



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Effect of Perfectionism on Work Overload: The Moderating Role of Mental Toughness**

**<sup>1</sup>Fatima Shamim\* <sup>2</sup> Dr. Hafsa Zahur <sup>3</sup> Bushra Alvi**

1. Lecturer, Management Sciences Department, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Management Sciences Department, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
3. Assistant Director HR, Bahria University Head Office, Islamabad, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author** fatima05shamim@yahoo.com

**ABSTRACT**

The current research aims to investigate the linkages between perfectionism and work overload. Further this study also purposes that this linkage moderated by mental toughness. A quantitative and cross-sectional research method using a convenient - sampling technique was employed to get responses from employees working in different Job- sectors of Pakistan. Data were collected from 261 employees and then tested by utilizing the Hayes's process approach. The findings of the study indicate that work overload is related with perfectionism while mental toughness does not play any significant role between perfectionism and work overload. By utilizing Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study for the first discussed the moderating role of mental toughness.

**Keywords:** Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, Mental Toughness, Perfectionism, Work Overload

**Introduction**

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by the desire for perfection, extremely high performance standards, and a propensity for making unjustified critical judgements of one's own behaviour (Frost et al. 1990). However, perfectionism has many facets and comes in different degrees, each with its own set of characteristics. Perfectionism is therefore best viewed as a complex personality trait (Enns & Cox, 2002). Factor analytic studies have demonstrated the support for two higher-order dimensions: perfectionistic strivings, which captures personal standards and a self-oriented pursuit of perfection, and perfectionistic concerns, which captures worry about errors, feelings of discrepancy between one's expectations and performance, and negative reactions to imperfection (Gotwals et al. 2012; Stoeber & Otto 2006). Numerous positive psychological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural outcomes have been associated with perfectionism (Stoeber, 2018). In this view, establishing the distinction between perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns is essential since they display various, and perhaps conflicting, patterns of relationships with various outcomes. While striving for perfection is more ambiguous, showing positive relationships with both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes (e.g., academic engagement; Damian et al. 2017a, 2017b), perfectionistic concerns are found to have a consistent positive relationship with maladaptive outcomes (e.g., academic burnout; Hill and Curran 2016). (e.g., workaholism; Stoeber & Damian 2017). The links that perfectionistic strivings display with positive traits become even clearer when the overlap with perfectionistic concerns is taken into account and the particular relationships of perfectionistic strivings are studied (Stoeber & Gaudreau 2016).

Current study used Mental Toughness (MT) as a moderator since it has been studied as a major individual disposition that enables people to deal with challenges and endure under pressure. We are examining mental toughness between the relationship between perfectionism and work overload. MT is best known for its influence in sports, but it is now

gaining recognition in a number of other disciplines. It serves as an umbrella term for beneficial psychological resources that can be applied to numerous scenarios involving achievement (Clough et al., 2002; Crust & Clough, 2011; Gucciardi et al., 2015). As a result of having a high level of self-confidence, it not only demonstrates an efficient coping mechanism in the face of stressors (e.g., viewing stressful situations as opportunities for self-improvement), but it also enables people to seek out opportunities for personal growth on their own initiative. (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2015).

This study used work overload as a dependent variable to explore the relationship between mental toughness and job overload, which is defined as employees' perceptions of having more work than they can complete in a certain amount of time (Jex, 1998). Overworked individuals face pressure to work overtime (whether paid or unpaid), have unrealistic workloads, long (and/or irregular) workdays, work at a faster rate, and take less breaks, days off, and vacations (or none at all). Work Overload Measure (Caplan, & Van Harrison 2010); Quantitative overload refers to feelings about the amount of work, working too quickly or too hard, having too much to do, or feeling under too much pressure; and qualitative overload, which refers to an employee's perception that he or she does not have enough time to produce quality work or the skills to complete assignments. According to this study, a person's mental toughness is a resource that helps to reduce job overload through perfectionism.

### **Conservation of Resources Theory (COR Theory)**

Conservation of Resources theory suggest that individuals acquire and maintain resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Whenever there is a threat of loss of the resources, an actual resource loss or lack of an expected gains of resources, individuals react to protect themselves from these potential losses. These resources can be objects (tangible) or energies (intangible). The reaction of individuals usually manifests into withdrawal behaviours until they gain some resources to cope up with the experienced loss (Hobfoll, 1989, 2017).

By utilizing COR theory, we argue that perfectionism may create a stressful situation for the individuals as they usually do not get satisfied easily with their performance until they achieve maximum perfection in it, these perfectionist demands will create a sense of loss of resources in the form of work overload. More precisely, due to over demanding needs of the individuals for themselves to be perfect, they will keep on working on a single task, resultantly, they will get less time to complete all of their tasks, thus their work will pile up and it will create a sense of work overload. This work overload will consume all of the individual's energies that further impedes their work activities due to resource losses.

Individual dispositions and states are considered to be a very important component of COR theory. Advocates of theory suggests that individual differences can be considered as personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), which vary from person to person. These variations determine how employees react to their resource losses. Relying on this assumption of COR, we propose that mental toughness acts as an important personal resource that facilitates people to gain back and retain their resources. Specifically, those employees who possess high mental toughness i.e., those who are able to forget their past failures and are capable of being competitive and positive about their future may have a reserve that can be utilized in this scenario. As per our knowledge, the existing literature is silent on the moderating role of mental toughness in perfectionism and work overload relation. Considering this view, we suggest that employees having high mental toughness are less likely to experience work overload and will be able to cope up with their own over demanding sense of being perfect.

## Literature Review

### The effect of perfectionism on work overload

The most defining characteristic of perfectionism is a drive for complete and utter perfection (Frost et al., 1990). High perfectionists maintain a binary, all-or-nothing view of their performance and are rigid and unforgiving about the degree of performance they plan to achieve (Egan, Piek, Dyck, & Rees, 2007; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). No matter how near you come to meeting these conditions, you fail completely if you don't (Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2017). These performance expectations are not only very strict and subject to harsh criticism, but they are also rigidly adhered to even in circumstances where perfection is not required (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Sherry, Hewitt, Sherry, Flett, & Graham, 2010). Importantly, persons with high levels of perfectionism are more likely to feel relieved and/or compelled to set even higher standards the next time, even when requirements are met (Mor, Day, Flett, & Hewitt, 1995; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002).

Operationally defining workload based on factors like task requirements or work complexity to complete a project is sometimes possible. Workload refers to the extent of excessive demand for employment duties (Seo et al. 2004). By utilizing COR theory, we argue that perfectionism may create a stressful situation for the individuals as they usually do not get satisfied easily with their performance until they achieve maximum perfection in it, these perfectionist demands will create a sense of loss of resources in the form of work overload. More precisely, due to over demanding needs of the individuals for themselves to be perfect, they will keep on working on a single task, resultantly, they will get less time to complete all of their tasks, thus their work will pile up and it will create a sense of work overload. This work overload will consume all of the individual's energies that further impedes their work activities due to resource losses. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1. There is a positive and direct relationship between perfectionism and work overload.

### The moderating role of mental toughness

A major individual difference trait that enables people to cope well with challenges and endure under pressure has been identified as mental toughness (MT). It not only serves as a successful coping strategy in the face of stressors (e.g., viewing challenging situations as opportunities for self-improvement), but also encourages people to actively seek out opportunities for personal development due to high levels of competence confidence (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2015). Individual dispositions and states are considered to be a very important component of COR theory.

Advocates of theory suggests that individual differences can be considered as personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), which vary from person to person. These variations determine how employees react to their resource losses. Relying on this assumption of COR, we propose that mental toughness acts as an important personal resource that facilitates people to gain back and retain their resources. Specifically, those employees who possess high mental toughness i.e., those who are able to forget their past failures and are capable of being competitive and positive about their future may have a reserve that can be utilized in this scenario. As per our knowledge, the existing literature is silent on the moderating role of mental toughness in perfectionism and work overload relation. Considering this view, we suggest that employees having high mental toughness are less likely to experience work overload and will be able to cope up with their own over demanding sense of being perfect. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2. Mental toughness moderates the relationship between perfectionism and work overload such that this positive relationship is weakened in case of higher mental toughness but not when it is lower.

## Theoretical Framework

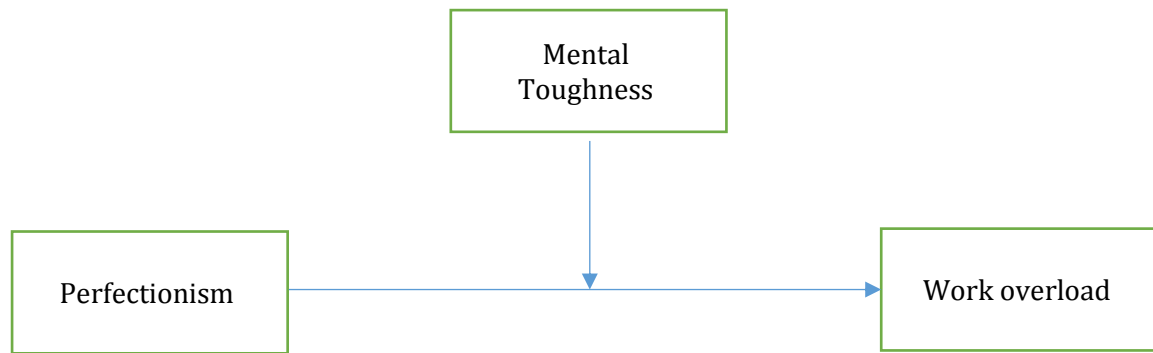


Figure 1. Depicts the Research Model of the study where perfectionism is associated to work overload and mental toughness is acting as a moderator.

## Material and Methods

The research Quantitative in nature as we have collected data through questionnaires. A cross-sectional research methodology was used to collect data for our research. Data was collected at individual level, i.e., all the variables were self-reported. Research was done in the natural environment where work proceeds normally, we didn't interfere the activities of our respondents and therefore research was executed in non-contrived settings. We have targeted the sectors such as education, human resources, finance, telecommunications, sales and marketing, supply chain, and others in order to collect the data.

## Sampling Technique and Sampling Size

Through Convenient sampling technique this study collected information from 380 employees from various departments were approached based on the convenience sampling technique. Questionnaires were distributed in person and via email. 261 totally filled questionnaires were returned out of 380 questionnaires sent out; the rest were rejected, resulting in a 69 percent effective response rate. The sample size chosen is adequate for the investigation for the following reason: According to Nunnally (1978), as a rule of thumb for sample size, some researchers recommend having 5 observations per item, while others recommend having 10 observations per item (Alpher, Blanton, & Nunnally, 1987; Nunnally, 1978). The survey had 38 items, and we collected data from 261 respondents which is an appropriate sample size (i.e., above  $190$  as  $38 \times 5 = 190$ ), as discussed earlier. As a result, the sample size for the study is 261.

## Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in person and via email. The participants were explained the nature of research by sending a cover letter before the original questionnaire in which the objectives of the research were mentioned. Participation in the study was voluntary and respondents were told that the confidentiality of responses will be maintained.

## Sample Characteristics

The respondent's ages, genders, educational levels, hierarchical levels, departments, and other demographic characteristics varied. There were 67.4% men and 32.6% women, with 36.4% of the men and 63.6% of the women being married. The participants' average age was 29. About 62.8% of them had bachelor's degrees, 30.7% had masters or M.Phil. Degrees, and only 6.5% had doctoral degrees or above. 10.3% of respondents specialized in

sales and marketing, 17.6% in finance/accounting, 17.6% in human resources and administration, 6.5% in supply chain, 14.6% in information technology, and 6.9% in education. The majority of them belonged to the department of Finance and Accounting (17.6%), followed by the department of Human Resources and Administration (17.6%). The average length of service with the current organization was 3 years, and average total tenure was about 6 years.

### Measures

A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree was used to get responses on the items. High values indicated high levels of their agreement regarding the particular statement and vice versa.

### Perfectionism

Perfectionism was measured by 16 item scale developed by Feher et al (2020). Sample items of this scale are, "I have a strong need to be perfect" and "I know that I am perfect." The Cronbach  $\alpha$  for this scale was found to be 0.854.

### Work Overload

It was tapped by four item scale developed by Price (2001). Sample items of this scale are, "I do not have enough time to get everything done in my job" and "I have to work very fast in my job." The Cronbach  $\alpha$  for this scale was found to be 0.699 in the current study.

### Mental Toughness

It was measured by 18 item scale developed by Crust (2008). Sample items of this scale are, "It's always good to try challenging things" and "When faced with difficulties, I usually give up." The Cronbach  $\alpha$  for this scale was found to be 0.628

### Results Discussion

**Table 1**  
**Description of the original scales**

Scale	Reference	No. Of Items	Sample Items
Perfectionism	Feher et al (2020)	16	"I have a strong need to be perfect" and "I know that I am perfect."
Work overload	Price (2001)	04	"I do not have enough time to get everything done in my job"
Mental Toughness	Crust (2008)	18	"It's always good to try challenging things"

### Control Variables

This study run one-way ANOVA test to check the influence of demographic variables on our dependent variable and none were found to be significant therefore no control variables are present in our research.

### Data Analysis Techniques

SPSS 20 software, specifically SPSS Macro (PROCESS) developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2007) is used for data analysis. Descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, correlational and regression analysis was performed to test the proposed hypothesis.

## Results and Discussion

### Correlational Analysis

**Table 2**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities for Key Variables in the Study**

Sr No	Variable	Means	SD	1	2	3
1	Perfectionism	4.05	1.03	(0.854)		
2	Work Overload	4.8	1.26	0.28***	(0.69)	
3	Mental Toughness	4.69	0.61	0.44***	0.29 ***	(0.62)

Note: N=261. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities are presented in parentheses. \*\*\*p < .001.

Table 2 gives a summary of the descriptive statistics, Cronbach alpha reliabilities, and Pearson correlations among the main variables of the study. Results depict that there is a significant and positive association among perfectionism and work overload ( $r=0.28$ ,  $p=0.00$ ), significant and positive relationship between mental toughness and perfectionism ( $r=0.44$ ,  $p=0.00$ ) and positive and significant association among work overload and mental toughness ( $r=0.29$ ,  $p=0.00$ ).

### Regression Analysis

**Table 3**  
**Moderated Regressions of Mental Toughness and Perfectionism on Work Overload**

Sr No	Predictor	B	SE	T	P
Mental Toughness as a moderator between Perfectionism and Work Overload					
1	Constant	4.59***	.08	58.77	.00
2	Perfectionism	.24**	.08	3.05	.01
3	Mental Toughness	.43***	.14	3.14	.00
4	P * MT	-.04	.09	-.39	.69 (n.s)

Note: N=261. Unstandardized regression coefficients. Bootstrap sample size=5000. P=Perfectionism, MT=Mental Toughness, n.s=non-significant \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

Further, Table 3 depicts our results for regression. To test our hypothesis we ran regression analysis, and found support for our direct relationships, which shows that perfectionism is positively and directly associated with work overload ( $\beta=0.24$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), thus, Hypothesis 1 was proved. To test our moderation hypothesis, we ran model 1 in SPSS process, but the results were found to be insignificant ( $\beta= -.04$ ,  $p=0.69$ ). Therefore, our hypothesis 2 regarding moderation was not proved.

As mentioned earlier, our direct hypothesis got support from the data proving that those individuals who have perfectionist personalities tend to face greater workload. This study that individuals who are perfectionist are more concerned about perfectionism in their work activities. They tend to stick to one task until they achieve its maximum level (as determined by themselves). Thus, their work piles up and create condition of work overload. According to COR theory, we proposed that mental toughness acts as a buffer between perfectionism and work overload and lower the adverse effects of perfectionism but somehow, we didn't find support for the moderation. The lack of evidence for our moderation might be because the individual's perfectionist thoughts are more significant that it is affecting the whole life of the individuals and mental toughness alone is not enough to mitigate this link.

### Theoretical Implications

The research will add to the existing literature as we have presented a new conceptualization of perfectionism, whereby perfectionism affects the individual's work

activities. The over perfectionist demands of individuals for themselves will create burden on them, they keep on working on one task and put all their efforts in it, thereby, their work keeps on getting pending thus, increasing their work load. This work overload will consume their personal resources so they will try to conserve them and will invest more in their personal resources through their mental strength, which we suggest is mental toughness.

Past research has mostly utilized perfectionism theory to explain the concept of perfectionism which limits the research to one specific domain and focuses on the outcomes of perfectionism mostly. We are utilizing COR theory and trying to explore the factors that might help the individuals to protect themselves from the adverse effects of these stressors by utilizing their personal resources.

## **Conclusion**

Perfectionism is a double-edged sword as it provides positive as well as negative consequences in the organizations. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory is utilized in the current study to explore the relationship between perfectionism and work overload. Mental toughness was also considered as a boundary condition that weakens the relationship between perfectionism and work overload; but we couldn't find support for moderation through our findings.

Perfectionism has both positive and negative effects. The perfectionists, if managed properly can be utilized to achieve effectiveness in the organization. This study will facilitate the managers to focus on the perfectionist people of the organization, managers can work on the strengths of their employees and help them to achieve a moderate level of perfectionism and facilitate them in achieving the desired goals and objectives timely. They can also help employees polish their personal resources and make themselves capable enough so they can manage themselves positively. Managers can also organize workshops and trainings regarding work management, time management and stress management, so they can work effectively.

Despite this study's strengths, it is not free from limitations. Firstly, the current study is cross-sectional, and the reliability values are low, future researchers may use longitudinal or time lagged data to get more precise results to verify the current model.

Secondly, all the data were collected through self-reports. Nonetheless, as the variables used in this study were individual dispositions or perceptions of organizational context, hence employing self-reports was the viable option but in future scholars could also employ multi-sourced data to get more detailed insights.

Thirdly, this research used mental toughness as a moderator in our research which was supposed to act as a boundary condition to weaken the relationship between perfectionism and work overload; but we couldn't find support for moderation through our findings. It will be fruitful for future researchers to examine new moderators such as other first order or second order personality types, like psychological capital etc.

Fourth, the present study didn't examine any mediator in perfectionism and work overload relationship. Future researchers should study other mediating mechanisms e.g., work overload could also be explored as a mediator to further explore other outcomes to get more deeper understandings of the concept for example task performance.

Moreover, the sample size of our study was small, which can be the reason that we couldn't figure out the role of mental toughness as a moderator, the future researchers should use larger sample size, which may alter the results of current model.

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