A QUALITATIVE ENQUIRY INTO THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF SINGER-SONGWRITERS: INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF PERFECTIONISM

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BACKGROUND

- The current issue of musician mental health
  - (Gross and Musgrave, 2017; Loveday, Musgrave, and Gross, 2023; Musgrave, 2023; Ficek, 2023; Ficek, 2024)
- Perfectionism as a potential contributor
  - (Flett, Hewitt, and Dyck, 1989; Hewitt, *et al.*, 1998; O'Connor, Rasmussen, and Hawton, 2010; Flett, *et al.*, 2012; Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, 2017; Curran and Hill, 2019; Egan, *et al.*, 2022; Flett, *et al.*, 2022)
- Perfectionism in the performing arts
  - (Mor, *et al.*, 1995; Kenny, Davis, and Oates, 2004; Stoeber and Eismann, 2007; Dobos, Piko, and Kenny, 2019; Hill, *et al.*, 2020)
- Perfectionism as a disrupter of the creative process
  - (Nordin-Bates, 2012; Chou, *et al.*, 2019; Nordin-Bates, 2020)
- Interpersonal aspects of perfectionism in singer-songwriters
  - (Casale, *et al.*, 2015; Hill, *et al.*, 2020)

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JUSTIFICATION

Of the literature reviewed:

- No studies on perfectionism in the singer-songwriter population
- Methodological gaps in perfectionism- related literature reviewed

29% = Concerning musicians

17% of which = Qualitative

12% of all literature = Qualitative

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AIMS OF THE PROJECT

Explore this topic and population qualitatively

Improve the creative process, careers and well-being of singer-songwriters

Contribute to the wider community, mitigation strategies, and the development of future research

Inform my work in HE and design of future courses

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METHODOLOGY

- Relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology
  - (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018)
- Qualitative methodology
- Interpretive methods
  - (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018)

Participants:

- Singer-songwriters
  - Professional
  - Undergraduate student songwriters
- Recruited through researcher's professional network via a flyer
- Purposively sampled
  - (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018)

Procedure:

- Open-ended anonymous questionnaires
  - (Gray, 2009)
- Semi Structured Interviews
  - (Weiss, 1995; Braun and Clarke, 2013)
- Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)
  - (Braun and Clarke, 2022)

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Ethical approval granted by UWTSD Ethics Board
- Participants given information sheet --> informed consent (signed consent form)
  - (Berg, 2001)
- Participation = voluntary, confidential, data protected, no direct benefits, and anonymised in report
  - (Creswell, 2014)
- Acknowledging and reflecting on positionality (insider researcher) throughout
  - (Walliman, 2009; Fleming and Zegwaard, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2022)
- Questioning sensitive and paced appropriately
  - (Braun and Clarke, 2013)
- All participants signposted to mental health support in case needed

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

OVERVIEW OF THEMES

1

Perfectionism disrupts the creative process

2

Insidious effects of saving face

3

Detrimental pressures of ‘trying to make it’ in the music industry

4

Turbulent paradox of creative expression

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OVERVIEW OF THEMES

1

Perfectionism disrupts the creative process
(individual)

2

Insidious effects of saving face
(social)

3

Detrimental pressures of ‘trying to make it’ in the music industry
(cultural)

4

Turbulent paradox of creative expression
(latent meanings)

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THEME 1: PERFECTIONISM DISRUPTS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CREATIVE PROCESS (INDIVIDUAL)

Negative emotions and mental health problems that are a result of self-oriented perfectionism, as well as how perfectionistic thinking interacts with the creative process.

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THEME 1: PERFECTIONISM DISRUPTS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CREATIVE PROCESS (INDIVIDUAL)

"Maybe it's like 2% better. Even then. But it took you 2 weeks, and you're crying." **(P2)**

- Perfectionism = negative emotions
  - (Flett, Hewitt, and Dyck, 1989; Fedewa, Burns, and Gomez, 2005; Flett, *et al.*, 2012)
- Perfectionism = poor mental health
  - (Flett, Hewitt, and Dyck, 1989; Hewitt, *et al.*, 1998; Flett, *et al.*, 2012)
- Perfectionism = disrupts creativity
  - (Nordin-Bates, 2012; Nordin-Bates, 2020)

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THEME 2 - THE INSIDIOUS EFFECTS OF SAVING FACE (SOCIAL)

The impacts of interpersonal perfectionism (perfectionistic self-presentation and socially prescribed perfectionism) on singer-songwriters, as well as how this relates to social media use.

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THEME 2 - THE INSIDIOUS EFFECTS OF SAVING FACE (SOCIAL)

Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP)

"Often I feel like I try to write to what others may perceive as good." (P15)

- Rise of SPP
  - (Curran and Hill, 2019; Flett, *et al.*, 2022)
- Mitigation recommendations for Higher Education (HE)
  - (Miksza, Evans and McPherson, 2021; Arbinaga, 2023)

Imposter phenomenon (IP)

"Yeah, it just feels like it distances me in a way, it feels like I'm carrying around this whole big secret about like it's kind of imposter syndrome, I suppose." (P18)

- Perfectionism = increase, predispose and sustain IP
  - (Gaudreau, *et al.*, 2022; Pannhausen, Klug, and Rohrmann, 2022)

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THEME 2 - THE INSIDIOUS EFFECTS OF SAVING FACE (SOCIAL)

Perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP)

"It is a demanding beast, which never sleeps. It's thinking about what people going to think and how they going to laugh at me, so I need to be perfect and write everything perfectly, and get all the pitches right and smooth and look amazing and just show no struggle at all. It is just impossible to sustain that type of thinking. It doesn't serve me." (P10)

- Anxiety sensitivity
  - (Flett, Greene, and Hewitt, 2004)
- PSP = decrease in positive feelings
  - (Hill, *et al.*, 2020)

Interpersonal perfectionism and social media use

"It makes me want to only put the very best out there." (P6)

- Excessive smartphone and social media use = poor mental health
  - (Elhai, Levine and Hall, 2019; Etherson, *et al.*, 2022; Twenge, *et al.*, 2022; Brailovskaia, *et al.*, 2023)

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THEME 3 - THE DETRIMENTAL PRESSURES OF 'TRYING TO MAKE IT' IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY (CULTURAL)

Feelings of lacking time and money to be a singer-songwriter.

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THEME 3 - THE DETRIMENTAL PRESSURES OF 'TRYING TO MAKE IT' IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY (CULTURAL)

"So I struggle financially to do the music that I want and make money out of it. I make money out of other things to support my creativity." (P20)

"I'm scared I won't be able to make enough money to do it full time." (P2)

- Career precarity
  - (Musgrave, 2023)
- Low pay for musicians
  - (Hesmondhalgh, 2021)

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THEME 4 - THE TURBULENT PARADOX OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

The duality of being creative: the well-being benefits being creative brings versus the negative self-view when creative block appears, as well as the duality reflected in views on perfectionism helping/hindering the creative process.

THEME 4 - THE TURBULENT PARADOX OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

"I love it. I don't. I also kind of hate it." (P2)

"I tie my self-worth very closely with my music so it feels very close to me." (P1)

"The curse is being dependent on writing to process feelings and needing time to find a way to put them into words." (P20)

"Self-depreciation and irritation directed to my actual personality rather than my creative persona." (P13)

- Pleasure/pain
  - (McRobbie, 2004)
- 'Tortured artist'
  - (Alacovska and Kärreman, 2023)
- 'Positive' aspects of perfectionism
  - (Stoeber and Otto, 2006; Wigert, *et al.*, 2012; Rice, Richardson, and Tueller, 2014; Hill, *et al.*, 2015; Stoeber, Haskew and Scott, 2015; Sirois, Molnar and Hirsch, 2017; Madigan, 2019)

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CONCLUSIONS

- Research aims addressed, with room to do further research in this area
- Qualitative study - questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and RTA
- Data collected supports current literature and provides insight on this group
- Project grounded in literature and pays due regard to ethics

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide information on perfectionism in HE, particularly how it may present in the singer-songwriter population, as well as evidence-based strategies.
- Support singer-songwriters in developing a healthy sense of self independent from their music/achievements.
- Dispel the ‘tortured artist’ narrative.
- Raise awareness on fair pay for musicians and lobby for change.
- Build on this study to inform the development of strategies, as well as applying these learnings in the wider educational/arts context.

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REFLECTION ON LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Developed skills in conducting questionnaires and interviews
- Learned about RTA throughout the project through applying it
- Effectively managed time within the given timeframe



Limitations of the current study

In future - based on limitations

- Go more in-depth on topic
- Focus on more narrow population
- Conduct research from outside perspective

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