Examining School Satisfaction in Adolescents: The Role of Academic Perfectionism and Meaning in Life

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the mediating effect of meaning in life on the relationship between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction among Turkish adolescents (N = 402; mean age = 15.27, SD = 1.19). Data were collected using the Academic Perfectionism Scale, the Meaningful Living Scale, and the Children's Overall Satisfaction with Schooling Scale. The analysis indicated a negative association between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction, whereas meaning in life was positively linked to satisfaction in school. A bootstrapping procedure was used to assess mediation. The results demonstrated that meaning in life partially mediated the relationship between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction, confirming a statistically significant indirect effect of academic perfectionism on school satisfaction through academic stress.

Keywords:
Adolescent, school satisfaction, academic perfectionism, meaningful living

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence emerges as a critical phase within the human life cycle, influencing individuals' biological, psychological, and social development. During these years, adolescents must not only adapt to physical changes but also engage in identity formation, abstract thinking, and the strengthening of friendships. Additionally, adolescents strive to fulfill various needs such as autonomy, pleasure, prestige, and achievement. This necessity arises as adolescents navigate rapidly changing environments, and it is expected that they develop their competencies at an equal pace to manage these changes effectively (Danielsen, Breivik, and Wold, 2011). The importance of external support, particularly from educational institutions, is believed to significantly facilitate adolescents' adaptation to these transitions. Given that adolescents spend a considerable portion of their time in school, the satisfaction derived from this environment becomes critically important. Consequently, the concept of school satisfaction emerges as a key factor in this context.

The exploration of school satisfaction has primarily been conducted from the broader perspective of Perceived Quality of Life (PQOL). It is characterized as a student's positive appraisal of their cumulative school experiences, as described by Huebner in 1994. Despite differing viewpoints on its standalone significance (Zullig et al., 2009), the relevance of school satisfaction is highlighted through its correlation with academic performance (Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000), behavioral issues (DeSantis, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006), and student attrition rates (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). School satisfaction represents a personal and cognitive judgment regarding the perceived quality of one's educational life, rooted in the theoretical framework concerning children's overall life satisfaction (e.g., Huebner, 1994), a subset of subjective well-being. As a critical element of children's quality of life, school satisfaction is inherently valuable, affirming children's entitlement to positive self-regard and enriching educational environments. Schools are envisioned as nurturing and supportive spaces that are both valued and enjoyed by students. Moreover, the degree of school satisfaction has significant implications for psychological health, engagement in school activities, attendance rates, dropout frequencies, and behavioral issues (Ainley, 1991; Reyes and Jason, 1993). Reviews of the literature indicate that the majority of studies on school satisfaction have focused on comprehending the assumed consequences of student dissatisfaction.

In recent educational discourse and policy, satisfaction and well-being within the school environment have been acknowledged as pivotal concerns and explicit educational goals (Coleman 2009; Currie et al. 2012; OECD 2017). Students disenchanted with school often exhibit lower academic achievements, increased absenteeism, and a heightened risk of discontinuing their education. A significant

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portion of these students opt out of the formal education system, perceiving it as irrelevant to their lives, as noted by Scott in 2015.

Comprehending the factors influencing school satisfaction is crucial for fostering student engagement, cultivating an educational identity, enhancing academic success, and mitigating issues such as alienation, absenteeism, and school dropout. Numerous elements can either augment or diminish school satisfaction, among which academic perfectionism stands out as a significant factor. Perfectionism is characterized by a drive to achieve flawlessness or to at least project an image of perfection (Flett, Hewitt, & Heisel, 2014). This trait, which can yield both positive outcomes like high performance standards and negative effects such as undue stress and self-criticism, varies with the individual and context (Hamachek, 1978). Notably prevalent among college students, perfectionism involves setting exceptionally high academic standards and is linked with a deep concern over mistakes, significant expectations from oneself and one's parents, and persistent doubts about one's choices in educational settings (Frost et al., 1990; Rice & Lopez, 2004).

The concept of perfectionism has evolved over the decades. Historically defined as maintaining "excessively high personal standards" (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007), recent perspectives recognize that perfectionism can be both beneficial and harmful (Ganske & Ashby, 2007). When managed effectively, high personal standards can lead to happiness, excellence, and professional success. However, the pressures and expectations associated with perfectionism are not universal but vary culturally, influenced by differing ethical values, educational systems, parenting styles, and religious beliefs (Burns, 1980).

Perfectionism has been extensively researched in academic settings where it is seen to affect a range of student behaviors and outcomes (Burns, 1980; Ghazal, 2012; Rice & Dellwo, 2001). Scholars like Capan (2010) and Chang & Rand (2000) have documented its impact on student performance, illustrating how this trait can shape educational experiences. The interplay of social expectations, family support, and traditional values that promote academic excellence highlights the intricacy of perfectionism, which students learn from an early age.

Academic perfectionism, defined as the aspiration to achieve the best possible outcomes, encompasses both positive traits such as high performance and negative tendencies like excessive stress and self-criticism, varying with the individual (Flett, Hewitt, & Heisel, 2014; Hamachek, 1978). In the academic realm, however, perfectionism often manifests more heavily through overwhelming concerns about possible mistakes, unachievable personal expectations, significant pressure from parental expectations, an inability to handle criticism from parents, and persistent doubts about one's academic endeavors (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). These perfectionistic concerns are linked to crucial processes that can negatively impact achievement. They typically involve overly critical evaluations and fears of making errors, which are associated with maladaptive cognitive processes such as worry, rumination, and anxiety, potentially stifling productive behavior (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The behaviors stemming from these perfectionistic concerns may reflect learned helplessness, where individuals feel overwhelmed by external pressures and a perceived lack of control. Furthermore, even when academically successful, students exhibiting perfectionism often do not feel a sense of accomplishment, perceiving success as an expected baseline rather than an achievement, thus not deriving sufficient satisfaction from their achievements (Patch, 1984). This dissatisfaction with school performance, compounded by academic perfectionism, is likely to adversely affect their overall school satisfaction.

Meaning in Life as a Mediator Role

The exploration of the concept of meaning in life presents significant scholarly challenges due to its intricate nature, encompassing a range of contradictory perspectives and complex ambiguities. The notion has been perceived variably as an illusion or myth (Camus, 1955; Yalom, 1980), an esoteric preoccupation primarily of intellectual concern (Baumeister, 1991; Taylor, 1989), and a profound attribute achieved only through ethical and virtuous behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2002). Furthermore, it is also considered a fundamental human necessity and motivation (Frankl, 1984 originally published in 1946). Meaning in life, thus, remains an elusive enigma, simultaneously embodying the essence of existence and the abstractness of nonexistence.

Victor Frankl (1965), in his existential analysis, emphasized the "will-to-meaning" as the core human drive. He articulated this as the inherent desire to imbue one's life with as much significance as possible and to realize a broad spectrum of values. The quest for meaning becomes especially pivotal during adolescence,

a stage characterized by new experiences and challenges. Adolescents actively engage in interpreting and structuring their experiences by identifying important elements of their personal and social lives and seeking deeper meanings (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Reker, 2005). This ongoing process is vital for their development and overall well-being, highlighting the essential role of meaning in facilitating personal growth and adaptation during formative years.

Although the intersection of perfectionism with a sense of meaning and purpose presents a compelling area for scholarly investigation, it remains underexplored how perfectionistic behaviors influence one's perception of life's meaning. Moreover, Meriläinen has highlighted that meaning in life is a significant predictor of academic motivation. Consequently, academic perfectionism may diminish the sense of meaning in life, which in turn could weaken satisfaction derived from school experiences. This interrelation suggests that the pursuit of flawless academic achievement might inadvertently undermine the broader psychological and motivational aspects of a student's life, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to academic and personal development.

METHOD

Participants

The study sample consisted of 402 adolescents recruited through convenience sampling. Participants were gathered using online data collection methods, which allowed for a diverse and geographically widespread participant pool. This sampling method facilitated the inclusion of volunteers who were willing to participate in the study. The participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years, with a mean age of 15.27 years (SD = 1.19). The gender distribution of the sample was 56.7% female (n = 228) and 43.3% male (n = 174). Regarding class level, the sample included 35.6% in 9th grade (n = 143), 24.4% in 10th grade (n = 98), 21.6% in 11th grade (n = 87), and 18.4% in 12th grade (n = 74). These class levels represent typical secondary education grades in most educational systems, providing insights into the academic behaviors and attitudes prevalent among early to late adolescents. Participants' perceived academic achievement was distributed as follows: 12.2% reported low achievement (n = 49), 54.2% reported middle achievement (n = 218), and 33.6% reported high achievement (n = 135). This variable was crucial for examining the potential correlations between academic self-perception and the psychological or behavioral variables under study. Additionally, the distribution of perceived socio-economic status (SES) among participants was 12.9% low (n = 52), 71.9% middle (n = 289), and 15.1% high (n = 61).

Table 1. Participants' information

	N	%
Gender		
Female	228	56.7
Male	174	43.3
Class level		
9th	143	35.6
10th	98	24.4
11th	87	21.6
12th	74	18.4
Perceived academic achievement		
Low	49	12.2
Middle	218	54.2
High	135	33.6
Perceived socio-economic status		
Low	52	12.9
Middle	289	71.9
High	61	15.1

Measures

The Academic Perfectionism Scale developed by Odacı, Kalkan and Çıkrıkcı (2017) was employed to assess the levels of academic perfectionism among students. This instrument consists of 13 items.

Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), with higher scores indicating a greater propensity for academic perfectionism. The potential scores range from 13 to 65, with higher scores suggesting higher levels of academic perfectionism. In the present research, the reliability coefficient was .88.

The Meaningful Living Scale developed by Arslan in 2020 was utilized to assess the perceptions of meaningful living among participants. This scale comprises 6 items. Respondents evaluated each statement using a five-point Likert scale, which spans from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Higher scores on this scale indicate a stronger sense of meaningful living. The total scores that can be obtained range from 6 to 30, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of perceived meaningfulness in life. In the present research, the reliability coefficient was .85.

The Children's Overall Satisfaction with Schooling Scale, originally developed by Randolph, Kangas, and Ruokamo in 2009 and adapted into Turkish by Telef in 2014, was employed to evaluate students' overall satisfaction with their schooling experience. This instrument consists of 6 items. Participants rated each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Higher scores on this scale indicate a higher level of satisfaction with schooling. The possible scores range from 6 to 30, with higher scores suggesting greater satisfaction among children with their educational experiences. In the present research, the reliability coefficient was .83.

Data Analysis

Initially, to explore the relationships among academic perfectionism, meaning in life, and school satisfaction, a Pearson correlation analysis was carried out. Additionally, descriptive analyses such as mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The mediation effect of meaning in life was evaluated using a bootstrapping procedure. Following the guidelines by Preacher and Hayes (2008), a Model 4 bootstrapping technique involving 5,000 samples was employed to confirm the significance of the mediation coefficients affecting life satisfaction through psychological distress. According to Preacher and Hayes (2008), for an indirect effect to be deemed significant, the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval must exclude zero.

FINDINGS

The correlational analysis conducted in this study explored the relationships among academic perfectionism, meaning in life, and school satisfaction among adolescents. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients were calculated for each variable (see Table 2). The sample exhibited the following mean scores: school satisfaction (28.74), academic perfectionism (38.65), and meaning in life (18.80). The standard deviations were 8.21 for school satisfaction, 11.31 for academic perfectionism, and 4.93 for meaning in life. Skewness and kurtosis indices suggested minor deviations from a normal distribution: skewness values were -.51 for school satisfaction, .05 for academic perfectionism, and -.42 for meaning in life; kurtosis values were -.36 for school satisfaction, -.52 for academic perfectionism, and -.21 for meaning in life. There was a significant negative correlation between academic perfectionism and meaning in life (r = -.250, p < .001). The correlation between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction was also significant and negative (r = -.293, p < .001). Conversely, a significant positive correlation was found between meaning in life and school satisfaction (r = .431, p < .001).

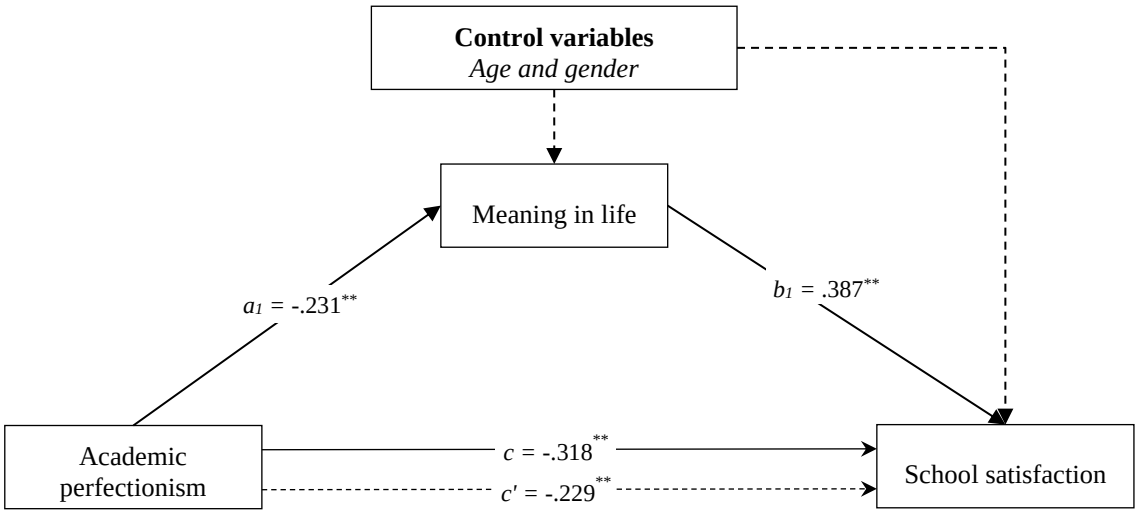
Table 2. Correlations among the variables

Variable	Academic perfectionism	Meaning in life	School satisfaction
Academic perfectionism	–		
Meaning in life	-.250**	–	
School satisfaction	-.293**	.431**	–
Mean	28.74	38.65	18.80
Standard deviation	8.21	11.31	4.93
Skewness	-.51	.05	-.42
Kurtosis	-.36	-.52	-.21

** p < .001

Mediation analysis

The mediation analysis utilized a bootstrapping approach to investigate the influence of meaning in life on the association between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction. Figure 1 illustrates the regression pathways and the direct effects assessed within the mediation analysis.



The investigation assessed the direct impacts, revealing that academic perfectionism significantly inversely influenced meaning in life (coefficient = -0.231, $p < .001$). Moreover, a significant relationship was found between meaning in life and school satisfaction (Coefficient = 0.387, $p < .001$). A bootstrapping procedure was utilized to verify the indirect effects linking academic perfectionism and school satisfaction through meaning in life. The findings supported that academic perfectionism acted as a significant mediator in the connection between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction, with a bootstrap value of -.089 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.141 to -.044.

DISCUSSION

The This study explores the relationship between academic perfectionism and school satisfaction among adolescents, suggesting a potential mediating role of life meaning. Academic perfectionism, defined as the pursuit of flawless academic performance, significantly influences how students perceive their school experiences. Previous research has indicated that high levels of perfectionism may increase psychological stress and negatively impact school satisfaction.

This study's findings that academic perfectionism negatively predicts school satisfaction among adolescents are aligned with the broader literature on the impacts of perfectionism in educational settings. While academic perfectionism is characterized by a high drive for flawlessness and superior performance standards (Flett, Hewitt, & Heisel, 2014; Hamachek, 1978), it also introduces significant psychological burdens such as undue stress and self-criticism (Frost et al., 1990; Rice & Lopez, 2004). These burdens can diminish a student's satisfaction with their school experience, as perfectionistic tendencies often involve excessive concerns about mistakes and unattainable expectations imposed by oneself or one's parents (Frost et al., 1990). Furthermore, although perfectionism can sometimes foster high academic achievement, it frequently does so at the cost of students' well-being, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction even in the face of success (Patch, 1984). This aligns with our findings and suggests that the pursuit of academic perfection may not only hamper the emotional and psychological balance necessary for a fulfilling school experience but also exacerbates issues such as anxiety, stress, and a critical self-view that detracts from overall school satisfaction.

The complex interplay between academic perfectionism and the sense of meaning in life presents a paradoxical challenge, as evidenced in our study. While academic perfectionism demands high standards and flawless performance, it often leads to an erosion of the broader sense of life's meaning (Flett, Hewitt, & Heisel, 2014; Hamachek, 1978). This phenomenon can be attributed to the perfectionist's relentless pursuit of academic excellence, which paradoxically may engender feelings of inadequacy and existential angst, overshadowing the intrinsic joys and satisfactions of educational experiences (Frost et al., 1990). Such a

stringent focus on perfection can detract from an individual's ability to appreciate the larger purpose and value of educational endeavors, thereby diminishing the perceived significance and meaningfulness of life. This negative correlation challenges the individual's capacity to find a coherent sense of purpose when academic endeavors are driven by perfectionistic impulses rather than genuine engagement and fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Conversely, a strong sense of meaning in life significantly enhances school satisfaction, as demonstrated by our findings. When students perceive their academic and personal experiences as meaningful, they are more likely to feel satisfied and engaged with their school environment (Frankl, 1984; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Meaning in life acts as a buffer against the routine stresses and challenges of academic life, providing students with a lens through which they can view their educational experiences as valuable and worthwhile. This perception not only fosters a positive emotional state but also enhances motivation and engagement, which are crucial for sustained academic involvement and success. The affirmation of life's meaning helps students to navigate the complexities of their educational paths with greater resilience and satisfaction, reflecting a deeper, more integrated sense of well-being and personal fulfillment (Seligman, 2002; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the complex dynamics between academic perfectionism, meaning in life, and school satisfaction among adolescents. Our findings reveal that while academic perfectionism negatively predicts school satisfaction, it also diminishes the perceived meaning in life, highlighting the potential pitfalls of excessive perfectionism in academic settings. Conversely, a robust sense of meaning in life not only enhances school satisfaction but also provides a crucial buffer against the negative effects of perfectionism. These insights suggest that educational interventions aimed at reducing perfectionistic tendencies and promoting a sense of purpose and value could significantly benefit adolescents' overall well-being and academic satisfaction.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval

The formal ethics approval was granted by Yildiz Technical University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Report Number: 20240202701). We conducted the study in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration in 1975.

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Research and Publication Ethics Statement

Hereby, we as the authors consciously assure that for the manuscript "Examining School Satisfaction in Adolescents: The Role of Academic Perfectionism and Meaning in Life" the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

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