

ENVIRONMENTAL CHAOS AS A PREDICTOR OF MALADAPTIVE PERFECTIONISM IN GEN Z

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to understand the relationship between chaos and perfectionism among Gen Z. Gen Z feels as if they are not good enough in their daily lives. There is constant self-imposed pressure and competition among Gen Z to perform at the highest level. However, the idea of being “perfect” has also caused chaos among them, as it leads to unfulfilled needs, fatigue, stress, and a constant sense of being on the go, aligning with research that links maladaptive perfectionism to burnout and diminished well-being. A sample of 123 participants, with an age range of 18–30 years old, from any socioeconomic background. To better understand the phenomenon, a correlational study was administered using two major scales: the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS) (Matheny et al., 1995) and Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990). The forms were circulated among them, and the responses were collected via a questionnaire. The data was collected using convenient sampling, so more data could be collected. Findings of the study suggested a positive relationship between chaos and perfectionism. However, there was an insignificant prediction found between chaos and perfectionism (striving) but a significant prediction between chaos and perfectionism (evaluating concerns), explaining 9.4% variation in the scores. The findings may inform targeted interventions such as CBT and ACT. Moreover, constant parental counseling is also to be administered to break the loop of wanting their children to be as “perfect.” This study highlights the drawbacks and downsides of constantly being the perfect human and all the chaos it brings along with perfection.

I. INTRODUCTION

Personality is a central determinant of individual differences, shaping behavior, regulating emotions, and guiding cognitive processes. It provides a lens through which to understand how people interact with their environment, manage stress, and strive toward personal and professional objectives (Andrade et al., 2025). The pursuit of excellence is an inherent aspect of human nature; however, the strategies individuals employ to reach high standards vary considerably. Some approach perfectionistic aspirations with resilience and persistence, whereas others become constrained by self-criticism and a heightened fear of failure (Andrade et al., 2025). Perfectionism itself is conceptualized as a personality dimension characterized by the pursuit of flawlessness, the establishment of exceptionally demanding standards, and a tendency toward overly critical self-evaluation (Boles et al., 2017). It has been hypothesized that perfectionism increases the likelihood of psychological need frustration. For perfectionistic criteria, however, previous research on fundamental psychological needs has produced unclear and sometimes unexpected findings (Chen et al., 2020). Motivation to avoid failure and associated feelings of

frustration related to competence demands have been positively correlated with perfectionism (Dunkley et al., 2012).

Within this context, the concept of chaos is defined as the level of disorganization or confusion present in the family environment, which further illustrates the challenges adolescents may encounter in their developmental settings. Chaos refers to the degree of disorder or confusion in the surroundings that adolescents experience in their family homes (Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale [CHAOS], PsycTESTS Dataset). Several studies have demonstrated that children raised in chaotic homes experience negative developmental consequences, such as decreased academic performance, increased behavioral issues, and poorer social-emotional functioning (Family chaos and child functioning..., 2017). This chaos often manifests as high levels of noise, overcrowding, a lack of predictable routines, and general household turmoil. It is characterized by instability, where daily life feels unpredictable and uncontrollable, making it difficult for adolescents to find quiet spaces for concentration or relaxation. This constant environmental stress can overwhelm a child's developing regulatory systems, leading to heightened physiological arousal and difficulty focusing. Ultimately, a chaotic home environment undermines the sense of security and structure that is crucial for healthy adolescent development, potentially impacting their ability to self-regulate, form stable relationships, and build confidence in navigating their world.

Large-scale and longitudinal studies indicate that adolescents who perceive greater household chaos than their siblings exhibit poorer mental health trajectories into young adulthood, highlighting the importance of subjective experiences of the home environment (Family chaos and child functioning..., 2017). Beyond its impact on mental health, household chaos has been linked to diminished parental support and impaired family functioning. Evidence suggests that these associations may operate through mechanisms such as emotion-regulation difficulties and increased vulnerability to depressive symptoms (Curran & Hill, 2019). More broadly, a wide range of adverse childhood outcomes including delayed social-emotional development, cognitive difficulties, academic failure, and behavioral problems have been linked to family chaos (Flett et al., 1995). Despite these advances, the interplay between household chaos and perfectionism in Generation Z remains underexplored. Integrating motivational theory with environmental risk, a plausible hypothesis is that chaotic home environments may amplify maladaptive perfectionistic concerns through competence-need frustration, fear of failure, and emotion-regulation strain, while showing more inconsistent associations with perfectionistic strivings (Flett et al., 2002).

In Pakistan, Generation Z frequently encounters intense academic demands, limited career opportunities, and strong familial expectations, often within home environments that may be disorganized or unpredictable. Although international research has established associations between household chaos, maladaptive perfectionism, and adverse psychological and academic outcomes, these relationships remain underexplored in the local context (Valdez et al., 2023). Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the relationship between perceived household chaos and multidimensional perfectionism in Generation Z, with particular attention to whether environmental disorganization is differentially associated with perfectionistic concerns and strivings. By situating the study within this critical developmental stage and drawing on recent theoretical and measurement advances, this research aims to refine existing risk models and highlight modifiable pathways that can inform culturally relevant prevention and intervention strategies. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between household chaos and perfectionism in Gen Z by testing three specific hypotheses: (1) there would be a significant relationship between chaos and dimensions of perfectionism (striving and evaluative concerns) among Gen Z; (2) chaos would predict perfectionism (striving for excellence) among Gen Z; and (3) chaos would predict perfectionism (evaluative concerns) among Gen Z.

II. METHOD

Participants

The following study used correlational research design. The sample of the present study consisted of 123 participants out of which 27 were males and 96 were females ($M = 21.85$, $SD = 3.83$) got selected through a convenient sampling method, ranging from 18-30 years. However, a strong inclusion and exclusion criteria was followed. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were followed for the study:

1. To maintain homogeneity, all the participants who fell in the age bracket of 18-30 years were taken into consideration.
2. The participants with a minimum of 10 years of education were included.
3. Anyone under the age less than 18 or more than 30 was excluded from the study.
4. Anyone previously diagnosed with any mental health problems was excluded from the study.
5. Anyone who had no history of any mental health disease was ultimately included in the study.
6. To keep the study wide, anyone from any birth order was taken into consideration.
7. Anyone with any socioeconomic status was included.
8. For a better and in-depth understanding, anyone with any marital status (Single, Divorced, Widowed, or Married) was included.

Measures

A demographic sheet was used, which included: age, gender, birth order, education, socioeconomic status and marital status. **[1]** Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale- Brief is an 8-item scale that was created by Frost et al. (1990). The scale has 2 sub-scales and measures Striving and Evaluating Concerns (EC). The following scale is a 5-point Likert Scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree), which is used in sub-scales as well. Out of 8 items, 4 of them measure striving and 4 measure EC. **[2]** Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS) is a 15-item scale that was brought into being by Matheny et al. (1995). The following scale marks responses in "True" and "False". However, it does not have any sub-scales in it. CHAOS is used to measure disorder in a child due to their home environment.

Procedure

The forms were circulated randomly to people, and they were asked to follow the above-mentioned criteria. Those candidates who were falling in the criteria were asked to stay in the study, and the rest were ultimately excluded. A Convenient Sampling method was used to gain as many responses as possible. The data was later gathered, and SPSS was run over it to generate results. The objective of the entire study, procedures followed, and materials used followed the ethical guidelines given by APA. It was ensured that consent from the participants was obtained. They also had the right to withdraw at any moment during the entire study. It was also communicated that their participation was entirely voluntary and that their data would be used for research purposes only and nowhere else. Moreover, the participants were clearly told that there would be no direct benefits to them; however, they had the privilege to self-reflect after filling in the questionnaire and receiving assistance from a psychologist if needed. Furthermore, the aim of the study was clearly communicated so that there may be no doubts about the respective research.

RESULTS

Table I: Summary of Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	<i>n</i>	%	Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender			Socioeconomic Status		
Male	27	22%	Upper	06	5%
Female	96	78%	Middle	113	92%
Age Range			Upper	06	5%
14 to 20 years	40	33%	Lower	04	3%
21 to 27 years	72	58%	Education		
28 to 30 years	11	9%	Matriculation	02	1%
Marital Status	114	92.5	Intermediate	08	9%
Single	114	92.5%	Undergraduate	94	76%
Married	08	6.5%	Other	19	14%
Divorced	01	1 %			

Birth Order		
First Born	35	28.5%
Middle	47	38%
Last Born	37	30.5%
Only Child	4	3.5%

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample ($N = 123$), providing an overview of participants' distribution across gender, age, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, and birth order. The sample was predominantly female (78%), with males comprising 22%. Most participants fell within the 21–27 age range (58%), followed by 33% aged 14–20 years and a smaller proportion (9%) aged 28–30 years. In terms of socioeconomic status, the majority belonged to the middle class (92%), with only 5% from upper and 3% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Regarding education, most participants were undergraduates (76%), while smaller percentages had intermediate (9%), matriculation (1%), or other levels of education (14%). The marital status data indicated that the vast majority were single (92.5%), with only 6.5% married and 1% divorced. Birth order distribution showed that 38% were middle-born, 30.5% last-born, 28.5% first-born, and a small fraction (3.5%) were only children. Overall, the table highlights a young, predominantly female, middle-class, and unmarried sample, with most participants engaged in undergraduate education.

Table II: Psychometric Properties of the Sample

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Environmental Chaos	5.78	3.72	--		
2. Perfectionism Striving	12.75	2.66	-.05	--	
3. Perfectionism Evaluative Concerns	10.68	3.04	.30**	.20*	--

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Results of the Pearson correlation indicated a significant positive association between environmental chaos and perfectionism evaluative concerns, $r(121) = .305$, $p < .01$. However, no significant relationship was found between environmental chaos and perfectionism striving, $r(121) = -.055$, $p > .05$.

Table III: Summary of Linear Regression Analysis with Chaos as a Predictor of Perfectionism Striving and Perfectionism Evaluative Concerns among Gen Z

Outcomes	β	R^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Perfectionism Striving	.05	.003	.37	.54
Perfectionism Evaluative Concerns	.31	.094	12.49	.00

The findings indicative of an insignificant predictive relationship between environmental chaos and perfectionism striving ($p > .05$) whereas a significant predictive relationship between environmental chaos and perfectionism striving ($p < .001$) among Gen Z.

III. DISCUSSION

The present study sought to investigate the relationship between environmental chaos and perfectionism in Gen Z. The findings provide partial support for the hypotheses and contribute to a nuanced understanding of how chaotic experiences may be differentially linked to the adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism. A significant overall relationship between environmental chaos and perfectionism, was supported. The positive correlation aligns with theoretical frameworks suggesting that external disorder and unpredictability (chaos) can correlate with internal pressures for control and flawlessness (Frost et al., 1990). This finding is consistent with the literature, indicating that individuals may develop perfectionistic tendencies as a compensatory strategy for managing perceived instability in their environments (Matheny et al., 1995). For Gen Z, who navigate a complex digital and socioeconomic landscape, this pursuit of perfection may represent an attempt to impose order and secure validation in a chaotic world (Kurz, 2021).

The results reveal a critical distinction. The prediction that environmental chaos would significantly predict perfectionistic strivings was not supported. This dimension, often associated with the pursuit of high personal standards and organized effort (Frost et al., 1990), was not statistically predicted by levels of chaos in this sample. This non-significant finding suggests that the drive for excellence and goal-setting in Gen Z may be motivated by other factors, such as intrinsic motivation and conscientious personality traits (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), or culturally valued achievement orientations (Curran & Hill, 2019), rather than by a direct reaction to environmental chaos. This differentiation is crucial, as it reinforces the theoretical separation between adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010), indicating that environmental instability may not diminish personal ambition but rather contorts it into a more anxious and evaluative form.

Environmental chaos was a significant predictor of perfectionistic concerns, accounting for 9.4% of the variance. This dimension, characterized by excessive worry over mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and a perceived discrepancy between one's standards and performance (Frost et al., 1990), appears to be more saliently linked to chaotic experiences. This aligns with clinical and developmental models positing that unstable or unpredictable environments foster hypervigilance to criticism and a fragile self-concept contingent on flawless performance (Flett, Hewitt, & Martin, 1995; Dunkley, Blankstein, & Berg, 2012). The constant "self-imposed pressure" described in the introduction may thus be less about a healthy drive for achievement and more about a maladaptive coping mechanism to mitigate the anxiety born from chaos, consistent with theories linking environmental stress to internalized pressure and emotion dysregulation (Shih, 2004; Chen et al., 2020).

Theoretically, these findings underscore the importance of a multidimensional approach to perfectionism. Treating perfectionism as a unitary construct obscures its complex relationship with environmental factors (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Our results suggest that chaos is specifically tied to the evaluative and anxious components of perfectionism, not necessarily to the setting of high goals. This aligns with theories linking environmental unpredictability to heightened vigilance and a preoccupation with mistakes and criticism (Flett et al., 2002; Slaney et al., 2002). This distinction is crucial for developing targeted interventions, as it directs focus towards mitigating perfectionistic *concerns* rather than discouraging personal standards or striving for excellence (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010).

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study found that while overall perfectionism is positively associated with chaos, this relationship is driven specifically by the maladaptive dimension of perfectionistic concerns, not by perfectionistic striving. For Gen Z, living in or perceiving chaotic environments appears to be significantly linked to a harsh, self-critical evaluation style marked by fear and doubt. This highlights the "downsides" and psychological toll of perfectionism when it is fuelled by instability rather than aspiration. Interventions aimed at reducing perfectionism-related distress in this population should therefore focus on mitigating perfectionistic concerns, potentially by addressing sources of chaos and fostering adaptive responses to uncertainty.

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