

Perfectionism's Role in Shaping Adolescents' Perception of Support from Friends

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ABSTRACT. Perfectionism is theorized to be affected by one's relationships, but also negatively impacting relationships with others. The present study explores the longitudinal associations between perfectionism and perceived support from friends, on a sample of two hundred and sixty-one adolescents ($m_{age} = 17.6$ years), using a cross-lagged panel design with two waves. Results showed that perfectionistic concerns contribute to relative decreases in adolescents' perceived support from friends. The present results support the model of perfectionism social disconnection, indicating that perfectionistic concerns may interfere with adolescents' perceptions on friendships.

Keywords: perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, support from friends, adolescents, longitudinal

ABSTRAKT. Perfektionismus wird theoretisch von zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen beeinflusst, wirkt sich aber auch negativ auf Beziehungen zu anderen aus. Die vorliegende Studie untersucht die longitudinalen Zusammenhänge zwischen Perfektionismus und der wahrgenommenen Unterstützung durch Freunde anhand einer Stichprobe von 261 Jugendlichen (Mittelw = 17,6 Jahre) unter Verwendung eines Cross-Lagged-Panel-Designs mit zwei Messzeitpunkten. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass perfektionistische Bedenken zu einem relativen Rückgang der wahrgenommenen Unterstützung von Freunde beitragen. Dieses Ergebnis unterstützt das theoretische Modell der sozialen Entfremdung durch Perfektionismus und deutet darauf hin, dass perfektionistische Bedenken die Freundschaften von Jugendlichen beeinträchtigen können.

Schlüsselwörter: Perfektionistische Bestrebungen, Perfektionistische Bedenken, Unterstützung durch Freunde, Jugendliche, Longitudinal.

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1. PERFECTIONISM'S ROLE IN SHAPING ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS

Perfectionism is commonly described as a multifaceted personality attribute signified by the pursuit of unrealistically high standards and severe self-criticism, fueled by an internal drive to achieve flawlessness (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt et al., 2017).

Previous research has established it as a significant contributing factor for mental health struggles and relational difficulties (Flett et al., 2022). It consistently related to depression and suicidality (Smith et al., 2018), eating disorders (Bills et al., 2023), poorer outcomes in therapy (Mitchell et al., 2013), as well as social disconnection and social isolation (Chen et al., 2024; Magson et al., 2019). Moreover, perfectionism may be on an alarming rise for today's youth (Curran & Hill, 2019). Given that research indicates adolescent perfectionism peaks around the age of 15 (Leone & Wade, 2018), studying perfectionism during adolescence can provide valuable insights into the challenges and protective influences in perfectionism development, as well as the impact on adolescents' relational dynamics.

The perfectionism social disconnection model (PSDM; Hewitt et al., 2017) argues the importance of a supportive relational context impacting an individual's perfectionism over time, as well as how perfectionistic tendencies inside relationships can contribute to social disconnection. The PSDM considers perfectionism as something developed within relationships that further affects the quality of relationships. The model draws attention to the importance of studying the reciprocal dynamics between perfectionism and adolescent relationships to understand better how relational context shapes perfectionism and how perfectionism shapes relational context.

While most research investigating perfectionism development focuses on family relationships (Damian et al., 2013; Ko et al., 2019), there are still many unknowns regarding the interplay of perfectionism and friendships in adolescence. Furthermore, it is commonly known that friendships become a salient part of adolescents' lives. Thus, the present research investigates the longitudinal interplay between perfectionism and friends' social support, attempting to test the PSDM in the context of adolescent friendships.

1.1. Perfectionism conceptualization

Many descriptions of perfectionism exist in the literature spanning over 30 decades. However, two influential multidimensional perfectionism models are most used in children and adolescent research.

Firstly, Frost et al. (1990) model of perfectionism is defined through six facets: personal standards (i.e., the adoption of unrealistically high standards), organization (i.e., preoccupation with organization and order), doubts about actions (i.e., hesitation or lack of confidence in what one has done or believes), concern over mistakes (i.e., preoccupation with avoiding mistakes), parental expectations (i.e., perceptions that parents impose high standards and expect one to attain those standards), parental criticism (i.e., perceptions that parents harshly evaluate and criticize oneself and one's performance). However, parental expectations and criticism are now established antecedents in perfectionism development (Damian et al., 2013; Curran & Hill, 2022), while organization is considered to be a correlate rather than part of perfectionism (Stoer, 1998). Thus, most research is presently using personal standards, doubts about the actions, and concerns over mistakes scales of this model (e.g., Domocus & Damian, 2018).

Secondly, Hewitt and Flett's (1991) define perfectionism as comprised of both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects: self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., requiring perfection from the self and harsh evaluations of the self), other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., requiring perfection from others and harsh evaluations of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., perceptions or beliefs of being required to be perfect by others). Additionally, this model includes an assessment specifically designed to measure self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism in children and adolescents (Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale; Flett et al., 2016), distinguishing it from other assessments developed for adults.

According to previous theoretical considerations and factorial analyses on the structure of perfectionism, these distinct models are integrated two superordinate dimensions of perfectionism, which unite the multiple facets into perfectionistic strivings (i.e. personal standards and self-oriented perfectionism) and perfectionistic concerns (i.e. concerns over mistakes, and doubts about actions, and socially prescribed perfectionism) (for review Stoer, 2018). Factorial analyses also suggest that children's perfectionism profile is better represented by combining the ratings from multiple models (Sironic & Reeve, 2015). Additionally, evidence suggests that perfectionism in children and adolescents is not adequately captured using just one model (O'Connor et al., 2009; Rice et al., 2007; 2011; Flett et al., 2016). Overall, the bi-dimensional model is more parsimonious than others, and integrating existing models in research might better capture perfectionism in adolescents.

1.2. The perfectionism social-disconnection model

The PSDM (Hewitt et al., 2017) represents a relational conceptualization of perfectionism firstly addressing the development of perfectionism, and then, its consequences regarding relationships.

The first half of the PSDM discusses the role of relationships in perfectionism development. It suggests that perfectionistic beliefs and behaviors can be developed in an effort to remain connected and avoid rejection and loss of approval within relationships, especially with the caregiver (Hewitt et al., 2017). In contrast, exposure to affirming and supportive relationships can help individuals build a sense of belonging, self-worth, and acceptance, irrespective of their flaws or shortcomings. Most theories and research focus on the relational context within the family (Smith et al., 2022). However, extending this model to relationships outside the nuclear family, supportive friendships that build a sense of security and acceptance may prove to be a protective factor against perfectionism development.

There is little evidence of the role of peer relationships in perfectionism development. So far, research has only found a negative correlation between peer acceptance and perfectionism in adolescent athletes (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2005). Also, a study investigating associations between perfectionism and resistance to peer influences found preliminary evidence of interpersonal perfectionism processes being linked to less resistance to peer influence and more proneness to internalizing ideals from peers (e.g., thinness ideals for girls) (Nanu & Scheau, 2013). Adding to this, a social network analysis research found a tendency of homophily for perfectionism in peer friendships, suggesting that perfectionistic individuals tend to surround themselves with like-minded peers (Forney et al., 2019). Moreover, research conducted with Croatian university students found that lower peer relationship quality was linked to heightened self-doubt and fear of errors, while stronger college relationships were associated with elevated perfectionistic standards and a greater emphasis on organization. However, cross-sectional research cannot inform us of the direction of influence of peer relationships and friendships that may contribute to adolescents' perfectionism. Longitudinal research is necessary to further clarify this connection and investigate whether friendships may play a role in perfectionism development in adolescents.

The second half of the PSDM proposes a reciprocal process inside relationships, where perfectionism subsequently shapes relationships (Hewitt et al., 2017). Thus, the model also describes the social disconnection consequences of perfectionism and its contribution to disconnection within relationships. More specifically, PSDM argues that perfectionism can contribute to social connection

failure and interpersonal problems, through interpersonal oversensitivity and hostility that result in feelings of social disconnection (Hewitt et al., 2017; Roxborough et al., 2012). Perfectionistic tendencies previously developed may subsequently guide perceptions, as well as specific patterns of behaviors within relationships, leading to a cycle of increasing perfectionism and disconnection (Hewitt et al., 2017). Thus, adolescent perfectionism may contribute to biased perceptions of lack of acceptance and support, and even bias further interactions contributing to a lack of trust, hindering communication, and exacerbating alienation. Extending this to friendships, adolescent perfectionism may bias perceptions and interactions with friends that result in less subjective or objective support from friends.

Empirical evidence found some preliminary support for this component of the PSDM. More specifically, cross-sectional research found an association between adolescents' need to avoid imperfection and bullying, as well as social hopelessness in relation to peers (Roxborough et al., 2012). Also, Barnett and Johnson (2016) found perfectionistic concerns to be linked to aggressive communication and lower social support in university students. Furthermore, a mixed design study on autobiographical narratives of first-year students found socially prescribed perfectionism to be linked to low friendship intimacy (Mackinnon et al., 2014). Also, another study found that young adults with perfectionistic concerns experiencing need frustration and less satisfaction within their friendships interact with their friends in a more psychologically controlling way (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017).

In sum, the PSDM suggests that perfectionism can hinder relationships subjectively due to hypersensitivity to rejection and disconnection or objectively due to experiences of disconnection associated with the hostile behavior of perfectionists (Roxborough et al., 2012). Empirical research comes in support of this model, finding associations with aggressive communication, increased conflict (Barnett & Johnson, 2016; Kim et al., 2024), as well as subjective perceptions of lower general social support, lower friendship intimacy, lack of friendship quality (Barnett & Johnson, 2016; Hewitt et al., 2020; Mackinnon et al., 2014) in adults and clinical samples. Also, in preteens, perfectionism was associated with sensitivity to rejection, interpersonal difficulties, and feelings of social isolation (Magson et al., 2019). Following these results, one can argue that perfectionism may contribute to subjective disconnection from friends via biases in interpretations and objective disconnection from friends via maladaptive interpersonal behaviors within adult friendships. Still, most research focused on young adults and there is very little research investigating social disconnection in adolescence. One study on adolescents found different relations of concern over mistakes and personal standards with maladaptive social tendencies

(Fletcher & Shim, 2019), suggesting that different perfectionistic dimensions might interact differently with relationship outcomes. However, Magson et al. (2019) found both types of perfectionism to be associated with sensitivity to rejection, interpersonal difficulties, and feelings of social isolation in preteens. Lastly, we found only one longitudinal research on emerging adult friendships, which specifically investigated perceived pressure for perfection within the friendship (i.e., an individual's perceptions of their friends expecting them to be perfect) and found it to be positively associated with increased conflict between friends (Kim et al., 2024). Consequently, how perfectionistic strivings and concerns contribute to adolescents' relationships with their friends across time is yet to be fully understood.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

Summing up, the PSDM (Hewitt et al., 2017) proposes that nurturing relationships, characterized by safety, acceptance, and belonging, can help shield adolescents from developing perfectionistic tendencies. A source of experiences of support, acceptance, and belonging salient for adolescents may represent their friendships. Thus, friends may contribute to lowering perfectionistic tendencies in adolescents, who feel supported and accepted in their friendships. In contrast, less supportive friendships may contribute to furthering perfectionistic tendencies in adolescents. However, to our knowledge, no research investigated friends' support contributions to perfectionism development.

Additionally, perfectionism may affect friendships and friend support, due to a sense of disconnection, social isolation or even perfectionists' hostile behaviors (Hewitt et al., 2017). Nonetheless, to date, no longitudinal research has investigated the links between perfectionism and adolescents' views of friend support, despite the critical importance of friendships in this life stage.

Considering the previously mentioned gaps in the literature, the present research explores the bidirectional, long-term connections between adolescents' perfectionism and how they perceive support from their friends. In accordance with the PSDM (Hewitt et al., 2017), we expected perceived social support from friends to contribute to relative decreases in perfectionism over time and perfectionism to contribute to relative decreases in perceived support from friends over time. In accordance with previous empirical data, this may be true, particularly for perfectionistic concerns. To examine this, we used an exploratory approach to analyze the links between adolescents' perfectionism and how they perceive support from friends, employing a cross-lagged panel design with two points of data collection three months apart. This timeframe was chosen based on previous studies that have identified shifts in perfectionism over similarly

short intervals (e.g., McGrath et al., 2012; Domocus et al., 2018; Sherry et al., 2013), also considering that reliable changes can be captured within shorter periods (Dormann and Griffin, 2015).

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The present study is a component of a more extensive longitudinal project (Domocus & Damian, 2018; Domocus et al., 2022). Two hundred and sixtyfive high-school adolescents aged 14–19 ($m_{age} = 17.6$; $SD = 1.1$), from 9th to 12th grade, from Romania were recruited for a longitudinal study. The initial sample at Time 1 (T1) included two hundred and sixtyfive adolescents. From this group, one hundred and seventy adolescents also provided data at Time 2 (T2). From this sample, 83% of participants identified as boys, 42.4% living in a rural area, and 57.6% living in an urban area.

3.2. Procedure

The first wave (T1) was collected in 2017 at the start of the 2nd semester of school, followed by a second collection (T2) three months later, at the semester's conclusion. Adolescents completed identical paper-and-pencil questionnaires during school hours at both time points. Participation was entirely voluntary, and adolescents were not compensated for their involvement in this study. The research received approval by the authors' university and the schools' directors via a signed partnership agreement. Parents of participants under the age of 18 received an informed consent form and retained the right to remove their children from participation in the study at any point in time during our research.

3.3. Measures

Perfectionism was measured using both the Child–Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (Flett et al., 2016) and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990). The score for perfectionistic standards was calculated as a mean between the subscales of self-oriented perfectionism (12 items; e.g., *I feel that I have to do my best all the time.*) and personal standards (7 items; e.g., *I expect higher performance in my daily tasks than most people.*). The score for perfectionistic

concerns was calculated as the mean between the subscales socially prescribed perfectionism (10 items; e.g., *I am always expected to do better than others.*), and using the concern over mistakes (9 items; e.g., *If I fail partly, it is as bad as being a complete failure.*), and doubts about actions (4 items; e.g., *It takes me a long time to do something "right"*). Perceived support from friends was assessed using the Perceived Social Support from Friends scale (PSS-Fr; Procidano & Heller, 1983), which consists of 21 items (e.g., *I rely on my friends for emotional support*). For PSS-Fr the translation into Romanian was carried out following established back-translation procedures of Brislin (1986). The items were rated using a Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning *always false for me*, to 5, meaning *always true for me*. All demonstrated strong psychometric properties, as presented in Table 1.

3.4. Data analysis

To begin, the survey responses were examined to identify any missing data and we found that 64,4% of the completed the surveys at both time points, with only 2% missing individual data. Further, we tested Little (1988) 's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test ($p > .001$, chi-square (χ^2/df) of 2.72) which indicated attrition-related bias, thus we followed the recommendations of Graham (2009) using FIML (Full Information Maximum Likelihood).

Next, we screened the data for multivariate outliers, according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) and assessed the reliability of the scale scores by computing Cronbach's alpha coefficients (please see Table 1). All scales demonstrated Cronbach's alpha values greater than .80, which we deemed acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Next, we calculated descriptive statistics and examined bivariate correlations among all variables.

Finally, we computed the main cross-lagged analysis on Mplus version 8.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2018), using the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2018). We accounted for autoregressive paths and included all within-time correlations for the model's variables (Geiser, 2013). Model fit was evaluated using multiple criteria (Byrne, 2012): the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). According to Bryne (2012) 's recommendations, the model presented a good-to-acceptable fit: $\chi^2 (2) = 5.58$, $p = 0.0615$, CFI = .99; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .08; SRMR = .04; AIC = 2101.133; BIC = 2190.986.

4. RESULTS

Preliminary results found a positive correlation between perfectionistic standards and perceived support from friends within waves; however, across waves, perfectionistic concerns were negatively correlated with perceived support from friends (please see Table 1).

The main analysis results identified that perceived support from friends did not predict significant changes in any of the perfectionism dimensions (please see Figure 1). Thus, the hypothesis of perceived support from friends predicting changes in perfectionism was not supported.

Nonetheless, perfectionistic concerns contributed to a relative decrease in adolescents' perceived support from friends, whereas perfectionistic standards demonstrated no significant longitudinal relationships (please see Figure 1). Thus, the results provide support only for perfectionistic concerns contributing to perceptions of decreasing support from friends, and not for perfectionistic standards.

Table 1. *Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perfectionistic standards (T1)						
2. Perfectionistic concerns (T1)	.67***					
3. Perceived support from friends (T1)	.16**	-.08				
4. Perfectionistic standards (T2)	.60***	.46***	.08			
5. Perfectionistic concerns (T2)	.36***	.54***	-.15**	.70***		
6. Perceived support from friends (T2)	-.03	-.20***	.48***	.28***	-.02	
<i>M</i>	3.17	2.72	3.57	3.02	2.69	3.51
<i>SD</i>	0.50	0.57	0.55	0.48	0.47	0.47
Cronbach's alpha	.82	.91	.81	.87	.91	.84

Note. *N* = 261. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

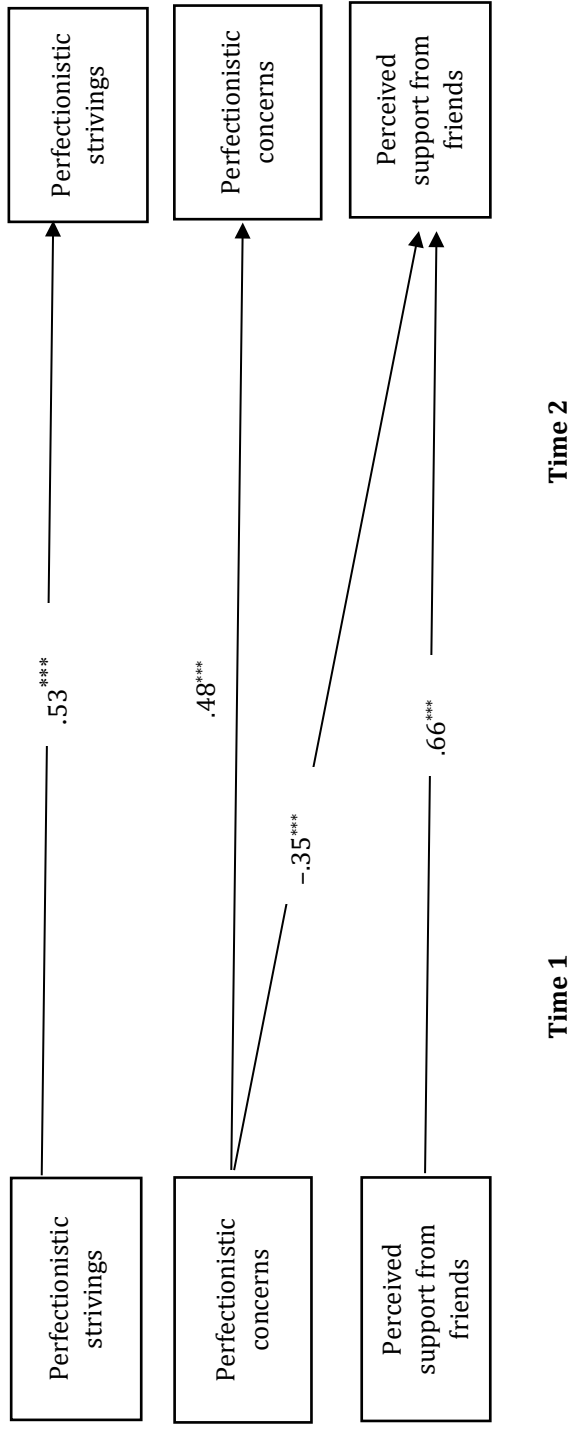


Figure 1. *N* = 261. Cross-lagged model between perfectionistic standards, perfectionistic concerns, and perceived support from friends. Only the significant longitudinal results are presented ($p < .05$). All coefficients are standardized. *** $p < .001$.

5. DISCUSSION

The present research investigated the reciprocal longitudinal relation involving perceived support from friends and perfectionism in adolescents by employing a longitudinal cross-lagged design with two waves. Previous research noted associations between perfectionism and various factors relating to relationships with peers and friends (e.g., Branett & Johnson, 2016; M). Our preliminary results found a positive association between perfectionistic standards and perceived support from friends within waves; however, across waves, only perfectionistic concerns were negatively associated with perceived support from friends. This emphasizes that perfectionistic standards and perfectionistic concerns may act very differently within friendships.

Contrary to our hypothesis, perceived support from friends did not significantly contribute to changes in perfectionism. Although the results do not confirm the hypothesis that supportive relational experiences act as safeguards against perfectionism, they also do not completely negate this possibility. An explanation for the present results may be that strong and stable cognitive appraisals of relationships had already developed in childhood inside the caregiver-child relationship. Thus, further changes in perfectionism may need stronger and more intense experiences of acceptance and unconditional support from friends to fight perfectionistic biases or a longer time to impact perfectionism development in any form. Changes in perfectionistic standards and concerns that occur naturally might take longer to manifest than we originally expected. Also, future research may consider experimental designs targeting the development of supportive and accepting friendships and their long-term impact on perfectionism. Furthermore, perfectionism may already be more stable in mid-to-late adolescence. Thus, future research should consider younger ages, when perfectionistic tendencies are less stable, to explore this relationship further.

Consistent with our expectations, perfectionistic concerns predicted relative declines in adolescents' perceived support from friends, while perfectionistic standards showed no significant longitudinal associations. These findings support the idea that perfectionistic concerns undermine adolescents' connections with their friends. This aligns with the social disconnection model, which proposes that perfectionism may foster interpersonal struggles, resulting in feelings of being socially disconnected (Hewitt et al., 2017). These suggest that adolescents who are preoccupied with mistakes, doubtful about their actions, and who adhere to socially prescribed pressures may experience social disconnection in their friendships, indicated by decreasing perceived support from friends. This may be due to biased perceptions of support from friends. More specifically, interpersonal hypersensitivity to rejection could lead to subjective evaluations

of lack of needed support from friends, as previously remarked by cross-sectional research (Barnett & Johnson, 2016; Magson et al., 2019; Roxboughrough et al., 2012; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). Additionally, these perceptions of lower support from friends may be informed by objective lowering of support due to perfectionistic individuals' tendencies for interpersonal hostility, abruptness in communication, conflict, and aggressiveness (Barnett & Johnson, 2016; Hewitt et al., 2020; Magson et al., 2019; Roxboughrough et al., 2012; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). Future studies should further explore this by investigating both the subjective experience of the adolescent as well as objective accounts of support within their friendships.

Consequently, perfectionistic concerns may be an important risk factor impacting social support and friendship quality. Considering this, schools and mental health professionals should monitor adolescents' perfectionistic tendencies and social support levels to identify at-risk individuals early and provide timely interventions. These interventions should focus on helping adolescents manage their perfectionistic concerns (e.g., fear of failure, perceived pressure to be perfect) to prevent the erosion of social support and create support systems to reduce the likelihood of social isolation. Additionally, interventions could include social skills training to help adolescents with perfectionistic concerns communicate their needs and manage interpersonal relationships more effectively.

The present study is not without its limitations, which should be carefully considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study specifically focused on adolescents, which limits the generalizability of our findings to this developmental stage. Future studies should aim to replicate and extend these findings by including younger participants, such as children or early adolescents. This is particularly relevant because perfectionism is likely to be less stable and more malleable during earlier developmental periods, potentially making social support a more influential factor in shaping perfectionistic tendencies. By broadening the age range, researchers could gain a deeper understanding of how perfectionism and social support interact across different stages of development. Second, when investigating reciprocal relationships between variables, some of the expected effects may unfold over more extended periods, such as the role of support from friends in shaping perfectionism, while other expected effects may have shorter optimal intervals, such as the role of perfectionism in shaping social support from friends (cf. Dormann & Griffin, 2015). Future studies should consider this and employ mixed longitudinal designs, including multiple measurements for shorter and more prolonged effects. Future studies should aim to explore this relationship over extended time periods, incorporating multiple waves of data collection to build upon the current findings and mitigate any potential biases or influences related to the timing of data collection. By

adopting a longitudinal design with several measurement points, researchers could capture more nuanced changes in perfectionism and perceived social support over time, providing a clearer picture of how these constructs interact and evolve. Additionally, the present study focused exclusively on adolescents' perceptions of support received from friends, which, while valuable, offers only one perspective on the dynamic interplay between social support and perfectionism. Future research should expand this scope by examining both adolescents' and their friends' perceptions of support, as well as incorporating objective measures of the support actually received. This dual-perspective approach would provide a more complete understanding of how support functions within friendships and its relationship with perfectionism. Furthermore, future studies could investigate potential mediators of these relationships, such as emotional regulation, or interpersonal trust, to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which social support influences perfectionistic tendencies. By addressing these gaps, future research could offer deeper insights into the complex dynamics between perfectionism and social relationships.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Although this study has its limitations, it is one of the first to explore the bidirectional relationships between perfectionism and perceived social support from friends longitudinally, during middle to late adolescence, a developmental stage in which friendships grow increasingly significant and influential for the individual. As a result, we found that perfectionistic concerns may contribute to relative decreases in perceived social support from friends, suggesting potential biases of perfectionism hindering relationships, in accordance with the perfectionism social disconnection model (Hewitt et al., 2017). The present results emphasize the role perfectionistic concerns play in shaping adolescents' friendships, as well as reiterating its potential risks for the interpersonal relationships of individuals with perfectionism.

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