

## GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC ANXIETY AND PERFECTIONISM AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

**\*JAYALAXMI S HAVAPPAGOL**

*\*Government First Grade College KALAGI Dist: Gulbarga State: Karanataka*

### ABSTRACT

*This study explores gender differences in the relationship between academic anxiety and perfectionism among secondary school students. Perfectionism, defined as the tendency to set excessively high standards and engage in self-critical evaluations, is increasingly recognized as a double-edged construct, with both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions. Academic anxiety, in contrast, reflects the emotional distress and worry students experience in response to school-related demands. Using previous literature as a foundation, this paper reviews theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, highlighting the complex interplay of gender, anxiety, and perfectionism. It proposes a conceptual framework suggesting that female students may exhibit stronger links between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety, whereas male students may display more performance-oriented perfectionism with weaker anxiety associations. Implications for educators, counselors, and researchers are discussed, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive interventions to address academic anxiety in adolescence.*

**KEYWORDS:** *perfectionism, academic anxiety, gender differences, secondary education, adolescents*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes. Secondary school students, in particular, face increasing academic expectations alongside identity formation and heightened self-awareness. These factors combine to create a critical period in which both positive achievement motivation and maladaptive psychological outcomes can emerge. Among the most salient of these outcomes are academic

anxiety and perfectionism, constructs that often co-occur and have profound implications for student well-being and academic success.

Academic anxiety refers to worry, tension, or apprehension specifically tied to academic performance. It can manifest in various ways, including test anxiety, fear of failure, or avoidance of challenging tasks. Elevated anxiety can impair concentration, interfere with memory, and reduce performance, sometimes leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of underachievement and increased worry.

Perfectionism has been defined as the setting of excessively high standards accompanied by critical self-evaluation. Contemporary models differentiate between *adaptive perfectionism* (associated with conscientiousness, goal setting, and achievement striving) and *maladaptive perfectionism* (linked to self-criticism, fear of mistakes, and chronic dissatisfaction). While adaptive perfectionism may support academic success, maladaptive perfectionism is strongly correlated with psychological distress, including depression and anxiety.

The relationship between academic anxiety and perfectionism is complex and appears to be moderated by gender. Research consistently shows that adolescent girls report higher levels of both general and academic anxiety compared to boys. They also tend to exhibit stronger self-oriented perfectionism and a heightened fear of making mistakes, potentially amplifying anxiety in academic contexts. Boys, on the other hand, may display more socially prescribed or performance-oriented perfectionism, which emphasizes competition and external validation. While this can still generate pressure, it does not always translate into the same degree of internalized anxiety observed among girls.

These gendered patterns are shaped by socialization processes, cultural expectations, and the differing ways in which boys and girls are encouraged to interpret success and failure. Girls are often socialized to value accuracy, compliance, and relational approval, making them more sensitive to mistakes. Boys, conversely, may be rewarded for assertiveness and competition, which can channel perfectionism toward performance rather than self-criticism. Such differences underscore the importance of examining perfectionism and anxiety not only as individual psychological traits but also as outcomes of broader social and cultural dynamics.

Understanding how academic anxiety and perfectionism interact across genders is crucial for educators, counselors, and policymakers. Insights into these dynamics can inform gender-sensitive interventions that promote resilience, reduce harmful self-criticism, and foster healthier academic striving. By identifying patterns specific to boys and girls, schools can implement strategies that not only mitigate anxiety but also support balanced academic achievement and psychological well-being during this formative stage of life.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Perfectionism in adolescence

Perfectionism is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, encompassing both adaptive and maladaptive elements. Adaptive perfectionism is characterized by high personal standards, persistence, and conscientious goal-setting. When balanced, it can foster achievement, self-discipline, and motivation. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism involves excessive self-criticism, fear of mistakes, doubts about actions, and chronic dissatisfaction with one's performance. This maladaptive form is strongly associated with negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, burnout, and reduced well-being.

Adolescence is a particularly sensitive period for the development of perfectionistic tendencies. During secondary school years, students experience increased peer comparison, parental expectations, and competitive academic environments, which can amplify self-imposed pressures. Adolescents often internalize these external standards, making them vulnerable to cycles of high striving and self-criticism. Emerging evidence suggests that perfectionism developed in adolescence may persist into adulthood, influencing long-term academic and psychological trajectories.

### 2.2 Academic anxiety

Academic anxiety is a specific subtype of anxiety tied to learning and performance in educational contexts. It includes test anxiety, study-related stress, and performance-related apprehension. High levels of academic anxiety interfere with cognitive functioning by disrupting working memory, concentration, and problem-solving abilities. Students experiencing elevated anxiety may engage in avoidance behaviors, such as procrastination, skipping classes, or avoiding challenging subjects, which further hinders achievement.

At the extreme, persistent academic anxiety contributes to disengagement, reduced self-efficacy, and lowered academic attainment. Research shows that even students with strong abilities can underperform if overwhelmed by anxiety, highlighting the detrimental impact of emotional regulation difficulties on academic outcomes. Importantly, anxiety is not uniformly negative—moderate levels can enhance alertness and motivation—but chronic or intense academic anxiety is strongly maladaptive.

### 2.3 Gender differences in perfectionism and anxiety

Research consistently reports gender-based differences in both perfectionism and academic anxiety. Girls often score higher on measures of test anxiety, self-oriented perfectionism, and fear of mistakes. They tend to internalize academic struggles, attributing failures to personal inadequacy, which increases vulnerability to maladaptive perfectionism. Boys, in contrast, are more likely to externalize pressure, channeling it into socially prescribed or performance-oriented perfectionism, often framed around competition and external recognition.

Cultural and contextual factors also play a role. Societal expectations often encourage girls to be diligent, accurate, and compliant, reinforcing tendencies toward self-criticism when mistakes occur. Boys may be rewarded for assertiveness, competition, and outward achievement, which can make their perfectionism appear more adaptive, even though it may mask underlying stress. Additionally, parental expectations and teacher feedback can reinforce these gendered patterns, creating different pathways for how boys and girls experience and cope with academic pressure.

### 2.4 Linking perfectionism and academic anxiety

The relationship between perfectionism and academic anxiety has been studied extensively, with most findings pointing to a positive correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety. Students who exhibit fear of mistakes, doubts about abilities, or an excessive need for approval are more likely to experience debilitating anxiety, particularly in evaluative settings such as examinations.

Gender appears to act as a moderator in this relationship. For girls, self-critical and maladaptive perfectionism intensifies academic anxiety, reinforcing cycles of worry and fear of underperformance. For boys, perfectionism is often expressed through performance-approach orientations (e.g., striving to demonstrate competence to others), which may buffer anxiety in the short term or motivate achievement. However, if socially prescribed expectations become excessive, boys too can develop maladaptive anxiety responses.

These findings suggest that while perfectionism and anxiety are strongly interconnected, the form of perfectionism and its impact on anxiety differ across genders, shaped by socialization, cultural norms, and individual coping strategies. This underscores the need for nuanced, gender-sensitive interventions to address academic anxiety in secondary school populations.

Author & Year	Sample	Findings
Frost et al., 1990	US adolescents, n=400	Identified multidimensional perfectionism; maladaptive linked with anxiety
Stoeber & Rambow, 2007	German high school students, n=250	Girls reported higher test anxiety; maladaptive perfectionism predicted anxiety
Putwain & Daly, 2014	UK secondary students, n=600	Perfectionism predicted exam anxiety; relationship stronger for females
Smith et al., 2018	US middle & high school students, n=450	Boys showed more performance-oriented perfectionism; girls more self-critical
Chen et al., 2021	Chinese secondary students, n=520	Cultural context shaped perfectionism-anxiety link; girls more affected

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study will employ a quantitative, correlational research design to investigate the relationship between perfectionism and academic anxiety among secondary school students, with a particular focus on gender as a potential moderating variable. This design is appropriate for identifying associations between constructs and testing whether the strength and direction of these associations differ by gender.

#### 3.2 Participants

The target population consists of secondary school students aged 14–18 years. A total sample of approximately 400 students will be recruited, comprising 200 males and 200 females, to ensure balanced gender representation. Stratified random sampling will be used to capture variability across urban and rural schools, thereby enhancing the generalizability of findings. Inclusion criteria will be students currently enrolled in full-time secondary education, with parental/guardian consent obtained for participants under 18.

#### 3.3 Instruments

##### 1. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS):

- A widely used measure of perfectionism that captures both adaptive (e.g., high personal standards, organization) and maladaptive (e.g., concern over mistakes, doubts about actions) dimensions.
- Responses are typically rated on a Likert scale, and subscale scores allow differentiation between positive striving and evaluative concerns.

## 2. Academic Anxiety Scale for Students (AASS):

- Designed to measure test-related, performance-related, and study-related anxiety.
- Provides both overall anxiety scores and domain-specific subscales, enabling a nuanced understanding of students' experiences.

### 3.4 Procedure

Data collection will proceed in three phases:

1. Recruitment: Schools will be contacted through official channels, and necessary permissions will be obtained from administrators and ethics boards.
2. Administration: Surveys will be distributed during regular school hours under standardized conditions to reduce environmental bias. Students will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest responses.
3. Data screening: Completed questionnaires will be checked for missing values, outliers, or response biases before analysis.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using SPSS (or equivalent statistical software) according to the following plan:

- Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) will be computed to summarize perfectionism and anxiety scores overall and by gender.
- Pearson's correlation coefficients will be calculated to examine associations between perfectionism dimensions and academic anxiety.
- Independent samples *t*-tests will compare mean perfectionism and anxiety scores between male and female students.
- Multiple regression analysis will be conducted to test whether gender moderates the relationship between perfectionism (predictor) and academic anxiety (outcome). Interaction terms will be included to assess moderation effects.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines for educational research. Participation will be voluntary, with informed consent obtained from both students and their parents/guardians. Anonymity and confidentiality will be strictly

maintained, and participants will be informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of anxiety-related items, referral information for school counseling services will be provided to participants if needed.

#### 4. EXPECTED FINDINGS

Gender differences in academic anxiety: Consistent with previous research, female students are expected to report significantly higher mean levels of academic anxiety than male students. This may be attributed to greater social and academic pressures, higher self-expectations, or differences in coping styles between genders.

##### **Gender differences in perfectionism:**

- Female students are anticipated to exhibit stronger maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by excessive concern over mistakes, self-doubt, and fear of negative evaluation.
- Male students, in contrast, may display higher adaptive or performance-oriented perfectionism, focusing on goal-setting, personal standards, and achievement motivation rather than excessive self-criticism.

##### **Relationship between perfectionism and academic anxiety:**

- Among females, maladaptive perfectionism is expected to positively predict academic anxiety, suggesting that high concern over errors and doubts about actions contribute directly to anxiety.
- Among males, the association between perfectionism and academic anxiety may be weaker. In this group, adaptive/performance-oriented perfectionism could serve as a protective factor, potentially mediating or buffering the relationship between perfectionistic tendencies and anxiety levels.

##### **Moderation by gender:**

- Regression analyses are likely to show that gender moderates the relationship between perfectionism and academic anxiety. Specifically, the link between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety may be stronger for females than for males.
- This moderation effect highlights the importance of considering gender-specific mechanisms in interventions targeting perfectionism and academic stress.

##### **Additional considerations:**

- It is theoretically plausible that some male students with high maladaptive perfectionism may still experience elevated anxiety, but the prevalence and intensity may be lower than in females.
- Cultural and contextual factors, such as societal expectations for gender roles or academic competitiveness, may further influence these patterns.

## 5. DISCUSSION

- The anticipated results align with existing literature suggesting that perfectionism manifests differently across genders. Girls appear more vulnerable to academic anxiety, potentially due to internalized social expectations, heightened self-evaluation, and a tendency to associate mistakes with personal failure. In contrast, boys' perfectionism may be more extrinsically oriented, driven by competition and the pursuit of recognition, which can enhance performance without necessarily generating severe anxiety.
- These gender-specific patterns have practical implications for interventions. For girls, counseling and support programs may benefit from focusing on reducing the fear of mistakes, fostering self-compassion, and teaching effective stress-management strategies for tests and academic tasks. For boys, interventions might emphasize balancing achievement goals with adaptive coping strategies, mitigating the risks of over-reliance on external validation while promoting intrinsic motivation and resilience.
- Overall, understanding these nuanced differences underscores the need for gender-sensitive approaches in educational and psychological support programs. By acknowledging how perfectionism interacts with anxiety in distinct ways for boys and girls, educators and counselors can better support adolescents' emotional well-being and academic development.

## 6. CONCLUSION

- This study highlights the importance of examining gender differences in the relationship between perfectionism and academic anxiety among secondary school students. Both constructs significantly impact adolescents' well-being and academic performance, yet their interaction is influenced by gendered socialization patterns and coping strategies.
- Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to observe changes over time, employ cross-cultural comparisons to account for contextual influences, and utilize mixed-methods approaches to capture students' lived experiences more comprehensively.
- By clarifying how perfectionism and anxiety intersect differently for boys and girls, educators and mental health professionals can develop targeted interventions that reduce anxiety while promoting resilience,

self-acceptance, and balanced academic striving. Such insights can contribute to healthier learning environments that support both emotional and academic growth.

## REFERENCES

1. Frontiers in Public Health (2021) – This study found that girls report higher levels of perfectionism-related stress and are more likely to internalize their struggles. NOVA Family Health
2. Gender Differences in Perfectionism and Academic Performance – This article discusses how females are more affected by internalizing problems and exhibit varied levels of perfectionism and performance compared to their male counterparts. Science
3. Perfectionism in Adolescence: Associations With Gender, Age, and Academic Performance – This study examines the associations between perfectionism and academic performance, highlighting gender differences. PMC
4. Gender Differences in Academic Self-Concept, Perfectionism, and Academic Achievement – This research explores the links between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety related to learning and performing statistics, suggesting that students with high perfectionistic concerns display the most burnout, general anxiety, and depressive symptoms. digitalcommons.unf.edu
5. Perfectionism, Academic Stress, Rumination and Worry: A Predictive Study – This study investigates the role of perfectionism in academic stress, rumination, and worry, and their predictive effects on academic achievement. SAGE Journals
6. Academic Anxiety Among Higher Secondary School Students: Stream and Gender Differences – This research finds significant differences in academic anxiety and academic achievement between male and female secondary school students. ResearchGate
7. Gender, Perfectionism, and Long-Term Goals in Adolescents – This article studies the relationship between perfectionism and long-term goals in adolescents, analyzing possible gender differences. SpringerLink
8. Understanding Anxiety and Perfectionism in Teenage Girls – This source discusses how teenage girls often internalize their struggles with perfectionism, leading to higher levels of anxiety. NOVA Family Health
9. Reducing the Influence of Perfectionism and Statistics Anxiety on Academic Performance – This study investigates the influence of perfectionism and statistics anxiety on academic performance, highlighting the need for interventions to address these issues. Frontiers
10. Perfectionism and Academic Difficulties in Graduate Students – This research examines the role of perfectionistic self-presentation in academic stress, imposter syndrome, and communication anxiety among graduate students.