



Positive perfectionism, negative perfectionism, and emotional eating: The mediating role of stress



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the different impacts of positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism on individuals' emotional eating, as well as stress as the proposed underlying mediator that explains the abovementioned relationships. Overall, 386 adults in China reported their levels of positive perfectionism, negative perfectionism, perceived stress, and emotional eating behaviors. Results demonstrate that positive perfectionism is negatively associated with emotional eating, while negative perfectionism is positively associated with emotional eating. In addition, stress mediates the relationship between perfectionism and emotional eating. Specifically, positive perfectionism is indirectly related to emotional eating through the mediation of stress, whereas negative perfectionism is related to emotional eating directly and indirectly through the mediation of stress. Findings of the current study indicate that practitioners working with individuals who suffer from emotional eating problems should focus on ways to reduce negative perfectionism while finding approaches that enhance positive perfectionism. With this approach, individuals would experience less stress and, therefore, would be less likely to be involved in emotional eating.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality style characterized by striving for excellence and setting extremely high standards of performance, accompanied by concern over faults (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995). Previous research has provided consistent evidence that perfectionism is connected to eating problems (Wade, O'Shea, & Shafran, 2015). For instance, perfectionists are more likely to develop anorexia, binge eating, overeating, etc. (Bardone, Vohs, Abramson, Heatherton, & Joiner, 2000; Machado, Gonçalves, Martins, Hoek, & Machado, 2014). However, studies have found different patterns of perfectionism (Terry-Short et al., 1995). That is, perfectionism is not always detrimental. It also has beneficial aspects. Nevertheless, the roles that different aspects of perfectionism play in eating problems are still underexplored. Moreover, the underlying mechanism that mediates the above associations should also be investigated.

1.1. Perfectionism and emotional eating

Perfectionism has long been considered a pathology-causing personality trait (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Existing research has demonstrated that perfectionism is a risk factor for eating disorders (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007; Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011; Wade et al., 2015). Although most prior studies assume that perfectionism is a negative trait (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Terry-Short et al., 1995), recent studies have found that perfectionism can be either negative or positive. Derived from Hamachek's (1978) model of normal and neurotic perfectionism, a dual process model—"positive perfectionism" and "negative perfectionism"—was developed (Slade & Owens, 1998; Terry-Short et al., 1995). In the dual-process model, positive perfectionism is described as perfectionistic behavior driven by the desire to achieve favorable outcomes, whereas negative perfectionism is defined as perfectionistic behavior driven by the goal to prevent failures. The dual-process model has provided a tool to better understand the impacts of perfectionism on people's lives. Recent studies have reinforced the discrepancy between positive and negative perfectionism (Chan, 2007; Choo & Chan, 2013). With respect to eating, Choo and Chan (2013) suggested that positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism had different influences on eating problems. Specifically, positive perfectionistic tendencies predicted lower total eating disorder index scores, while negative perfectionism

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was positively correlated with eating disorder index scores (Choo & Chan, 2013). Thus, we conjecture that positive perfectionism is negatively related to emotional eating, whereas negative perfectionism is positively related to emotional eating.

1.2. Perfectionism and stress

Positive perfectionists have superior adaptive skills. If they fail to achieve high standards, they might change their goals or work harder to cope with failures (Haase, Prapavessis, & Owens, 2002; Hamachek, 1978). Moreover, they are more likely to have high self-esteem and, therefore, are less dissatisfied with themselves (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Previous research has shown that positive perfectionism is negatively correlated with emotions like shame and anxiety, while negative perfectionism is positively associated with those emotions (Fedewa, Burns, & Gomez, 2005; Pirbaglou et al., 2013). Thus, we propose that positive perfectionism is negatively related to stress.

In contrast, numerous studies have shown that negative perfectionism often has harmful effects on people's daily lives. Individuals with high negative perfectionism set unrealistically high standards and strive for impractically high goals, which often end in failure (Burns, Dittmann, Nguyen, & Mitchelson, 2000; Hamachek, 1978). That is, negative perfectionism often leads to negative affect, anxiety, depression, and less satisfaction with life. Therefore, we propose that negative perfectionism is positively related to stress.

1.3. Stress and emotional eating

Emotional eating is broadly defined as the propensity for eating in response to negative emotions (Hawks, Goudy, & Gast, 2003). Stress is widely believed to lead to craving food or overeating (Greeno & Wing, 1994; Royal & Kurtz, 2010). For instance, female college students considered stress as the primary trigger for their emotional eating behavior. When they became stressed, they ate more (Bennett, Greene, & Schwartz-Barcott, 2013). A recent study found that both males and females who experienced high stress levels were more likely to suffer from emotional eating (Tan & Chow, 2014). People might cope with stress through eating because eating can distract them from thinking about things that bother them, or eating something that tastes good per se is pleasant (Van Blyderveen, Lafrance, Emond, Kosmerly, O'Connor, & Chang, 2016; Zellner et al., 2006). Therefore, we propose that stress is positively associated with emotional eating.

1.4. The mediating role of stress

As noted earlier, existing research has provided some evidence about the relationship between perfectionism and eating behaviors. However, the underlying mechanism that mediates the relationship has yet to be examined and the role of stress has been overlooked. Prior research speculated that negative perfectionism is particularly related to eating problems because negative perfectionists are concerned with the social evaluation of their appearances (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007; Wade et al., 2015). To these individuals, minor flaws in body image may bring about negative emotions. Consequently, they deal with these feelings through eating.

Nevertheless, we propose that stress mediates the relationship between perfectionism and emotional eating. As mentioned earlier, negative perfectionists often set high standards that are not easy to achieve, so they are more likely to experience stress, which may lead to emotional eating. The high goals that negative perfectionists set may not only be related to their appearance, they are probably also related to other domains of their lives (e.g., learning or sports; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). In contrast, positive perfectionists have better adaptive skills, which signifies that they might change their goals or work harder to cope with failures. Moreover, studies have found that stress mediates the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological

functioning (Chang, Watkins, & Banks, 2004), and the relationship between perfectionism and psychological well-being (Chang, 2006). That is, perfectionism has a negative influence on individuals' lives, and stress mediates this relationship. Taking the above evidence together, we hypothesize that stress may also play a mediating role in the relationship between perfectionism and emotional eating.

1.5. Current study and hypotheses

In this article, we propose a theoretical framework to examine how positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism influence individuals' emotional eating behaviors. Specifically, we argue that positive perfectionism could ease stress levels, whereas negative perfectionism would raise stress levels, which in turn would lead to emotional eating. Given the evidence discussed in the preceding paragraphs, we propose that (1) positive perfectionism is negatively related to stress; (2) negative perfectionism is positively related to stress; (3) stress is positively related to emotional eating; and (4) stress mediates the relationships between both (a) positive perfectionism and emotional eating and (b) negative perfectionism and emotional eating.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We recruited a group of respondents from a professional website offering paid online tasks (<http://www.sojump.com>). Three hundred and eighty-six participants completed the online survey. Of these participants, 215 (55.70%) were female and 171 (44.30%) were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years. Most participants (83.68%) held a bachelor's degree or higher.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

We adapted the self-report 40-item Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale (PANPS; (Terry-Short et al., 1995)) to assess the levels of positive and negative perfectionism (20 items each). The PANPS includes items such as, "When I am competing against others, I am motivated by wanting to be the best" and "If I make a mistake I feel that the whole thing is ruined." Participants rated the items on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism were 0.91 and 0.89, respectively.

2.2.2. Stress

We measured participants' stress levels using the 14-item Global Measure of Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The scale measures how often participants found their lives to be unpredictable, overloaded, and uncontrollable during the last month. The scale consists of items such as, "In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?" and "In the last month, how often have you been able to control the way you spend your time?" Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was 0.86.

2.2.3. Emotional eating

We used the 13-item emotional eating subscale of the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ; Van Strien, Frijters, Bergers, & Defares, 1986) to measure participants' emotional eating behaviors. The scale includes items such as, "Do you have a desire to eat when somebody lets you down?" and "Do you have a desire to eat when you are disappointed?" Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was 0.93.

All the scales used in this study were originally developed in English. The items for the Perceived Stress Scale and the emotional eating

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