

# The Role of Perfectionism and Self-Criticism in Predicting Burnout Among Students

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Perfectionism is associated with excessive self-evaluation, emotional exhaustion, and heightened pressure to meet unrealistic standards. The Perfectionism-Burnout Model (Hill & Curran, 2016) suggests that perfectionistic concerns are strongly linked to burnout. While research has explored perfectionism and burnout independently, the role of self-criticism within this framework remains underexplored.

**Aim:** This study examines the relationship between perfectionism, self-criticism, and burnout among college students.

**Methodology:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among 104 students, who completed three standardized self-report measures: Big Three Perfectionism Scale to assess perfectionism, Shirom-Melamed Burnout Inventory to measure burnout, and Forms of Self-Criticizing/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale to evaluate self-criticism. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's product moment correlation and multiple regression analysis was used for data analysis.

**Results:** The mean scores were 57.64 for burnout, 47.76 for perfectionism, and 46.37 for self-criticism, with standard deviations of 18.048, 9.886, and 9.831 respectively. Burnout showed positive correlations with

perfectionism ( $r = 0.371$ ) and self-criticism ( $r = 0.478$ ), while perfectionism and self-criticism were also correlated ( $r = 0.397$ ), indicating that higher perfectionism and self-criticism are associated with greater burnout. Multiple regression analysis showed that perfectionism and self-criticism together explained 26.7% of the variance in burnout, with self-criticism ( $\beta = 0.392$ ) and perfectionism ( $\beta = 0.215$ ) as significant predictors ( $p < .001$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings support the hypothesis that perfectionism and self-criticism significantly contribute to burnout. These results highlight the importance of interventions focused on reducing self-criticism and managing perfectionistic tendencies to mitigate burnout risks.

**Keywords:** Perfectionism, self-criticism, burnout, students, perfectionism-burnout model

## INTRODUCTION

### The Role of Perfectionism and Self-Criticism in Predicting Burnout Among Students

Burnout, first introduced by Maslach and Jackson (1986), describes a state of emotional exhaustion, disconnection, and a feeling of reduced accomplishment that builds up over time from dealing with constant stress. Although burnout was

originally studied in work environments, it's now clear that students are just as vulnerable, if not more, to its effects (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Juggling academic demands, deadlines, high expectations can leave students feeling mentally drained and emotionally distant from their work.

Over time, however, researchers began to recognize that the same psychological processes could occur in academic contexts. Later work by Schaufeli et al (2002) demonstrated that students experience a comparable pattern of exhaustion, cynicism toward academic tasks, feelings of inefficacy, leading to burnout. In university settings, students are often expected to balance demanding coursework, examinations, competitive grading systems, and expectations from family and society. When these pressures accumulate without sufficient coping resources or recovery time, students may begin to feel mentally depleted, emotionally detached from their studies, and doubtful about their abilities to perform well academically.

A growing body of literature suggests that certain personality characteristics may increase vulnerability to burnout, with perfectionism being one of the most widely examined factors. According to Hewitt & Flett (2002), perfectionism involves striving for extremely high standards while engaging in overly critical self-evaluation when those standards are not achieved. Although striving for excellence can sometimes promote motivation and achievement, maladaptive forms of perfectionism tend to create a persistent sense of inadequacy. Individuals who hold rigid expectations for flawless performance often interpret minor mistakes or setbacks as evidence of personal failure rather than as normal parts of the learning process. This pattern can intensify academic stress because success is rarely perceived as sufficient, while perceived shortcomings receive disproportionate attention.

Research by Hill and Curran (2016) further highlights the link between perfectionistic tendencies and psychological strain. Their research suggests that students with high

levels of perfectionism frequently evaluate their academic performance through an all-or-nothing lens. Even relatively minor academic difficulties such as receiving slightly lower grades than expected or struggling with challenging coursework may be interpreted as significant failures. Over time, repeatedly interpreting experiences in this way can erode self-confidence and increase anxiety about future performance. Because these students often equate academic achievement with their overall sense of self-worth, they may feel compelled to maintain relentless effort even when they are already emotionally and mentally exhausted.

This dynamic creates a cycle that can contribute directly to burnout. The constant pursuit of unrealistic standards demands sustained cognitive and emotional investment, while the fear of making mistakes prevents students from allowing themselves adequate rest or psychological distance from their work. As described by Shafran & Mansell (2001), maladaptive perfectionism often involves rigid goal setting combined with an inability to derive satisfaction from achievements. Consequently, even when students meet high expectations, the relief is usually temporary, and attention quickly shifts to the next demanding task. Over time, this pattern of chronic pressure, self-criticism, and emotional overinvestment can drain psychological resources, making feelings of exhaustion and detachment increasingly likely.

Within academic environments, these processes can be particularly pronounced because students are frequently evaluated through measurable outcomes such as grades, rankings, and performance feedback. When perfectionistic beliefs are combined with competitive academic climates, the perceived stakes of each task may become amplified. Students may begin to view every assignment or examination as a defining test of their competence, which increases both performance anxiety and vulnerability to stress. As these pressures accumulate,

emotional fatigue and a growing sense of disengagement from academic work can emerge, core features that characterize the experience of burnout.

Closely tied to perfectionism is self-criticism, the tendency to respond to personal shortcomings with harsh self-evaluation and persistent self-blame. Blatt (1995) described self-criticism as a personality style characterized by chronic feelings of inadequacy and an intense concern with personal failure. Individuals high in self-criticism often interpret mistakes as reflections of deeper personal flaws rather than temporary setbacks. Similarly, Gilbert et al. (2004) highlight that self-critical thinking is strongly associated with emotions such as shame, guilt, and feelings of inferiority. In academic contexts, this pattern can become particularly problematic, as frequent evaluations and performance pressures can easily trigger cycles of negative self-judgment.

Recent research suggests that self-criticism may play a significant role in the development of academic burnout. Hailikari et al. (2022) found that students who strongly blame themselves for academic difficulties are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, reduced academic confidence, and disengagement from their studies. Interestingly, while perfectionism has been widely examined in relation to student wellbeing, the specific role of self-criticism has received comparatively less attention. Nevertheless, emerging evidence indicates that persistent self-blame and harsh internal evaluation can intensify stress and gradually deplete students' psychological resources, making them more vulnerable to burnout over time.

With students facing growing academic pressures, it's important to look closely at how perfectionism and self-criticism work together to drive burnout. This study aims to dig deeper into that relationship, hoping to better understand the emotional struggles students deal with, and, ultimately, to help create healthier, more supportive academic environments.

## Objectives and Hypotheses

The present study was conducted with certain objectives in mind based on the review of literature done, which were- to investigate the relationship among perfectionism, and self-criticism among college students, and to examine whether perfectionism and self-criticism significantly predict burnout among college students. The study was guided by the following hypotheses:

1. There will be a positive correlation between perfectionism and burnout among college students.
2. There will be a positive correlation between self-criticism and burnout among college students.
3. Perfectionism and self-criticism will predict burnout among college students.

## METHOD

### Participants

Using a convenience sampling approach, the present study, which employed a correlational research design, included 104 college students (N = 104) from Bengaluru, Karnataka aged between 18 and 23 years (M = 21.697, SD = 2.10). The sample was predominantly female (n = 70, 67.3%), with 32 male participants and 2 participants identifying as others. All participants were either pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate education at the time of the study. Participants were recruited through the online distribution of a survey questionnaire among college students, and only those who met the eligibility criteria and voluntarily consented to participate were included in the study.

### Inclusion Criteria

1. College students aged between 18 and 23 years.
2. Participants pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate education at the time of the study.
3. Individuals willing and able to provide informed consent for participation.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

1. Individuals who reported having diagnosed mental health disorders.
2. Individuals currently undergoing psychological or psychiatric treatment.

### **Ethical Considerations and Data Collection**

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association. Prior to participation, individuals were provided with information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study and were assured that their participation was voluntary. Participants were also informed that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

Electronic informed consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of the survey. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. No personally identifying information was collected, and all responses were used solely for academic research purposes. The study ensured that no physical or psychological harm was inflicted on participants, and all collected data were handled in accordance with ethical research standards.

### **Measures**

1. **Big Three Perfectionism Scale - Short Form (BTPS-SF; Feher et al. (2020)):** This scale was used to assess perfectionism and provides a brief evaluation across three primary dimensions: rigid perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism, and narcissistic perfectionism. The scale was derived from the longer Big Three Perfectionism Scale to provide a concise yet psychometrically sound measure suitable for both research and clinical contexts. The BTPS-SF contains 16 items, with each item rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The structure of the short form mirrors that of the original scale and maintains the multidimensional

conceptualization of perfectionism. Previous studies have demonstrated good test-retest reliability for rigid, self-critical, and narcissistic perfectionism.

2. **Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM; Shirom and Melamed (2011)):** This instrument was used to assess burnout levels and has been validated for use in the Indian context (Johnson, 2020). The SMBM is widely utilized to measure physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms associated with burnout. The scale consists of 14 items distributed across three subscales: physical fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and cognitive weariness. Participants rate each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“almost never”) to 7 (“almost always”), indicating the frequency of their experiences over the past month. The scale demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties and satisfactory convergent, discriminant, and factorial validity among young populations (Gerber et al., 2018).
3. **Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS) (Gilbert et al., 2004):** This scale was used to measure levels of self-criticism and self-reassurance and has been validated in the Indian context (Garg & Sharma, 2020). The FSCRS consists of 22 items organized into three subscales: Inadequate Self (feelings of personal inadequacy), Hated Self (self-directed anger and contempt), and Reassured Self (self-compassion and the ability to be supportive toward oneself). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“not at all like me”) to 4 (“extremely like me”). The scale has demonstrated strong construct validity (Halamová et al., 2018), and the Cronbach’s alpha values for the three components have been reported to be above 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method through social media platforms such, as well as through in-person contact at various college campuses in Bengaluru, Karnataka. Interested students were provided with a link to an online survey hosted on Google Forms.

The first page of the survey contained an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the approximate time required for completion, and assurances regarding voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any penalty. Those who agreed to participate provided electronic informed consent before proceeding further. Following consent, participants responded to brief eligibility questions confirming that they were college students aged between 18 and 23 years and that they were not currently diagnosed with or receiving treatment for severe mental health conditions. Eligible participants then proceeded to the main questionnaire, which included demographic questions such as age, gender, and level of study.

Participants subsequently completed the Big Three Perfectionism Scale - Short Form (BTPS-SF) (Feher et al., 2019), the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) (Shirom & Melamed, 2006), and the Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS) (Gilbert et al., 2004). The entire survey required approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. All responses were automatically recorded through Google Forms and later exported to IBM SPSS Statistics software for statistical analysis. Prior to analysis, the dataset was screened for completeness and consistency, and incomplete responses were removed.

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were computed. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were subsequently conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables.

Throughout the study, ethical standards were maintained at all stages. Participants' identities were not recorded, ensuring complete anonymity. All collected data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. The purpose of the study and participants' rights were clearly communicated before data collection began, and participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic and research purposes. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association Ethical Guidelines.

**RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score for burnout among the participants was 57.64 (SD = 18.05), the mean score for perfectionism was 47.76 (SD = 9.89), and the mean score for self-criticism was 46.37 (SD = 9.83). These values provide an overview of the levels of the study variables among the college student sample.

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between perfectionism, self-criticism, and burnout. The results revealed that perfectionism was positively correlated with burnout ( $r = 0.371$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that higher levels of perfectionistic tendencies were associated with increased burnout among participants. Similarly, self-criticism showed a positive correlation with burnout ( $r = 0.478$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that individuals who reported higher levels of self-critical tendencies also tended to experience higher levels of burnout.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Correlation among Burnout, Self- Criticism and Perfectionism**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Burnout	Perfectionism	Self-criticism
Burnout	57.64	18.048	<i>I</i>	.371**	.478**
Perfectionism	47.76	9.886	.371**	<i>II</i>	.397**
Self-criticism	46.37	9.831	.478**	.397**	<i>I</i>

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To further examine the predictive role of these variables, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The analysis revealed that perfectionism and self-criticism together explained 26.7% of the variance in burnout ( $R^2 = 0.267$ ). Both predictors were found to be statistically significant. Perfectionism emerged as a significant predictor of burnout ( $\beta = 0.215$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),

while self-criticism also significantly predicted burnout ( $\beta = 0.392$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Overall, these findings suggest that both perfectionism and self-criticism are significantly associated with burnout among college students. Moreover, the regression results indicate that these psychological factors play a meaningful role in explaining variations in burnout levels within the sample.

**Table 2: Regression coefficients predicting Burnout from Perfectionism and Self-Criticism**

Criterion	Predictor	$\beta$	p-value
Burnout	Perfectionism	.215	.023
	Self- Criticism	.392	<.001
R	.52		
R <sup>2</sup>	.267		
$F = 18.4, p < .001$			

**DISCUSSION**

The present study aimed to examine the predictive roles of perfectionism and self-criticism in burnout among college students. The objective was to determine whether higher levels of perfectionistic tendencies and self-critical attitudes would be associated with greater experiences of burnout. The sample consisted of 104 college students with a mean age of 21.697 years.

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a positive correlation between perfectionism and burnout among college students. The findings supported this hypothesis, as the results indicated a significant positive relationship between perfectionism and burnout. This suggests that students who report higher levels of perfectionistic tendencies are more likely to experience increased levels of burnout. Perfectionistic individuals often set excessively high standards for themselves and strive for flawless performance. Within demanding academic environments, these unrealistic expectations can lead to chronic stress, frustration, and emotional exhaustion when individuals perceive that they are unable to meet their own standards. Over time, the continuous pressure to perform perfectly may reduce motivation and increase feelings of fatigue, thereby contributing to burnout (Asim et al., 2025; Goswami & Baksi, 2025).

Hypothesis 2 proposed that there would be a positive correlation between self-criticism and burnout among college students. The results also supported this hypothesis, demonstrating a significant positive relationship between self-criticism and burnout. Students who engage in frequent self-critical thinking and harsh self-evaluation were more likely to report higher levels of burnout. Self-criticism often involves persistent rumination about perceived failures, excessive self-blame, and negative self-judgment. Such cognitive patterns can increase psychological distress and weaken emotional resilience. When students repeatedly interpret academic challenges as personal shortcomings, they may experience heightened stress and emotional strain, which can gradually contribute to burnout (Hailikari et al., 2025; Souza et al., 2024).

Hypothesis 3 stated that perfectionism and self-criticism would significantly predict burnout among college students. The results of the multiple regression analysis supported this hypothesis. Perfectionism and self-criticism together accounted for 26.7% of the variance in burnout scores, indicating that these personality-related variables play a meaningful role in explaining students' experiences of burnout. Among the two predictors, self-criticism demonstrated a higher standardized beta value than

perfectionism, suggesting that it may be a comparatively stronger predictor of burnout within this sample. This finding indicates that while perfectionistic standards may create performance pressure, the tendency to engage in harsh self-judgment may have a stronger psychological impact on emotional exhaustion (Hailikari et al., 2025).

The findings of the present study are consistent with existing literature highlighting the role of perfectionism and self-critical tendencies in the development of burnout. For instance, Pereira et al. (2022) reported that self-critical perfectionism was a significant predictor of burnout and accounted for 18.42% of the variance in burnout levels. Similarly, Seco (2021) demonstrated that self-critical perfectionism contributed both directly and indirectly to burnout through increased self-generated stress, explaining 22.89% of the variance. These studies reinforce the view that internal cognitive processes, particularly those related to self-evaluation and personal standards, play a significant role in psychological exhaustion among students. Although perfectionism and self-criticism explained 26.7% of the variance in burnout in the present study, burnout is widely recognized as a multifactorial phenomenon influenced by various psychological and contextual factors. Previous research has identified several additional contributors to burnout among students. For example, Liu et al. (2023) reported that factors such as gender, academic year, parental educational background, monthly living expenses, academic pressure, interest in professional studies, and lifestyle behaviours may influence burnout levels. Similarly, Hwang and Kim (2022) found that psychological factors including stress, depression, and anxiety significantly affected burnout among students. These findings suggest that while perfectionism and self-criticism are important predictors, they operate within a broader network of academic, emotional, and environmental influences.

Overall, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of addressing

maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies and self-critical thinking patterns among college students. Psychological interventions that focus on promoting self-compassion, adaptive coping strategies, and realistic goal-setting may help reduce students' vulnerability to burnout. Educational institutions may also benefit from implementing mental health support programs that help students manage academic stress and develop healthier self-evaluative patterns. Addressing these psychological factors may play an important role in preventing burnout and promoting well-being among students.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite its contributions, the present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The study employed a convenience sampling method and included participants from a limited geographical and educational context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the variables. The reliance on self-report measures may also introduce response biases such as social desirability or subjective interpretation of items.

Future research could address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples across different universities and cultural contexts. Longitudinal designs may help clarify the causal relationships between perfectionism, self-criticism, and burnout over time. Further studies could also explore potential mediating or moderating variables, such as coping strategies, social support, resilience, or self-compassion, which may influence the relationship between these personality traits and burnout. Expanding research in this area would provide deeper insight into the psychological processes underlying burnout and contribute to the development of more targeted intervention programs for students.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights that both perfectionism and self-criticism are significant predictors of burnout, with self-criticism emerging as the stronger of the two factors. This finding underscores the importance of not only setting high standards but also the potential harm of being overly harsh on oneself. While striving for excellence can drive students to succeed, excessive self-criticism can lead to negative outcomes like burnout. Recognizing these patterns early in students can have a profound impact on their well-being. Schools and universities are in a unique position to make a difference by fostering supportive environments that encourage healthier approaches to managing stress. By teaching students' effective ways to cope with pressure, educational institutions can help them remain motivated without succumbing to burnout.

### Use of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

During the writing process of this study, the authors used ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) for assistance in organizing the structure of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified the content independently and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

### Declaration by Authors

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