answer questions on two different scales: Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick & Clarke 1998) and the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). The APS-R measured "maladaptive" and "adaptive" elements of perfectionism on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These scales asked participants to evaluate their responses regarding anxiety related interactions and "maladaptive" and "adaptive" components of perfectionism. The results of this study (Levinson 2014) concluded that those with SAD considered themselves to have low personal standards, but others actually considered those standards to be high. Thus, it is suggested that clinical perfectionism may be influenced by SAD.

1.3 Hypotheses

Based on the above literature review, we predicted the following hypotheses:
- Hypothesis #1: If self-esteem decreases then perfectionism will increase.
- Hypothesis #2: If social comparison increases then perfectionism will increase.
- Hypothesis #3: If Social Anxiety Disorder symptoms increase then perfectionism will increase.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The three authors of this paper served as the participants in its studies. The participants ranged in age from 25-46 years old, with an average age of 32 years, and all

identified as women. The participants were all undergraduate students at Camosun College who completed the current studies as an assignment for Psyc 110- D02 ("Experimental Psychology") and were grouped together due to their mutual interest in perfectionism. Each participant identified themselves as perfectionists.

2.2 Materials and Procedure

We first performed a correlational study to test concurrently all of our hypotheses by examining naturalistic daily changes in their variables longitudinally. Each participant kept a study journal with them at all times over this study's two-week period in order to record self-observations of the following four variables: (1) self-esteem, (2) social comparison, (3) social anxiety, and (4) perfectionism.

To measure levels of self-esteem, participants recorded their symptoms on a 0-100 point scale, with 0 indicating no symptoms, 50 indicating moderate symptoms, and 100 indicating severe symptoms at the end of each day. The symptoms considered measurable on this scale were feelings of worthiness, feelings of capability, feelings of pride, feelings of self-respect, and feelings of positivity towards oneself.

To measure social comparison participants recorded the amount of time on Instagram spent comparing themselves, on a 0-100 point scale, at the end of each day. The following anchors were used on the 100-point scale: 0 = no time on Instagram spent comparing oneself, 50 = half of the time on Instagram spent comparing oneself, 100 = entire time on Instagram spent comparing oneself. From these records, the average proportion of self-comparison on Instagram was calculated.

For social anxiety symptoms, the participants measured themselves on a 0-100 point scale, with 0 indicating no symptoms were felt, 50 indicating moderate levels of symptoms felt, and 100 indicating extreme levels of symptoms felt after social interactions they experienced throughout the day. The symptoms that were considered measurable on this scale include physical symptoms such as blushing, nausea, sweating, trembling, difficulty speaking, and increased heart rate, and psychological symptoms such as worrying about embarrassment during interaction with one or more people, feeling overwhelmed in crowded places, and stress and anxiety felt during common tasks such as interacting with a clerk in a store, phone calls, sending an email, eating in public, or posting on social media.

To measure feelings of perfectionism, each participant rated on a 0 to 100 scale the degree of perfectionism feelings felt at the end of the day. The symptoms that were considered measurable on this scale were feelings of failure, self-criticism, procrastination, struggling to relax, controlling of personal and professional relationships, obsession with rules, lists, and work, or extreme apathy. The following response anchors were used on this perfectionism scale: 0 = no feelings of perfectionism, 50 = moderate feelings of perfectionism, 100 = extreme feelings of perfectionism. From this scale the average level of perfectionism feelings of each participant was calculated at the end of the given day.

To assess the strength and statistical significance of associations between variables predicted by our three hypotheses, we performed Pearson product moment correlations of their predictor variables (self-esteem, social comparison, social anxiety) with their outcome variable (perfectionism).

For testing Hypothesis #1, we correlated the participants levels of self-esteem with their average feelings of perfectionism at the end of the given day. For testing Hypothesis #2, we correlated the daily amount of social comparison on Instagram, with the participants average feelings of perfectionism at the end of the given day. For Hypothesis #3 we recorded the daily levels of social anxiety in participants in addition to the participants' average feelings of perfectionism. We performed all of the above correlations separately for each participant as well as using data pooled across all of the participants. For the correlations using pooled data, in addition to using the raw data, we also performed correlations after we had first transformed the data from each participant into z-scores in order to standardize differences in averages and variability seen between the participants in their data and thus make them more comparable. A correlation coefficient was considered statistically significant if the probability of its random occurrence (p) was < .05 (i.e., less than 5% of the time expected by chance alone).

3. Results

As shown in Table 1, self-esteem, social comparison, and social anxiety were all significantly correlated with perfectionism. Self-esteem was statistically significant with perfectionism using both pooled raw data ($r = -.64$, $p = 2.711E-06$; see Figure 1A) and pooled standardized data ($r = -.71$, $p = 2.256E-08$; see Figure 1B). Additionally, social comparison and perfectionism was statistically significant using pooled raw data ($r = .52$, $p = .0002706$; see Figure 2A) and pooled standardized data ($r = .56$, $p = 6.894E-05$; see Figure 2B). Finally, social anxiety was significantly correlated with perfectionism using pooled raw data ($r =$

.61, $p = 1.189E-05$; see Figure 3A), or pooled standardized data ($r = .67$, $p = 3.177E-07$; see Figure 3B). Based on a comparison of the correlation coefficients using either the pooled raw data, or the pooled standardized data, self-esteem showed the strongest correlational with perfectionism.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of Results

Based on previous research we hypothesized that a decrease in self-esteem would increase perfectionism (Hypothesis #1), and that an increase in social comparison (Hypothesis #2), and an increase in social anxiety (Hypothesis #3) would both result in an increase in perfectionism. Data pooled across participants in our correlational study supported the predicted relationships between all three variables.

4.2 Relation of Results to Past Research

The findings of our correlational study to predict the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism is consistent with previous research. Flett et al. (2003) found that the lower levels of self-acceptance reported by participants was associated with an increase in levels of perfectionism. Flett et al. (2003) had participants assess levels of self-acceptance and perfectionism, while in our study we used symptoms of self-esteem. We found enough similarity exists between self-acceptance and self-esteem to suggest a strong relationship exists between self-esteem and perfectionism.

The relationship found in our correlational study between social comparison and perfectionism is consistent with the results of previous research. Mccomb (2019) found that upwards

comparison on Instagram resulted in elevated levels of physical appearance perfectionism. Mccomb (2019) got participants to rate themselves on a visual analogue scale after a short, single, period of viewing photos of models on Instagram- where as, we longitudinally measured the overall effect of social comparison, on Instagram, on a daily basis. The similarity of both conclusions, despite using different time references, displays that there is a general relationship between social comparison and perfectionism.

The relationship between social anxiety and perfectionism as suggested in previous research (Levinson 2014) is similar to the conclusion of our study. In the cited study (Levinson 2014) social anxiety was related to having unreasonably high expectations of oneself which is a symptom of perfectionism. Our study concluded that when participants reported experiencing symptoms of social anxiety, their perfectionism symptoms increased as well. Although the studies varied slightly in method, the conclusions both signify a

relationship between social anxiety and perfectionism.

References

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Table 1

Correlation coefficient (r) values, with number of daily trials (n) per correlation in brackets.

Variables correlated	Participant #1	Participant #2	Participant #3	Pooled raw data	Pooled standardized data
Self-esteem & perfectionism	-.91*(14)	-.75*(14)	-.49(14)	-.64*(14)	-.71*(14)
Social comparison & perfectionism	.36(14)	.87*(14)	.47(14)	.52*(14)	.56*(14)
Social anxiety & perfectionism	.80*(14)	.44(14)	.78*(14)	.61*(14)	0.67*(14)

*p < .05.

Figure 1

Scatterplot of self-esteem and perfectionism using pooled (A) raw and (B) standardized data across participants.
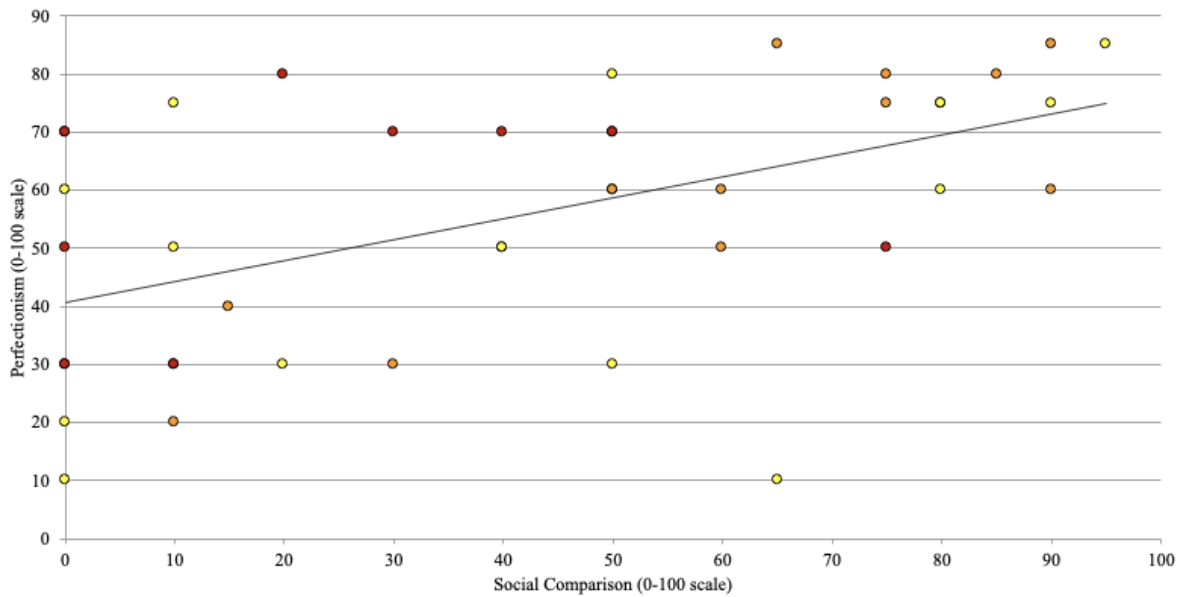
A.

B.
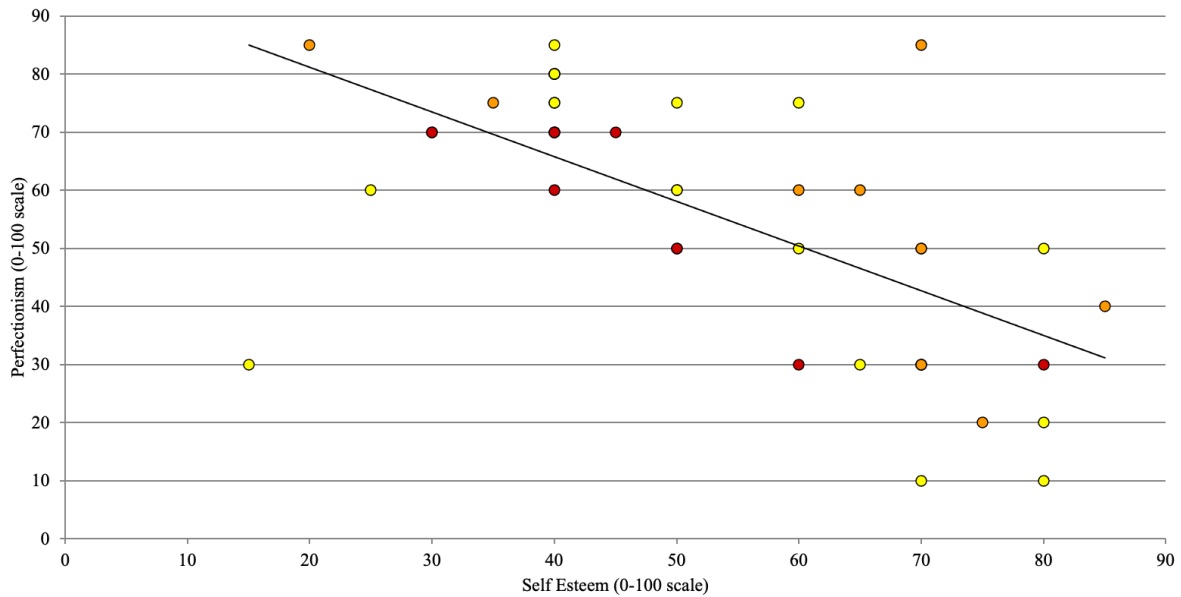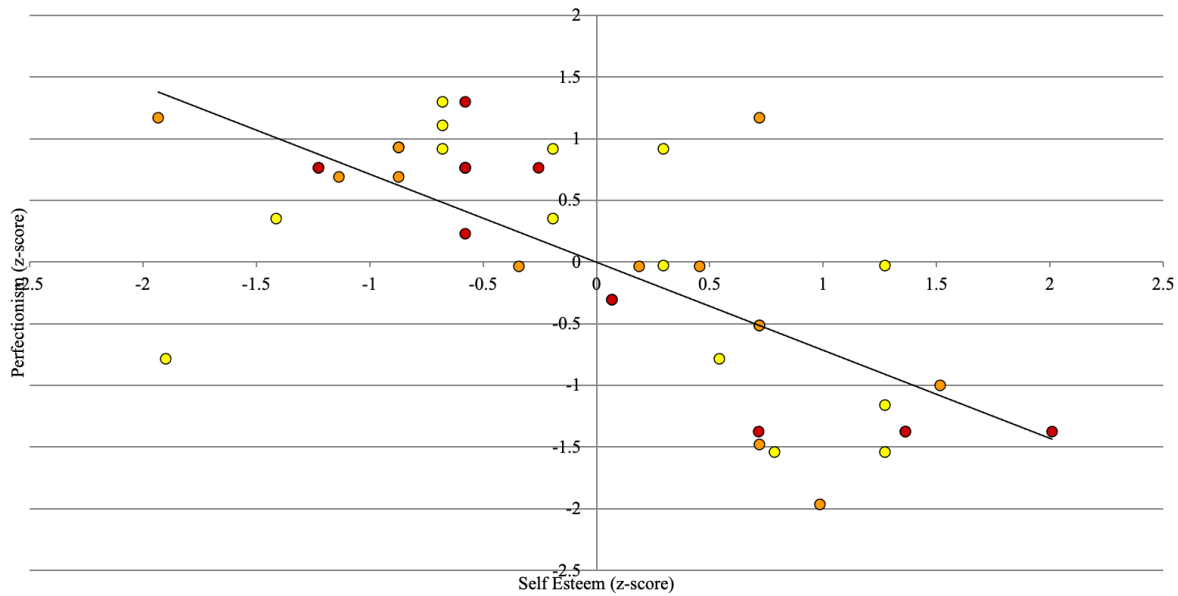
Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, orange = participant #2, and yellow = participant #3. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.
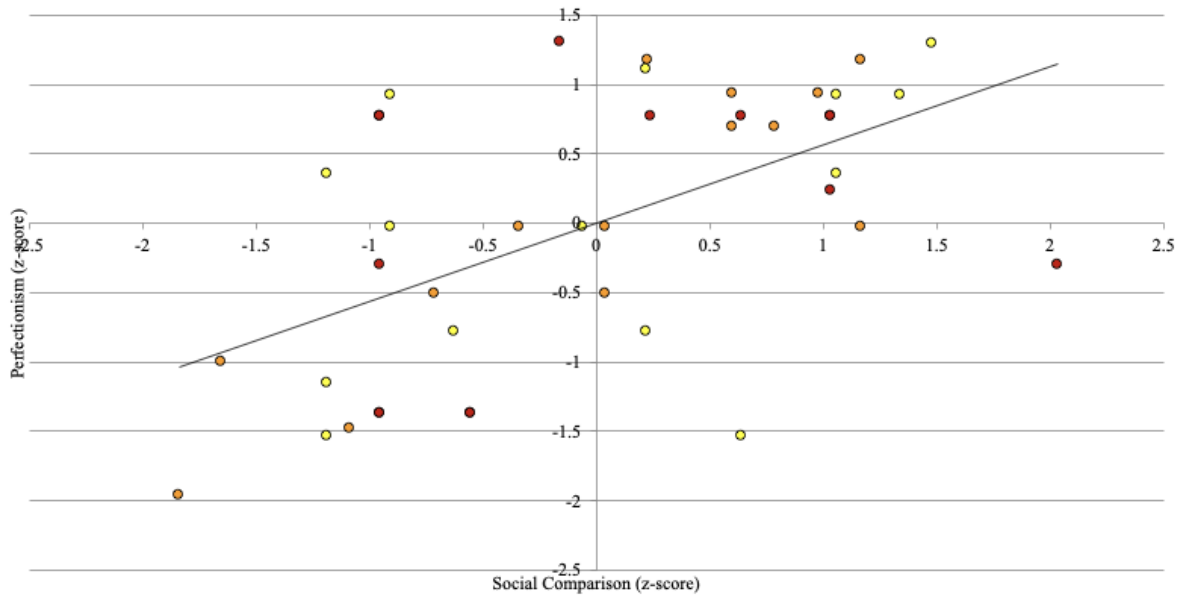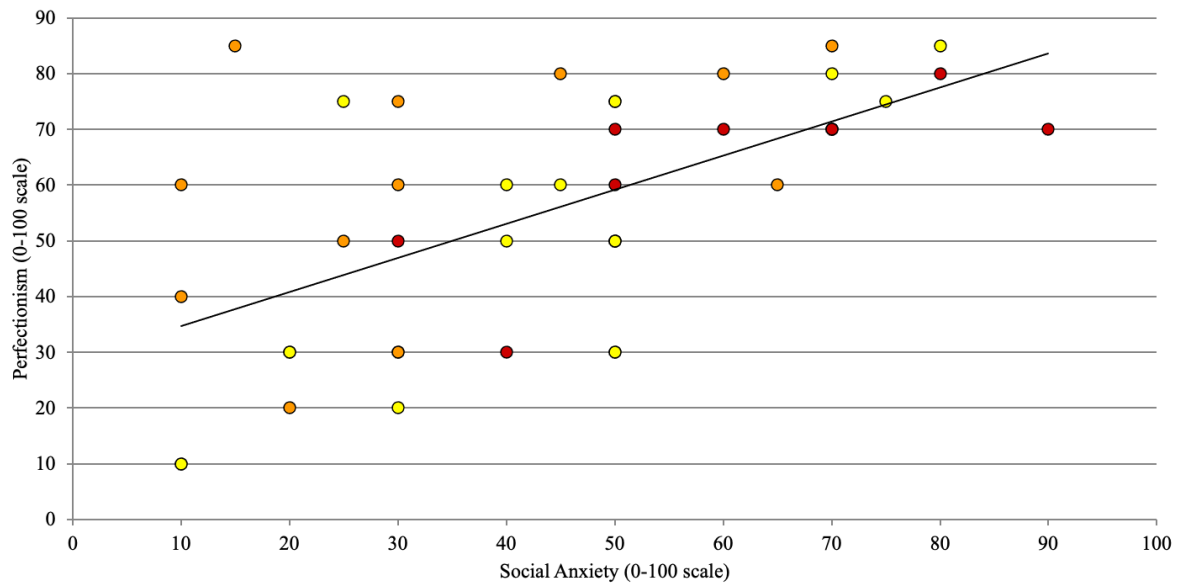
Figure 2

Scatterplot of social comparison and perfectionism using pooled (A) raw and (B) standardized data across participants.

A.

B.

 Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, orange = participant #2, and yellow = participant #3. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.
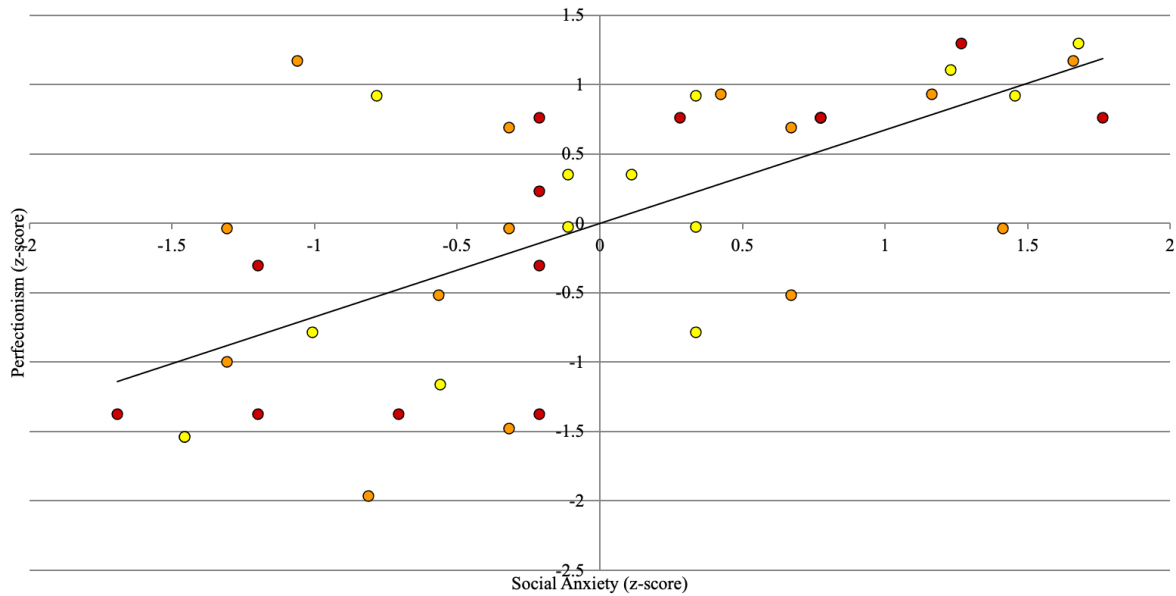
Figure 3

Scatterplot of social anxiety and perfectionism using pooled (A) raw and (B) standardized data across participants.

A.

B.

Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, orange = participant #2, and yellow = participant #3. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.