International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Higher Education

Volume 1, Issue 1 | 2024

Exploring The Mediating Role of Fear of Negative Evaluation Between Perfectionism and Academic Stress

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Abstract

The study uses a quantitative approach to examine how fear of negative evaluation mediates the relationship between language anxiety and academic stress among college students in Mindanao, Philippines. Data were collected online with adapted questionnaires through Google Forms, and participants were selected using stratified random sampling. To ensure accuracy, validity, and reliability tests were conducted on the measurement model. Descriptive statistics were used to outline the main constructs, and mediation analysis was performed using bootstrapping in SmartPLS 4.0 on the proposed model. The findings reveal that perfectionism has a significant total effect on academic stress (β = 0.328, T = 8.797, p < 0.000), highlighting its considerable impact on students' stress levels. Additionally, the fear of negative evaluation (FNE) shows a smaller but significant effect on academic stress (β = 0.164, f^2 = 0.025, t = 3.857, p = 0.000), indicating a modest increase in stress among students with high FNE. These results underscore the importance of exploring additional factors that may contribute to academic stress, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its multifaceted nature.

Keywords

Introduction

Students experience academic stress from the high pressure and expectations they receive in different educational settings. This stress reveals itself in diverse ways, including anxiety, depression, and a sense of being burdened, all of which are inherent characteristics with positive and negative consequences depending upon the individual's ability to cope alongside other moderating factors (Gupta, 2020; Hasanah et al., 2022; Suldo et al., 2008). According to Matutino and Singson (2020), academic expectancy stress is the psychological discomfort students feel in response to educational pressures from different sources, including parents, teachers, friends, family members, school systems, examinations, and homework. This concept is supported further by other research, such as Sailo and Varghese (2024), who explain that academic stress is a regular aspect of students' lives arising from expectations placed on them both by themselves and by others.

A study conducted in Hong Kong by Chyu and Chen (2022) explored different predictors of academic stress, identifying key factors such as perfectionism, social-oriented achievement motivation, parent-child relationships, and the strong emphasis on academic performance within schools. The study has found that academic stress is mostly driven by personal characteristics such as perfectionism and social-oriented achievement motivation. This highlights the significant role of individual traits and motivations in shaping students' stress levels, emphasizing that beyond external pressures from family or school systems, students' internal desire to meet high standards and gain social approval plays a crucial role in the experience of academic stress.

A study conducted by Fuerte et al. (2022) focused on pharmacy students at Centro Escolar University in the Philippines intended to evaluate the academic stress and coping strategies of Pharmacy students before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study disclosed significant changes in the academic stress levels and coping techniques of students before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that the move from traditional classroom learning to online learning played an important role in modifying the causes of stress and how students manage it, with many adopting strategies aimed at addressing practical challenges as well as those aimed at managing their emotional responses. These findings stress the need for academic institutions to improve their support systems by offering counseling services and educating students on effective coping strategies to better handle academic stress in evolving learning environments.

While no specific study has focused on academic stress in the Davao Region, research by Dula and Osorno (2022) and Enero et al. (2013) offers insights into factors that may influence students' stress levels and coping strategies in academic settings. Dula & Osorno's study found that PE students showed high degrees of drive, enjoyable school experiences, and strong confidence in their abilities, suggesting that such positive factors may help reduce academic stress for some students in the region. On the other hand, Enero et al. (2013) determined that extreme noise levels among elementary and secondary learners were found to be above the allowed threshold for a suitable working environment, suggesting that environmental factors may affect academic performance. Stress reduces the capacity of kids to focus and study efficiently.

On the other hand, perfectionism generates a strong fear of failure, which can carry out avoidance behaviors, procrastination, and withdrawal from challenging tasks (Danne et al., 2023). Additionally, it can encourage fear of making mistakes and being judged, which can negatively impact students' learning experiences and overall well-being (Flett et al., 2020; Obenza et al., 2024a). As a multidimensional concept (Stoeber, 2018; Stoeber & Gaudreau, 2017), perfectionism is

identified by a combination of excessively high self-imposed standards and critical self-evaluation (Corrie & Palmer, 2014), along with perceived external pressures (Smith et al., 2017). This combination often leads to elevated stress and anxiety levels (Worst et al., 2023), potentially resulting in academic burnout. Students experiencing burnout frequently encounter emotional exhaustion, detachment, and a reduced sense of accomplishment (Fisher et al., 2023; Garratt-Reed et al., 2018; Obenza et al., 2024b).

Additionally, Ajmal and Iqbal (2019) emphasize that fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is a psychological concept that involves concern over how others see and judge individuals, specifically the discomfort caused by the expectation of being evaluated unfavorably. This fear is an essential element of social anxiety, marked by uneasiness about being judged negatively by others (Johnson & Anderson, 2014; Weeks et al., 2007). FNE plays an important role in the cognitive aspects of interpersonal anxiety, which influences a range of demographic and mental health factors that shape its expression. It is important to treat and understand social anxiety, as it can lead to maladaptive behaviors and emotional distress (Ajmal & Iqbal, 2019; Jain & Sudhir, 2010; Johnson & Anderson, 2014; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2011; Weeks et al., 2007).

While previous research has considerably explored the individual relationships between perfectionism, fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and academic stress, as demonstrated by the study of Wang et al. (2018), there is limited understanding of how FNE acts as a mediating factor between perfectionism and academic stress. Existing studies often focus on perfectionism's direct influence on stress or its association with social anxiety, but few have looked into the specific role of FNE in intensifying or buffering this relationship.

This study's primary objective is to examine how fear of negative evaluation mediates the relationship between perfectionism and academic stress. The insights being obtained could enhance educational outcomes and support the development of targeted interventions. Furthermore, the result may help educators implement strategies to address factors that contribute to students' academic stress, ultimately promoting greater academic success.

Materials and Methods

This research employed a non-experimental, correlational approach with a quantitative method to examine relationships between variables. The study specifically sought to evaluate how fear of negative judgment mediates the association between perfectionism and academic stress among Mindanao college students in Mindanao. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2022), as cited by Obenza and Rabaca (2024), "Quantitative research involves systematically collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; this is usually done through a survey or experimental study." This approach tests objective hypotheses by analyzing correlations between variables using numerical data, yielding measurable outcomes that can be statistically analyzed. Mediation analysis was done to determine how the mediating variable affects the relationship between the two primary variables. This method is gaining favor in psychology, and it typically necessitates a controlled process for participant selection (Mackinnon et al., 2007).

The factors were measured using numerous standardized questionnaires. The fear of negative assessment was examined using Leary's (1983) scale. Perfectionism was measured using an adaptation from Smith, Saklofske, Stoeber, and Sherry (2016). For Academic Stress, it adopted and modified Lakaev (2022). The Surveys were administered using Google Forms using a 5-point Likert scale. The study upheld strong ethical standards, protecting participants' rights and dignity, with a sample coming from college students at various universities in Mindanao, Philippines. A stratified random selection

method was used to construct a combined sample by categorizing the population and selecting from each group (Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021).

To test the hypothesis that fear of negative evaluation mediates the relationship between perfectionism and language anxiety, a power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.6 (Faul et al., 2007) determined that a sample size of 129 would provide 80% power to detect a medium effect size (f^2 = 0.15 at an alpha level of 0.05). However, the actual sample size of 688 surpasses this minimum requirement, enhancing the study's reliability in evaluating the relationships between the key factors.

During the pilot test, professional validation of the instruments was performed. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the instruments' reliability, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) assessed convergent validity, and the Hetero-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) assured discriminant validity remained below the threshold. Jamovi 2.0 was used to produce descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation to summarize data on fear of negative assessment, perfectionism, and language anxiety. The proposed mediation model was tested in SmartPLS 4.0 software with bootstrapping to determine direct, indirect, and total effects, as well as impact sizes for each path.

Results

Table 1: Construct Validity and Reliability

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Academic Stress		
Affective	0.871	0.607
Behavioral	0.818	0.733
Cognitive	0.903	0.631
Psychological	0.808	0.565
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.959	0.689
Perfectionism		
Narcissistic Perfectionism	0.958	0.666
Rigid Perfectionism	0.913	0.589
Self-Critical Perfectionism	0.909	0.687
Discrimination Validity	**Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)**	
Perfectionism <-> Academic Stress	0.328	
Perfectionism <->Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.433	
Fear of Negative Evaluation <-> Academic Stress	0.279	

Gonzales and Mackinnon (2021) emphasize the need to confirm that the measurement model is valid and reliable before conducting mediation analysis. In this study, some items were removed from the measurement model due to low indicator loadings. Table 1 presents the validity and reliability of the instruments used. The reliability of the instruments was

assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which measures internal consistency.

For academic stress, Cronbach's alpha values were strong: affective (0.871), behavioral (0.818), cognitive (0.903), and physiological (0.808). The fear of negative evaluation also showed high reliability with a value of 0.959,

exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.7 (Ursachi et al., 2015; Taber, 2017). Values for narcissistic, rigid, and self-critical perfectionism were 0.958, 0.913, and 0.909, respectively.

Convergent validity was measured using the average variance extracted (AVE). AVE values for academic stress (affective 0.607, behavioral 0.733, cognitive 0.631, physiological 0.565), fear of negative evaluation (0.689), narcissistic perfectionism (0.666), rigid perfectionism (0.589), and self-critical perfectionism (0.687) all exceeded the minimum requirement of 0.50. This shows that each construct accounts for at least 50% of its indicators' variance, confirming acceptable validity based on previous studies. Hair et al. (2019) suggest that AVE values should be above 0.50 to show good convergent validity. This means each construct should account for at least 50% of the variance in its items, confirming that its indicators measure the construct reliably.

Discriminant validity was assessed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). The HTMT values ranged from 0.50 to 0.60 between pairs, such as perfectionism and academic stress (0.328), perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation (0.433), and fear of negative evaluation and academic stress (0.279). Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015) suggest that for discriminant validity to be considered acceptable, HTMT values should typically be below 0.85 or 0.90, with the specific threshold depending on the context of the study.

Table 2: Status of College Students' Perfectionism, Academic Stress, and Fear of Negative Evaluation.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Description
Perfectionism	688	2.94	0.659	Moderate level of perfectionism
Narcissistic Perfectionism	688	2.34	0.901	Moderate level
Self-Critical Perfectionism	688	3.38	0.729	High level
Rigid Perfectionism	688	3.11	0.811	High level
Fear Negative Evaluation	688	3.34	0.936	High level of FNE
Academic Stress	688	2.76	0.695	Moderate level of Academic Stress
Psychological	688	2.5	0.901	Moderate level
Cognitive	688	2.95	0.893	Moderate level
Behavioral	688	2.33	0.823	Moderate level
Affective	688	3.27	0.787	High Level

Table 2 presents the mean value and key statistical data from 688 respondents. Perfectionism averaged 2.94, indicating a moderate level among university students. This result aligns with findings by Curran and Hill (2017), who identify an upward trend in perfectionism. The study found moderate narcissistic perfectionism (mean = 2.34) and high levels of self-critical perfectionism (mean = 3.38) and rigid perfectionism (mean = 3.11). These findings are consistent with Liu and Berzenski's (2022) research, which confirmed that the College Academic Perfectionism Scale reliably assesses academic perfectionism in college students, revealing two primary factors, which are rigid and self-critical, which exhibit strong reliability and validity. Casale et al. (2020) also reinforced these results, demonstrating that rigid, self-critical, and narcissistic forms of perfectionism are associated with perfectionistic thoughts and self-presentation tendencies. Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) had an average value of 3.34, indicating moderate to high levels. This coincides with Wardhani's (2019) study, which showed that students in public

speaking classes often feel this fear, resulting in increased language anxiety. The mean academic stress value was 2.76, with moderate levels of physiological (mean = 2.5), cognitive (mean = 2.95), behavioral stress (mean = 2.33), and high affective stress (mean = 3.27). In contrast to studies reporting very high stress levels, Elavarasi and Rajendran (2021) found that about 75% of secondary school students experience moderate to high academic stress. They observed moderate stress levels across all six dimensions examined in their study.
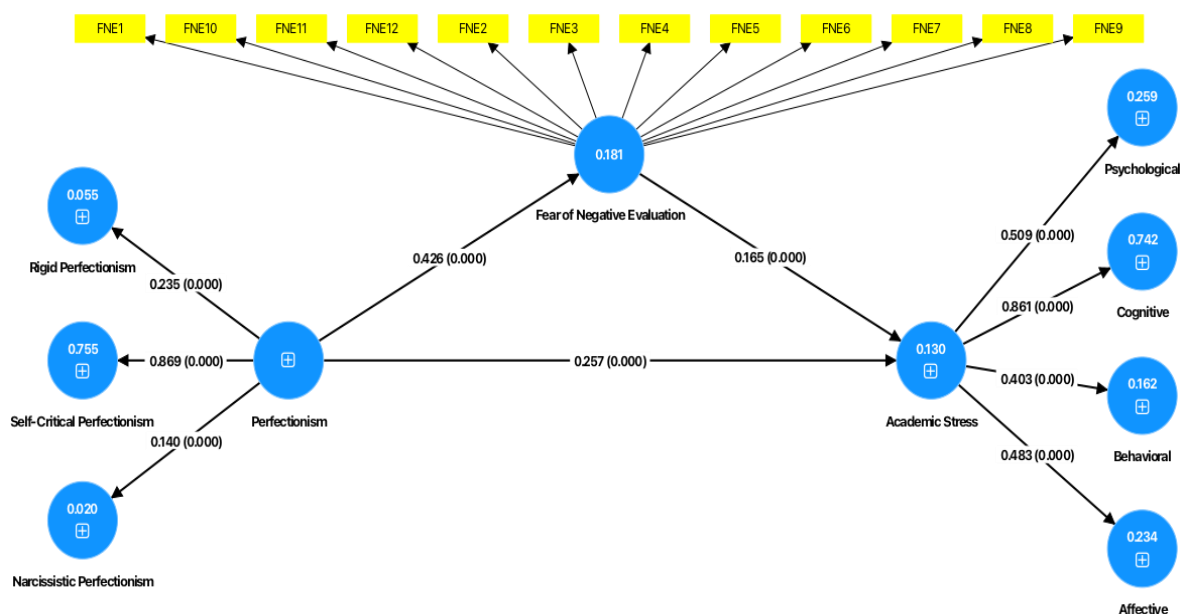

Figure 1: Mediator's Impact - Results using SmartPLS 4.0

Mediation involves introducing a third variable, the mediator, to explain the relationship between predictor and criterion variables (Hayes et al., 2011). In this study, Fear of Negative Evaluation acted as a mediator to examine the link between Perfectionism and Academic Stress in college students. Using SmartPLS 4.0 and a bootstrapping algorithm, the mediation model showed significant direct effects: Perfectionism was positively associated with Academic Stress (β = 0.257, f^2 = 0.063, t = 6.159, p = 0.000).

The path from Perfectionism to Fear of Negative Evaluation is statistically significant, with a strong positive relationship and a moderate-to-large effect size (f^2 = 0.220). Additionally, while significant, the direct effect of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Academic Stress is weak (β = 0.164, f^2 = 0.025, t = 3.857, p = 0.000), indicating only a slight increase in academic stress among students with high FNE.

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	F^2	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Perfectionism -> Academic Stress	0.257	0.258	0.042	0.063	6.159	0.000
Perfectionism -> Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.425	0.426	0.036	0.220	11.666	0.000
Fear of Negative Evaluation -> Academic Stress	0.164	0.164	0.043	0.025	3.857	0.000
Indirect Effects						
Perfectionism -> Fear of Negative Evaluation -> Academic Stress	0.070	0.071	0.019		3.709	0.000
Total Effects						

Perfectionism -> Fear of Negative Evaluation -> Academic Stress	0.328	0.327	0.037	8.797	0.000
R² = 0.130 Adjusted R² = 0.127					

Note. F2 is Cohen's (1988) [feet size: 0.02=small, 0.15=medium, 0.35=large.

The R² value of 0.130 indicates that the model explains 13% of the variability in academic stress. While this shows that perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation have some influence, a large portion of academic stress is influenced by other factors that are not included in the model. The adjusted R² of 0.127 confirms this, suggesting that even when accounting for the model's complexity, these two predictors explain about 12.7% of the variance in academic stress.

Discussion

In Table 1, using Cronbach's alpha values, all variables surpassed the 0.7 threshold, confirming that the instruments are reliable for assessing the intended constructs. As for the study's validity, an alpha level between 0.60 and 0.70 is acceptable for exploratory research, while values between 0.70 and 0.90 indicate good reliability. However, values above 0.95 can sometimes be problematic (Diamantopoulos et al., 2001; Drolet & Morrison, 2001). Based on the data in Table 1, all values were below the 0.85 cutoff, which indicates strong discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Therefore, the instruments used in this study are both valid and reliable for measuring the intended constructs.

Turning to Table 2, the results show that the moderate level of perfectionism in college students is consistent with Curran and Hill's (2017) findings that rising perfectionism is due to cultural shifts toward competitive individualism. The moderate level of narcissistic and rigid perfectionism is similar to results from Liu and Berzenski (2022) and Casale et al. (2020), who linked these types of perfectionism to increased distress and perfectionistic self-presentation.

The moderate to high levels of Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) supports the findings of Wardhani (2019), who reported that FNE heightens language anxiety in students, and Ajmal and Iqbal (2019), who described FNE as a key factor in social anxiety, with a persistent fear of negative judgment (Johnson & Anderson, 2014; Weeks et al., 2007).

Additionally, the mean of academic stress with moderate levels of physiological, cognitive, and behavioral stress, along with high affective stress, aligns with the research by Gupta (2020), Hasanah et al. (2022), and Suldo et al. (2008), who emphasized the varying effects of academic stress on mental health, especially in high-achieving environments like International Baccalaureate (IB) programs.

Moving to Table 3, the observed positive association of perfectionism with academic stress aligns with Hill and Madigan (2022) and Kahn et al. (2023), who distinguish between perfectionistic strivings (setting high goals) and perfectionistic concerns (worrying about mistakes). While perfectionistic strivings can aid time management, perfectionistic concerns are strongly linked to increased stress. Kahn et al. (2023) found that students with high perfectionistic concerns experience more stress, similar to this study's results. Perfectionistic strivings can also increase stress, especially when failure feels imminent and personally controllable, highlighting how both forms of perfectionism can heighten stress depending on individual perceptions of control.

The path from Perfectionism to Fear of Negative Evaluation suggests that individuals with higher levels of perfectionism are more likely to experience increased fear of negative judgment. Shafique et al. (2017) also found that perfectionism contributes to psychological distress through fear of negative evaluation, underscoring its role in social anxiety and related issues. Yoshizawa (2018) supports this, noting that self-oriented perfectionism can make students, especially older ones, uncomfortable in social situations due to fear of judgment.

Moreover, the data on the direct effect of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Academic Stress is consistent with Pan et al. (2018), who found FNE to be a less strong predictor of stress than fear of positive evaluation. Li et al. (2023) also suggested that FNE mediates the link between feelings of inferiority and social anxiety, contributing modestly to academic stress. Yap et al. (2016) emphasized FNE's connection to perfectionism and self-esteem, both of which can elevate stress when combined with fear of judgment.

Regarding the indirect effect of perfectionism on academic stress, the results indicate that fear of negative evaluation plays a mediating role between the two variables, meaning that perfectionism indirectly contributes to academic stress through its impact on the fear of being negatively evaluated.

On the other hand, the total effect of perfectionism on academic stress suggests that the independent variable has a meaningful positive impact on the dependent variable, and the strength of this relationship is reliable and unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Finally, the data for R^2 and adjusted R^2 values indicate that while perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation have played a role, there's a need for further exploration of other factors that contribute to academic stress.

Conclusions

Generally, the results strengthen the idea that perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation play critical roles in shaping students' stress levels, with perfectionism exerting the most substantial impact.

Cognitive-behavioral theory (CBT) effectively explains the complicated relationships between perfectionism, academic stress, and fear of negative evaluation. CBT helps to clarify how twisted thought patterns associated with perfectionism can lead to an increased fear of being judged negatively, which also increases academic stress. The theory highlights how certain thought patterns, like placing too much weight on the opinions of others or constantly aiming for unachievable standards, can lead to anxiety and stress. CBT works to change these patterns with practical strategies, helping students feel less pressure, manage stress better, and eventually improve their academic performance. This makes CBT an effective tool for tackling these challenges among students.

Although the findings offer key points into the relationships between variables, several limitations should be recognized. The generalizability of the results may be restricted due to the distinct characteristics of the sample, and the nature of perfectionism and academic stress could vary across different educational environments. Furthermore, as personal and environmental factors mold both perfectionism and academic stress, future studies could benefit from conducting longitudinal research to inspect how these relationships progress over time. Additionally, based on the R^2 and adjusted R^2 results, future research should consider looking into other factors that may contribute to academic stress aside from perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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