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# Latter-day Saint Religious Media and Perfectionism

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**ABSTRACT** *Links between exposure to religious media and perfectionism were investigated in 121 Latter-day Saint (LDS), Brigham Young University students. Random assignment was given to view an LDS religious video or no video, after which participants filled out a questionnaire assessing the effects of LDS media on perfectionism. The 35-item Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) scored students' perfectionism. Our hypothesis, that viewing an LDS religious video would increase adaptive perfectionism scores and decrease maladaptive scores, was not supported. However, a post-hoc analysis showed a significant interaction effect between gender and video exposure among single participants. Unmarried males had lower perfectionism scores after watching the video, while unmarried females had higher scores after watching the video. We conclude that perfectionism and religious influence may interact differently in different individuals and demographic groups, especially by gender. Because 90% of the sample was unmarried, further research is needed to explore this connection in different populations. Also, because our data is based on post-hoc analysis, similar studies should be conducted to confirm our findings.*

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Perfectionism is an unwillingness to settle for anything less than an impeccable personal ideal, recognizable by doubts about actions, excessive concern over mistakes, high personal standards, and parental and societal pressure (Hewitt, 1991; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Perfectionism has been widely studied for many years. It is frequently linked with eating disorders (Sassarolia et al., 2008; Bardone-Cone, Sturm, Lawson, Robinson, & Smith, 2010), including links with anorexia, body image, and self-esteem, which not only makes perfectionism a psychological concern, but also makes it a health concern. Perfectionism has been linked with depression (Sassarolia et al., 2008), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Zohar et al., 2005), and anxiety (Arable, 2010). The single most well-established factor leading to

perfectionism is perfectionism in the individual's mother (Cook & Kearney, 2009; Frost, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1991), but many researchers have also studied religion as a possible moderator in the development of perfectionism. Most of this research is devoted to the study of religiosity, or personal religious devotion.

In addition to studying the causes of perfectionism, several researchers have defined perfectionism in terms of different dimensions (Hewitt, 1991; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), the simplest of which is contrasting maladaptive, or "bad" perfectionism, with adaptive, or "good" perfectionism. Hewitt proposed three dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. All three have links to maladaptive conditions and behaviors, but self-oriented perfectionism, which is personal and intrinsically motivated, has also been linked with positive outcomes (Hewitt, 1991). For example, Corrigan (1998), using Hewitt's perfectionism scale, found that other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism are correlated with a negative image of God among clergy, including a belief of God as uninvolved in coping. Other researchers divided perfectionism into six dimensions (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), the most maladaptive of which are concerns about mistakes and doubts about actions.

We theorize that, in general, intrinsically motivated religiosity (or religious practice motivated internally, as opposed to socially) will increase adaptive dimensions of perfectionism and decrease maladaptive perfectionism, given that religiosity has been correlated with a number of positive outcomes. For example, measures of religiosity have been positively correlated with mental health and life satisfaction (Abdel-Khalek, 2009; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2010), as well as with physical health (Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Gill, Barrio Minton, & Myers, 2010). Intrinsic religiosity has been specifically associated with high self-esteem and academic performance in students at Brigham Young University (BYU) (Furr et al., 2007; Cannon,

## 22 Intuition, Spring 2011

Barnet, Righter, Larson, & Barrus, 2005).

In 2008, Edgington, Richards, Erickson, Jackson, and Hardman performed a landmark study on women with eating disorders and perfectionism who are also members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). In semi-structured interviews, they found that participants reported feeling social pressures to be ideal. Participants also reported that religious doctrine, notably the doctrine of Jesus Christ's suffering and death, seemed at first to be a source of guilt. However, as they confronted their feelings about these doctrines, they reported better feelings about themselves. Since eating disorders have common links to perfectionism (Sassarolia et al., 2008), and religion-based therapy can help Latter-day Saint women with eating disorders (Edgington, Richards, Erickson, Jackson, & Hardman, 2008), it follows that religious doctrine may have a beneficial effect on perfectionism, perhaps specifically in Latter-day Saints.

Many other researchers have studied links between religiosity and perfectionism. For example, Corrigan (1998) found that perfectionism is linked to certain types of religiosity in clergy, Thelander (2003) found that maladaptive perfectionism is correlated with a poor relationship with God, and Heise and Steitz (1991) theorized that a misinterpretation of the Bible can lead to a philosophy of spiritual *perfection*, as opposed to a healthy philosophy of spiritual *progress*. However, almost all of the empirical research done thus far on the interaction between religion and perfectionism is based on self-report measures of personal religious devotion; in fact, other options seem absent from dialogue on measuring religiosity and its effects (Bjarnason, 2007; Clarke, 2006; Gummerum, 2008). Self-report measures of personal religiosity have many weaknesses, such as requiring a particular language, catering to a particular religious background (Abu-Rayya, Abu-Rayya, & Khalil, 2009), relying on participants' subjective opinions of themselves, and being limited to correlational study. Exposure to religious media should also be studied, given that it can be subjected to experimental study, giving researchers a more direct key to the effects of religion on individuals. Religious media is also an independent topic worthy of study, given the powerful influence of both religion and media (Hosseini, 2008).

Although it is known that religiosity is linked to better health, that Latter-day Saint religious discussion can help women with eating disorders, and that certain LDS religious media can improve self-esteem, no research has been done on the effect of religious media

on perfectionism. This study will specifically focus on the effect of LDS doctrine on adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism scores, comparing a group who watches a video presenting LDS religious doctrine to one who does not. Our primary hypothesis is that exposure to the religious video will result in higher scores on adaptive dimensions of perfectionism. Our secondary hypothesis is that exposure to the video will cause lower scores on maladaptive perfectionism.

### Method

Participants for this study were BYU students recruited through internet-based recruiting and survey resources (SONA and Qualtrics). The students were randomly assigned to be in either the control or experimental group. Data were analyzed using the General Linear Model of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 17.0 (SPSS 17.0).

A total of 123 students made up the original sample. Exclusion factors included non-BYU students, non-LDS students, and students who did not complete the entire experiment (which excluded 2 of the original 123 students in the sample). Participants ranged between the ages of 18 and 44 with a mean of 20.4, and 55% of the participants were women (see Table 1 for a summary of sample demographics). Most notably, only 9.9% of the sample was currently married, while 90.1% were currently not married. Only two participants were

Table 1. *Demographics*

	N (121)	Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	121	--	20.47	3.047
Males	55	45.45%	--	--
Females	66	54.55%	--	--
Single	109	90.08%	--	--
Married	12	9.92%	--	--
From Utah	39	32.23%	--	--
From Elsewhere (US)	80	66.12%	--	--
From Elsewhere (non-US)	2	1.65%	--	--

from outside the United States. The analysis found no statistically significant demographic differences between the experimental and control group.

This study used a between-subjects experimental design to compare results of the two participant groups. The independent variable was manipulated by the participant either watching a religious video clip (Mormon Messages, 2009) or not watching a video. In order to make the video clip as representative of LDS media as possible, a clip was chosen that focuses on the life and death of Jesus Christ, which is a central and foundational part of Latter-day Saint religion. The dependent variable was measured using the *Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale* (FMPS). The FMPS is a 35-item scale consisting of six subscales, which can be used to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Respondents indicated their agreement with items using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perfectionism. Sample questions include “My parents never tried to understand my mistakes,” and “It is important to me that I be thoroughly competent in everything I do.” The FMPS has been found to be valid and reliable by a number of studies (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, & Mattia, 1993; Parker & Adkins, 1995). The original study found that the FMPS had a Cronbach’s alpha of .91, with subscales’ Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .77 to .94, as well as high correlations with other measures of perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). We measured adaptive perfectionism by adding together the personal standards, organization, and parental expectations subscales. Maladaptive perfectionism was measured using the parental criticism, doubts about actions, and concern over mistakes subscales.

Both the video and questionnaire were administered online through Qualtrics. Participants expressed consent electronically and filled out a short demographics questionnaire. The experimental group completed a manipulation check (two open-ended questions about their reaction to the video clip) to ensure completion and understanding of the religious video. An analysis of the manipulation check revealed that all participants watched and were able to report on the content of the video, suggesting that the independent variable manipulation of exposure to a religious video was successful.

## Results

We found that the control group had a mean adaptive perfectionism score of 64.63 with a *SD* of 8.46 (see Figure 1). The experimental group mean for adaptive perfectionism was 63.96 with a *SD* of 8.04. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found that there was no statistically significant difference ( $p = .66$ ) in regards to adaptive perfectionism scores between students who watched an LDS doctrinal video and those who did not.

Maladaptive perfectionism had a mean for the control group of 42.76 with a *SD* of 10.52 (see Figure 1). The experimental group had a mean maladaptive perfectionism score of 44.29 with a *SD* of 9.97. We failed to support our secondary hypothesis, as the data indicated that there was no significant difference in maladaptive perfectionism scores between the two groups ( $p = .42$ ).

We did find, using post-hoc analysis, that there was a significant interaction effect between gender and exposure to the video among single participants ( $p = .037$ ; see Figure 2). For the experimental group, the mean overall perfectionism score for unmarried males was 4.7 points *lower* than the control group. Single females who watched the video averaged a score 5.5 points *higher* than single females in the control. In other words, after watching the video, single males had lost some of their perfectionism, while single females had gained more perfectionism. Single men also started out with slightly higher overall perfectionism scores than single women, though this difference was not statistically significant. Married males and females showed the opposite pattern: married men in the experimental group had higher perfectionism, and married women in the experimental group had lower perfectionism. However, the results for married individuals were not statistically significant, likely due to the small number of married participants.

## Discussion

This study aimed to discover possible links between perfectionism and religious influence among LDS college students. Our primary hypothesis was that exposure to a video discussing religious doctrine would result in higher scores on adaptive dimensions of perfectionism. Our secondary hypothesis was that exposure to a doctrinal video would cause lower scores on maladaptive perfectionism. No such results were found. However, exposure to a religious video did result in higher perfectionism scores

## 24 Intuition, Spring 2011

(both maladaptive and adaptive) for single females and lower scores for single males. We conclude that reactions among Latter-day Saint BYU students to a given religious stimulus may vary based on a variety of factors, including gender and marital status.

One implication of our research is that many moderators may exist between religious influence and perfectionism. This is consistent with research showing that the Big Five trait of conscientiousness can predict long-term increases in perfectionism (Stoeber, Otto, & Dalbert, 2009), and that many personality traits and some mental illnesses have correlations with perfectionism (Ashby, Kottman, & Stoltz, 2006; Huprich, Porcerelli, Keaschuk, Binienda, & Engle, 2008), suggesting that certain personality traits may lead an individual to interpret a religious message—or other environmental stimuli—in a way that increases perfectionism. This concept of a complex relationship between personality, perfectionism, and religion is supported by research showing that intrinsic (personal) and extrinsic (social) religiosity have different effects on the self-esteem and academic performance of BYU students (Furr et al., 2007; Cannon, Barnet, Righter, Larson, & Barrus, 2005).

Perfectionism may also operate differently in men versus in women, as suggested by research showing that male perfectionism correlates with increased care-based judgments and decreased justice-based judgments, while female perfectionism has the opposite relationship or no relationship at all (Agerström, Möller, & Archer, 2006). Our study's results may also be due to the greater number of religious status markers for men than for women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (M. Cornwall, personal communication, March 19, 2010). For example, men are more likely to be missionaries and hold prominent Church positions. With fewer such markers of religious success, women's contributions to the Latter-day Saint community may be less visible and may be culturally marginalized (A. Lewis, personal communication, September 9, 2010), which could lead to doubts about actions and concern about mistakes, key dimensions of perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990).

Another implication is that religious influence may play a role in development, prevention, and treatment of perfectionism, as it can for LDS women with eating disorders (Edgington, Richards, Erickson, Jackson, & Hardman, 2008). It is known that perfectionism in the individual's mother often leads to perfectionism (Woodside et al., 2002; Frost, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1991; Cook & Kearney, 2009), but few other factors have

been explored in the development of perfectionism.

One major limitation of our study is that we studied a limited population: Latter-day Saint undergraduate students at Brigham Young University. Also, most of the students were recruited out of courses in psychology. Therefore, the application of our findings to other populations is limited. Another limitation is that a different religious video clip, focusing on different doctrines, might have a different effect on perfectionism. While we chose a video clip focusing on a relatively central doctrine, our video clip may not be representative of all religious influences, even within the Latter-day Saint community. We also had no way of measuring the stability of our findings, so the effect of the video clip on perfectionism may be temporary. In addition, our effect size was small. It is possible that exposure to repeated video clips and other religious influences, over a longer period of time, may create a larger effect. Finally, our findings came from a post-hoc analysis: by exploring a large number of possible relationships between variables, we increased the chance that coincidence could influence our data. Therefore, similar studies need to confirm our findings.

Future study should focus on other populations, including married BYU students, students who are not Latter-day Saints, and people of all ages. For example, another study could explore if religious status markers such as marriage, parenthood, serving as a missionary, having responsibilities at church, etc., change the way people react to religious media. Further research should also explore the possibility that perfectionism affects men and women differently, since research suggests that perfectionism affects men and women differently in their moral reasoning (Agerström, Möller, & Archer, 2006).

### Overall Perfectionism Scores

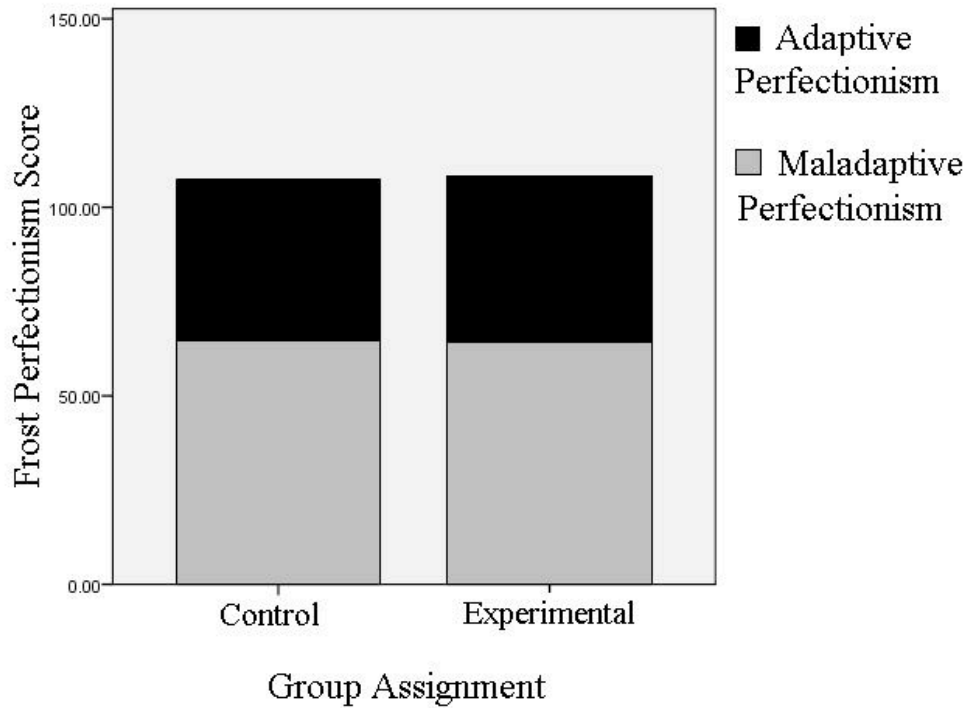


Figure 1. No significant differences in overall, adaptive, or maladaptive perfectionism.

### Gender, Religious Media, and Perfectionism

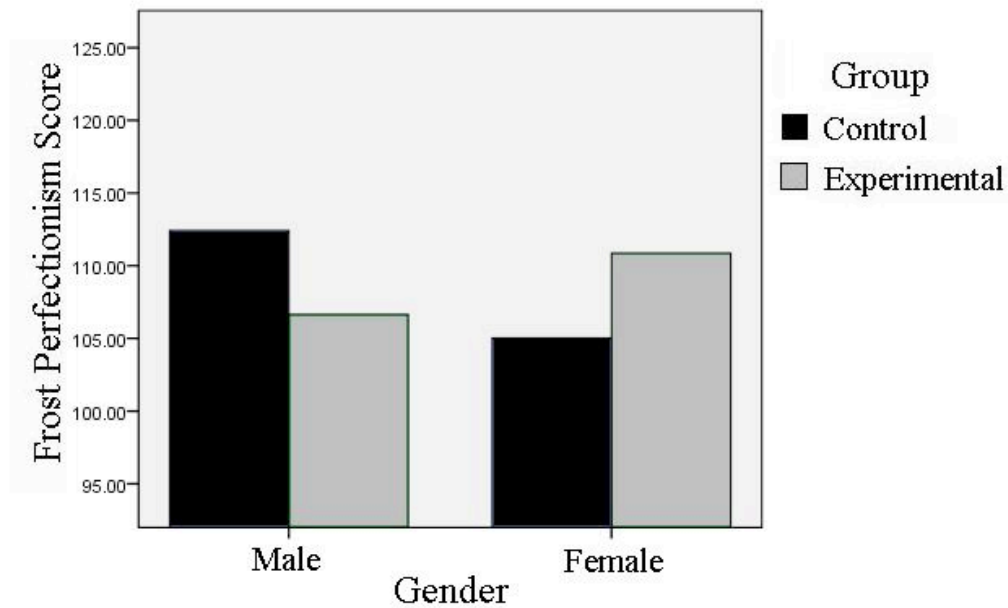


Figure 2. Effect of religious media on overall perfectionism scores for single BYU students by gender ( $p = .037$ ).

## 26 Intuition, Spring 2011

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