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## **Navigating the Impact of Perfectionism on Academic Burnout among University Students through the Lens of Ego-Strength**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The university experience involves striving for academic excellence and personal growth. However, this journey can be challenging due to the pursuit of perfection and high standards, potentially leading to burnout. This study explores how ego strength mediates the relationship of perfectionism and burnout among university students. The sample included 271 undergraduate and postgraduate students from private universities in Lahore, Pakistan, aged 17-25. Correlational research design was used. The study utilized the positive and negative perfectionism scale, Barron's ego strength scale-short version, and Oldenburg burnout inventory-student version. Analysis methods included psychometric analysis, Pearson-product moment correlation analysis, and mediation analysis using SPSS AMOS. Findings showed positive perfectionism positively relates to ego strength and negatively relates to academic burnout. Conversely, negative perfectionism negatively relates to ego strength and positively relates to academic burnout. Ego strength partially mediates the relationship between positive perfectionism and academic burnout among university students. Ego strength also partially mediates the relationship between negative perfectionism and academic burnout among university students. This research aims to guide future studies and provide insights for students, parents, and policymakers to understand and address academic burnout in university settings.

**Keywords:** Academic Burnout, Multi-Dimensional Perfectionism, Ego-Strength, Exhaustion, Resilience.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Pursuing academic excellence, accompanied by aspirations for personal growth, is an integral part of the university experience. However, the journey through higher education can be arduous, marked by formidable challenges and the relentless pursuit of perfection. This pursuit, often driven by high academic standards, may inadvertently lead to burnout,



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which is a phenomenon that has garnered increasing attention worldwide. The current study investigated the involved nexus related to perfectionism dimensions, ego strength, and burnout at the university level.

Although perfectionism has been studied quite a bit throughout the years, there is still no single definition of the term that experts agree upon. According to many psychologists, Perfectionism can be considered a personality trait where an individual strives to be an impeccable and flawless version of themselves, to the point that he/she ends up being overly critical of their own imperfections (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). As far as academics are concerned, perfectionism is simply described as setting extremely high standards for your academic performance and achievement and being self-critical in pursuing those set standards (Ólafsdóttir, 2022).

However, perfectionism-being regarded as multidimensional- entails two distinguishable dimensions, namely adaptive (positive) and maladaptive (negative) perfectionism (Butt, 2010; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). For this reason, psychologists have occasionally referred to perfectionism as a double-edged sword (Molnar et al., 2006). Negative perfectionism involves an excessive focus on avoiding mistakes and the accompanying anxiety and self-criticism that emerge when perfection is not achieved (Besharat et al., 2023). Positive perfectionism, on the other side, is characterised by high standards, a strong work ethic, and a pursuit of excellence (Stoeber & Childs, 2010). Academic perfectionism may lead to decreased psychological well-being (Fernández-García et al., 2022).

Ego strength is a commonly studied concept in psychology that is often described as an individual's capability to deal with stress and anxiety. Students with high ego strength tend to exhibit a positive outlook towards life, higher resilience, and have better coping mechanisms when faced with stressors (Furber, 2022). This, as a psychological construct related to an individual's resilience and adaptability in coping with stressors, emerges as a key factor in perfectionism and burnout. It has been empirically proven that ego strength can be another significant predictor of burnout in the university youth (Schabram & Heng, 2021). Thus, young people with low ego strength are predisposed to the burnout phenomenon: due to the lack of resources to confront stressors, the individuals will be unable to experience exhaustion (Furber, 2022). Considering the fact that university students need to live through a dialectical and hardly supportive environment, the burnout phenomenon is especially inherent among young adults in higher education. system. One of the central concerns within this context is burnout, typically studied in personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout has been recognised as a growing concern among university students, affecting their academic performance and overall quality of life (Hamaideh, 2011). Even though a wide array of studies have been conducted on Burnout, the focus has typically been on the Organisational domain; there is an evident gap regarding research on academic Burnout specifically (Cheung & Li, 2019).

Positive perfectionism has been observed to mitigate the risk of burnout among university students (Stoeber et al., 2020). Students with positive perfectionism may employ adaptive coping strategies, fostering resilience and protecting against burnout. Conversely, negative perfectionism has consistently been linked to higher levels of burnout in the university setting (Luo et al., 2016). The fear of making mistakes and the relentless pursuit of unattainable standards can lead to emotional exhaustion and disengagement, core components of burnout.

## Theoretical Framework



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In the study of Bandura, (1986) it emphasised the reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors in shaping human behaviour. SCT may provide a lens through which we can understand the perfectionism and burnout problem. This theory might suggest that perfectionistic students may initially possess high self-efficacy related to their ability to meet high standards. If such unrealistic standards result in regular failure or considerable stress, self-efficacy may decrease. When self-efficacy diminishes, feelings of helplessness and anxiousness become more pronounced, paving the way for burnout. In a broader SCT context, perfectionism can shape the academic setting, particularly if students have such qualities. In other words, people with perfectionistic characteristics may contribute to creating a competitive and high-level environment. At the same time, this elevated environment may strengthen characteristics of perfectionism. Consequently, perfectionism can contribute to burnout according to the SCT. Moreover, since the SCT emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in behaviour, it can occur when confronted with academic stress. In fact, perfectionism may influence the cognitive assessment of academic work. Perfectionists can consider the assessment of their work to be exceptionally “pivotal,” leading to stress and, finally, burnout. If perfectionists compare their work to that of others and believe it to be better, they may be highly assertive. Finally, the SCT also explains how a person considers the anticipated outcomes of a specific act or decision. Therefore, perfectionistic characteristics can cause a person to focus on their expected performance and give rise to stress. In other words, the SCT can explain how perfectionistic characteristics influence how an individual assesses their adequacy. Thus, this theory can explain perfectionism in an academic setting because of social components and cognitive problems.

Baumeister (2001) theorized that self-control and willpower draw on limited energy that may become drained. This way, the SCT becomes to be associated with the ego-depletion theory. It involves coping with stress, setbacks, and challenges without experiencing ego depletion. Individuals with higher ego strength may have a greater reserve of self-control resources, allowing them to effectively manage the demands associated with perfectionism.

According to Baumeister (2001), ego strength is a significant protective factor against ego depletion. In this context, it can be seen as a form of self-regulatory capacity. It involves coping with stressors, setbacks and challenges without experiencing ego depletion. Some of such stressors might be those associated with perfectionism (defined by the desire to be perfect and flawless) (Crane et al., 2015). These stressors contribute towards excessive burnout (Seo et al., 2015), especially in the university student population. Thus, buffers against stress inducing factors are greatly related to reducing burnout. Higher levels of ego strength might buffer against cognitive resources caused by perfectionism, reducing the likelihood of burnout. Thus, individuals with strong ego-strength may be less likely to experience ego depletion from perfectionistic pursuits in this mediated relationship. Consequently, they may be at a reduced risk of burnout compared to individuals with lower ego-strength who are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of ego depletion.

### **Objectives**

1. To find out the relationship of positive and negative perfectionism with ego strength and burnout among university students
2. To investigate the mediating role of ego strength in the relationship between positive and negative perfectionism and burnout among university students

### **Hypotheses**

H1: Positive perfectionism will positively correlate with ego strength and inversely with



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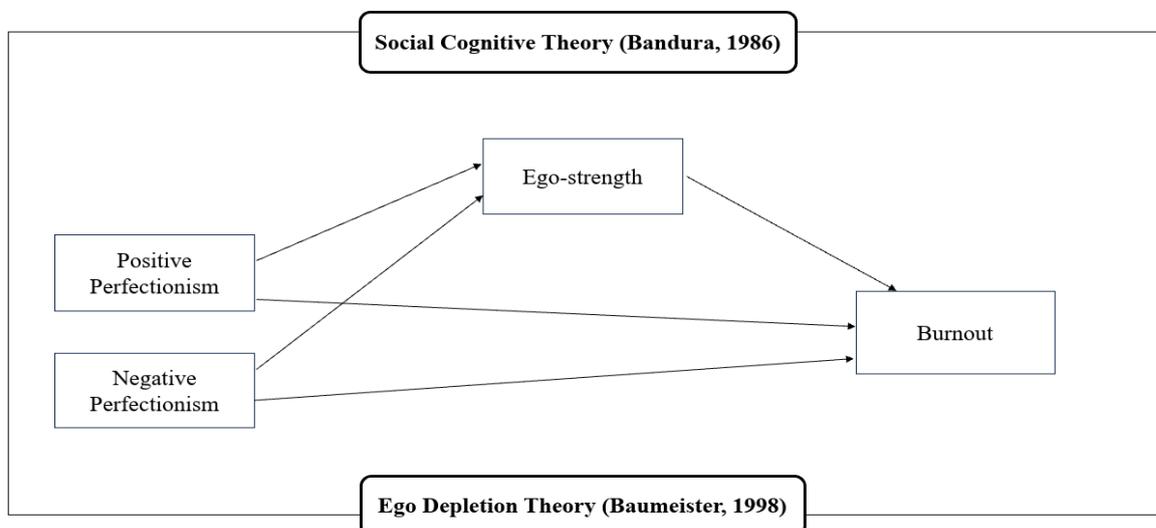
burnout in university students.

H2: Negative perfectionism will have a negative relationship with ego strength and a positive relationship with burnout.

H3: Ego strength will mediate the relationship between positive perfectionism and burnout.

H4: Ego strength will mediate the relationship between negative perfectionism and burnout.

The above objectives and hypotheses shape the contents of our research designed to investigate the intricate relationships between student perfectionism, their psychological resilience (ego strength), and their burnout. This research, therefore, goes beyond academic findings to make a contribution to interventions for enhancing student wellness.



**Figure 1:** Hypothesized Model of the Research

The research outlined in Figure 1 above presents a telling model that seeks to examine the potential effects of different types of perfectionism on university students' ego-strength and levels of burnout. Here is what the patterns in the model imply:

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research Design:** Correlational Research Design was used as the aim of the study was to explore the relationship of all the variables. Correlational research design is defined as a method for exploring the relationships between variables of interest.

**Sample and Sampling Strategy:** The sample consisted of N=271 (M=133, W=138) undergraduate and postgraduate students from private universities of Lahore, Pakistan and convenient sampling strategy was used to collect sample data. Only day scholars between the ages of 17-25 were included in the study. PhD students, students in 1st semester of the undergraduate program, and students with CGPAs below 2.5 were excluded from the study.

**Assessment Measures:** The present study used the demographic questionnaire consisted of age, gender, degree program, CGPA and a few screening questions. The Positive and Negative Perfectionism scale is a 40-item self-report inventory developed by Terry-short et al. (1995). It is used to measure the levels of positive and negative perfectionism in individuals. It uses a 5-point response scale, where "strongly agree" is scored as 5 and



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"strongly disagree" is scored as 1. Both positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism have 20 questions each, where scores may range from 20 to 100. Higher scores indicate higher levels of positive or negative perfectionism. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = .89$  for positive perfectionism and  $\alpha = .90$  for negative perfectionism. The 18-item short version of Barron's Ego Strength Scale (Kelly & Daughtry, 2018) was used in the research. Participants were asked to respond to each item as either "True" (scored 0) or "False" (scored 1) where higher scores indicate more ego strength. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha value for Ego Strength was  $\alpha = .82$ . The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) was initially developed and tested with various German workers (Demerouti et al., 2010; Demerouti & Nachreiner, 1998). It consists of a total of 16 items. It is used to evaluate two key aspects of burnout: exhaustion and disengagement (from work). The Exhaustion subscale includes 8 items about feelings of emptiness, being overwhelmed by work, needing rest, and physical exhaustion. The Disengagement subscale has the remaining 8 items that are about distancing from work tasks, negative attitudes, and behaviours toward work. Responses are on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Each subscale has 4 positively and 4 negatively worded items, respectively. The present study used an English translated version of the scale adapted for students. This included minor changes in wording from "work" to "study," "university," or "class." The Cronbach's alpha for Burnout in this study was  $\alpha = .88$ .

**Procedure:** Firstly, the permissions were sought from the original authors for using the scales. In this connection, seeking informed consent from the participants, all the required information was also conveyed to the participants regarding the attributes of the research and the questionnaire. Data collection was done both online and offline. Initial screening was done using a questionnaire to recruit participants according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. Questionnaires were distributed to students in cafeterias, university grounds and classroom settings for offline data collection. For online data collection, the link to the Google form was distributed using different social media sites and contacts. Collected data was fed into SPSS. The data was organized by demographic analysis, and different statistical analyses were performed to test the hypotheses.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Results include statistical analysis including Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive analysis, psychometrics of constructs and correlation analysis and mediation analysis through AMOS.

**Table 1:** Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

Sociodemographic Characteristics	n	%	M	SD
Gender				
Men	133	49.1		
Women	138	50.9		
Degree Program				
Undergraduate	215	79.3		
Post-graduate	56	20.7		
Sector				
Private	271	100		



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Age (in years)	21.62	1.56
Semester	4.68	2.24
CGPA	3.25	0.33

Note. N=271. n= Frequency. %= Percentage. M= Mean. SD= Standard Deviation.

The Demographic table 1 shows that more women were a part of the research, most of the students in the research were studying in undergraduate programs, and all the participants were from private universities. The mean age of the participants was 21 years and the average CGPA was 3.25

**Table 2:** Intercorrelations for Positive Perfectionism, Negative Perfectionism, Ego Strength, and Burnout in University Students

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Positive Perfectionism	-	-.33**	.35**	-.51**
2. Negative Perfectionism	-	-	-.69**	.72**
3. Ego Strength	-	-	-	-.67**
4. Burnout	-	-	-	-

Note. N= 271.

\*\*p < .01.

Table 2 of the study presents intriguing correlation data among key variables. Here's a breakdown of the findings:

There's a substantial positive correlation between positive perfectionism and ego strength, quantified at  $r = .35$  with a significance level of  $p < .01$ . These two types of perfectionism are negatively correlated with each other ( $r = -.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that as positive perfectionism increases, negative perfectionism tends to decrease, and vice versa. There's a significant negative correlation between positive perfectionism and burnout ( $r = -.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Students with higher levels of positive perfectionism tend to experience lower levels of burnout. Negative perfectionism shows a strong negative correlation with ego strength ( $r = -.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that increased negative perfectionism is linked with weaker ego strength. Conversely, there's a significant positive correlation between negative perfectionism and burnout ( $r = .72$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning higher negative perfectionism corresponds with higher levels of burnout. The correlation between ego strength and burnout is significantly negative ( $r = -.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that stronger ego strength is associated with lower burnout levels.

**Table 3:** Indices of Model Fit (N=271)

Model	NFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Model 1	.94	.94	.98	.06



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Note. NFI= Normative fit indices, CFI= Cumulative fit indices, TLI= Tuckers Lewis indices, RMSEA= Root mean square error of approximation.

Table 3 details the fit indices for Model 1, utilizing various statistical tools to evaluate the adequacy of the model structure in representing the data collected. This index measures the model fit by comparing the chi-square value of the model to the chi-square value of a null model. An NFI value above .90 typically indicates a good fit. It improves on the NFI by accounting for sample size. Values above .90 are generally considered indicative of good model fit A TLI above .90 implies that the model fits the data well. A value of .06 reflects that the model fits well, and a value .05 or even .01 indicates excellent fit . Based on the findings in table 3, all fit indices of Model 1 railed above the .90 level, which powerfully indicates a robust fit between the hypothesized model and observed data. The RMSEA value .06 is additional evidence that the model provides a good fit with the underlying characteristics as captured by the data. It implies that the theoretical premise that guided the development of the relationship between positive and negative perfectionism, ego strength, and burnout is supported by the data.

The fit indices presented in Table 3 affirm the reliability and validity of Model 1 in explaining how different forms of perfectionism and ego strength interact to affect burnout among university students. Such strong fit indices are crucial for advancing theoretical understanding and practical applications aimed at enhancing student well-being and academic success.

**Table 4:** Standardized Regression Coefficient of Mediation

	<b>B</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>p</b>
Positive perfectionism → Ego strength	.12	3.10	.004
Negative perfectionism → Ego strength	-.19	-15.02	.002
Ego strength → Burnout	-.54	-5.09	.002

The Table 4 showed that positive perfectionism significantly positively predicts ego strength. Moreover, negative perfectionism significantly negatively predicts ego strength. Furthermore, ego strength significantly negatively predicts burnout in university students.

**Table 5:** Standardized Indirect Effects of Positive Perfectionism, Negative Perfectionism, and Ego Strength on Burnout in University Students

	<b>B</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>p</b>
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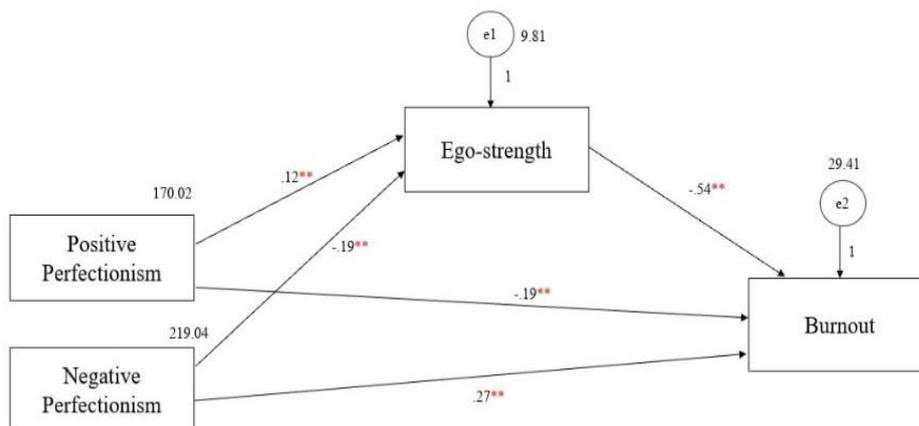
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Positive perfectionism → Ego strength →	-.06	-5.1	.000
Burnout			
Negative perfectionism → Ego strength →	.18	7.2	.000
Burnout			

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Table 5 outlines the standardized indirect effects of positive perfectionism, negative perfectionism, and ego strength on burnout among university students. The table includes the regression coefficients (B), critical ratios (CR), and p-values for each pathway. It demonstrates that ego strength acts as a partial mediator in the links from positive perfectionism to burnout and from negative perfectionism to burnout in university students. So, it depicts that when positive perfectionism is high, university students tend to experience less burnout; and when negative perfectionism is high, university students tend to experience more burnout.



**Figure 2** Emerged Statistical Model of the Research

The statistical model illustrated in Figure 2 provides a clear depiction of how different forms of perfectionism impact university students’ ego-strength and susceptibility to burnout. These results provide empirical support for the hypothesized relationships and contribute significantly to our understanding of the dynamics between perfectionism, ego strength, and burnout. Understanding these relationships offers critical insights for developing supportive educational strategies and mental health interventions aimed at enhancing student well-being by fostering adaptive perfectionism while mitigating its maladaptive counterpart.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study support and extend previous research on perfectionism, ego-strength and burnout in university student population. The first hypothesis, “Positive perfectionism will positively correlate with ego strength and inversely with burnout in university students” was supported in the present study. As reported by Kantan et al. (2018), despite other factors, perfectionism has a negative and significant effect on exhaustion levels, a component of burnout. Another research study also supports this by showing a significant negative correlation between positive perfectionism and academic



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burnout (Zhang et al. 2007). The positive relationship of positive perfectionism and ego strength is unique to our study regarding our knowledge. This is possible as both these variables have been reported by literature to correlate negatively with burnout and its components.

The second hypothesis “Negative perfectionism will have a negative relationship with ego strength and a positive relationship with burnout” was supported in the present study. In their study, Zhang et al. (2007) showed how negative perfectionism has a significant positive relationship with burnout in students. A study by Chang et al. (2016) has highlighted how different dimensions of perfectionism, namely adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism are negatively and positively linked to burnout, respectively. Furthermore, negative perfectionism has been linked to ego depletion suggesting a relationship where increased negative perfectionism is correlated with reduced ego strength (Hill et al., 2008). The third hypothesis “Ego strength will mediate the relationship between positive perfectionism and burnout” was supported in the present study. However, an indirect relationship between positive perfectionism and burnout has been observed throughout the existing body of theoretical and empirical knowledge. This is supported by the study conducted by Sirohi (2011), which reported how ego strength is a predictor of burnout, where individuals with high ego strength were observed to have reduced emotional exhaustion. As this is a component of burnout, ego strength is likely to have the same relationship with burnout. Another study suggests that bolstering ego strength may hold promise as a preventive measure against burnout among university students (Bryant, 2003). Burnout has been mediating in various studies with perfectionism as an independent variable (Besharat et al., 2017; Besharat & Asadi, 2017). Ego strength has also been used as a significant mediator in studies with burnout as the dependent variable (Sankhyan, 2022)

The fourth hypothesis, “Ego strength will mediate the relationship between negative perfectionism and burnout” was supported in the present study. However, an indirect relationship between negative perfectionism and burnout has been observed throughout the existing body of theoretical and empirical knowledge. Sankhyan’s (2022) findings revealed a significant negative relationship of ego strength with burnout where ego strength strongly predicted various components of burnout including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. A study by Besharat et al. (2023) found that ego strength is a good mediator in relationships where perfectionism dimensions (both positive and negative) are independent variables. Furthermore, negative perfectionism has been linked to ego depletion. People exhibiting high levels of negative perfectionism may be more susceptible to ego depletion, leading to diminished ego strength and vulnerability to stressors (Hill et al., 2008).

### Conclusion

The research establishes a clear correlation between types of perfectionism (both positive and negative), ego strength, and burnout among university students. Additionally, it has been found that ego strength plays a role in mediating the relationship of both types of perfectionism with burnout. The study delves into how perfectionism correlates to ego strength and burnout, uncovering that positive perfectionism typically enhances ego strength and reduces burnout risk, whereas negative perfectionism tends to decrease ego strength and increase burnout risk. The mediation by ego strength is significant in linking both forms of perfectionism to burnout. This study contributes important perspectives that could help mitigate burnout in educational environments, guiding further research into the interplay between academic demands and student well-being.



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**Implications:** The present study provides insight to students, parents and educational policymakers on how the dimensions of perfectionism impact burnout in university students, and the role of ego strength. This could help them devise strategies to minimize the threats of burnout. Since the study confirmed the influence of positive and negative dimensions of perfection on student burnout, strategies could be made focusing on enhancing positive components of perfectionism while simultaneously reducing negative components of perfectionism in students. This research is among the first to investigate the mediational role of ego-strength in the relationship of positive and negative dimensions of perfectionism with burnout in the university student sample, laying the groundwork for future research. Also, this study adds to the current literature related to perfectionism and burnout in the Pakistani context.

**Limitations and Future Recommendations:** All the measures used in this research were self-reported which might result in response bias driven by social desirability. Data was only collected from private institutes in Lahore, Pakistan; this could affect the generalizability of results. Based on the results of this study, we propose that a longitudinal study can be conducted that considers various demographic variables and expands the subjects. Moreover, future research could include participants from diverse backgrounds, including the rural and suburban areas.

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