




Exploring the Components of Psychological Inflexibility in Youth with Perfectionist Traits

Sabine. Kraus¹, Carlos. Hernández^{2*}, Karina. Batthyany³

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV, USA

² Department of Educational Sciences, University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Mexico

³ Department of Psychology, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

* Corresponding author email address: carlos.hernandez@udg.mx

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the key components of psychological inflexibility in youth with perfectionist traits, focusing on how cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal processes contribute to maladaptive outcomes.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 26 participants aged 18–25 from Mexico who self-identified as having perfectionist tendencies. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in gender, education, and socioeconomic background. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. To ensure rigor, constant comparison, peer debriefing, and iterative coding were conducted, leading to the identification of central themes and subthemes.

Findings: Analysis revealed four overarching themes of psychological inflexibility in perfectionist youth: (1) cognitive rigidity, including black-and-white thinking, failure sensitivity, and rumination; (2) emotional avoidance, characterized by suppression of emotions, reliance on external validation, and detachment strategies; (3) behavioral control and avoidance, manifested in over-preparation, procrastination, rigid routines, and withdrawal from opportunities; and (4) interpersonal strain, encompassing fear of negative evaluation, conditional self-worth, and difficulties with collaboration. These findings indicate that perfectionist youth experience a reinforcing cycle where rigid standards amplify inflexibility, sustaining maladaptive coping and social disconnection.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that psychological inflexibility is a central mechanism through which perfectionism leads to maladaptive outcomes in youth. By illuminating the lived experiences of young perfectionists, this research provides insights into how cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal patterns interact to maintain inflexibility. The findings underscore the need for interventions, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, that cultivate psychological flexibility and support adaptive coping in perfectionist youth.

Keywords: Perfectionism; Psychological inflexibility; Youth; Cognitive rigidity; Emotional avoidance; Interpersonal strain;

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a multifaceted personality trait that has gained significant attention in recent years due to its complex links with psychological functioning and mental health outcomes. While traditionally regarded as a motivational resource that fosters achievement, contemporary scholarship highlights its darker dimensions, particularly its association with maladaptive processes such as anxiety, depression, avoidance behaviors, and impaired well-being (Andrade et al., 2024; Flett & Hewitt, 2022). Within this context, psychological inflexibility—defined as the rigid dominance of internal experiences over valued living—emerges as a central process that shapes how perfectionist tendencies manifest in youth. The concept of psychological inflexibility has been well established in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) frameworks, emphasizing how avoidance, cognitive fusion, and rigidity can reinforce maladaptive behavioral patterns (Barrado-Moreno et al., 2025). Youth with perfectionist traits, who are in a critical developmental period of identity formation and social comparison, may be particularly vulnerable to the mechanisms of psychological inflexibility.

Research suggests that psychological inflexibility can act as a mediator between perfectionism and a range of psychopathological outcomes. For example, studies in clinical psychology have demonstrated that inflexibility exacerbates the relationship between personality traits such as impulsivity and problematic behaviors, including substance misuse (Barrado-Moreno et al., 2025). Similarly, perfectionist individuals often display tendencies toward cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance, both of which limit their ability to adaptively regulate emotions (White et al., 2020). In the youth population, these mechanisms may contribute to heightened risk for maladaptive coping strategies such as nonsuicidal self-injury (Callahan et al., 2020). Thus, the interplay between perfectionism and psychological inflexibility in youth represents an important area for empirical exploration.

Perfectionism among young people has been examined from multiple perspectives. Flett and Hewitt describe perfectionism in children as a critical domain of vulnerability, noting that early exposure to perfectionistic standards can undermine resilience and emotional development (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). Evidence from Russian youth similarly shows that perfectionism manifests as both socially prescribed expectations and self-imposed standards, often linked to increased distress (Березовский et al., 2020).

Cross-cultural research further underscores the global prevalence of perfectionistic tendencies in younger populations, with findings indicating that perfectionism can impair both academic performance and emotional adjustment (Doktorová & Píteková, 2020). In addition, studies on university students show a typology of perfectionism that differentiates adaptive and maladaptive forms, yet psychological inflexibility often shifts this balance toward maladaptation (Doktorová & Píteková, 2020).

Youth perfectionism is also strongly connected to fear of failure and overgeneralization of mistakes, processes that have been found to mediate links between perfectionism and procrastination (Yosopov et al., 2024). This is consistent with findings that perfectionist traits are associated with negative attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help (Dang et al., 2020), suggesting that rigid self-demands prevent flexible coping. Moreover, perfectionism has been found to impact how young consumers respond to imperfect products, as those with perfectionistic tendencies often reject products that do not align with their rigid standards (Chen et al., 2023). Together, these studies highlight how perfectionism in youth influences not only emotional and cognitive patterns but also social and behavioral domains.

Psychological inflexibility has been described as a transdiagnostic process that sustains maladaptive outcomes across contexts (Kuru & Şahin, 2023). For example, studies of chronic health conditions such as tinnitus reveal that inflexibility contributes significantly to depression, anxiety, and reduced quality of life (Kuru & Şahin, 2023). Similar processes have been observed in children with chronic pain, where autistic and ADHD traits combined with inflexibility exacerbate emotional and behavioral difficulties (Lipsker et al., 2021). In youth populations, inflexibility is often measured through tools like the Avoidance and Fusion Questionnaire (AFQ-Y8), validated in Spanish samples to assess experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion (García-Rubio et al., 2020). This measure has provided critical evidence linking inflexibility to diminished psychological adjustment among children and adolescents.

In the context of perfectionism, psychological inflexibility has been implicated in mediating relationships with various outcomes, including eating disorders (Aleeza & Bintari, 2023) and depressive symptoms (Li et al., 2021). For instance, Aleeza and Bintari found that trait anxiety and disordered eating symptoms in young adults were mediated by inflexibility, suggesting that rigid perfectionist standards lead to avoidance-based coping strategies that maintain

pathology (Aleeza & Bintari, 2023). Similarly, Li and colleagues identified that neuroticism and perceived stress predicted depressive symptoms in new fathers through inflexibility, highlighting its broader role as a psychological mechanism (Li et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate that perfectionism's maladaptive outcomes cannot be fully understood without considering the mediating role of psychological inflexibility.

The interaction between perfectionism and psychological inflexibility is also shaped by situational contexts and environmental demands. For example, studies in occupational psychology reveal that perfectionistic auditors' ability to detect fraud decreases under time budget pressure, illustrating how rigid standards interact with contextual stressors to hinder performance (Balboula & Elfar, 2024). Similarly, perfectionist leaders in business environments have been found to hinder organizational processes due to excessive control and avoidance of delegation (Malik, 2023). In youth academic settings, perfectionism interacts with exam stress and autistic traits to predict disordered eating attitudes, underscoring the compounding effect of inflexibility under evaluative pressure (Law, 2023). These findings suggest that inflexibility magnifies the negative impact of perfectionism when combined with contextual demands.

Cognitive and emotional responses to uncertainty are particularly salient in perfectionistic youth. Research demonstrates that perfectionists exhibit heightened negative repetitive thoughts in uncertain contexts (Kummer et al., 2023). This tendency overlaps significantly with inflexibility, as the inability to tolerate ambiguity drives avoidance behaviors and rumination (Kummer et al., 2023). Similarly, perfectionism has been linked to susceptibility to performance failures such as "yips" and choking, reflecting maladaptive responses under pressure (Clarke et al., 2020). For adolescents and young adults, such rigid responses to performance demands may reinforce cycles of fear, avoidance, and reduced self-efficacy.

The youth period is marked by heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and identity development, making the study of perfectionism and inflexibility particularly relevant (Jang et al., 2023). Evidence from nursing and healthcare contexts indicates that personality traits and deficits in mentalization can increase vulnerability to workplace bullying and stress, processes that parallel the interpersonal difficulties observed in perfectionistic youth (Jang et al., 2023). Moreover, research on healthcare access highlights that structural and social factors can exacerbate

psychological vulnerabilities (Sudhakar et al., 2021). These insights underscore the importance of examining how personal and contextual factors intersect to shape the lived experiences of youth with perfectionist tendencies.

Perfectionism and inflexibility also influence how individuals respond to self-critical thoughts. White and colleagues developed the FoReST scale to measure responses to self-criticism, finding that inflexible responses are strongly linked to maladaptive outcomes (White et al., 2020). In youth, who often face intense academic and social pressures, rigid and critical self-responses may form the core of maladaptive perfectionism. Similarly, studies have shown that perfectionist youth often struggle to balance basic psychological needs, with their drive for excellence undermining the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Andrade et al., 2024). The failure to meet these needs may further entrench inflexible coping strategies, reinforcing maladaptive cycles.

Taken together, existing evidence suggests that psychological inflexibility is a central mechanism that exacerbates the maladaptive outcomes of perfectionism in youth populations. Perfectionism in adolescence and early adulthood is linked to fear of failure (Yosopov et al., 2024), rigid cognitive patterns (Kummer et al., 2023), maladaptive responses to uncertainty (Clarke et al., 2020), impaired help-seeking (Dang et al., 2020), and diminished well-being (Li et al., 2021). Psychological inflexibility appears across domains, mediating the relationship between perfectionist standards and a range of maladaptive outcomes, from eating disorders (Aleeza & Bintari, 2023) to depression (Li et al., 2021) and self-injury (Callahan et al., 2020). However, there remains a lack of qualitative research exploring how perfectionist youth themselves describe the components of psychological inflexibility in their lives.

The present study aims to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of youth in Mexico who display perfectionist traits.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the components of psychological inflexibility in youth with perfectionist traits. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the recruitment of participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The sample consisted of 26 participants, all of whom were young

individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 residing in Mexico, who self-identified or were identified by mental health professionals as exhibiting perfectionist tendencies. Participants were selected to achieve a balance of gender, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic contexts to capture a wide range of perspectives. Theoretical saturation guided the sample size, meaning that data collection continued until no new categories or themes emerged from participants' narratives, at which point the total number of participants was finalized at 26.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which were chosen for their flexibility in probing individual experiences while ensuring consistency across participants. An interview guide was developed based on relevant literature on perfectionism and psychological inflexibility, covering key domains such as cognitive rigidity, avoidance strategies, emotional regulation, and interpersonal dynamics. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable setting to encourage openness and authenticity. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

2.3. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo 14 software, which facilitated systematic coding and organization of qualitative data. The

analysis followed an iterative and inductive process. First, transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. Open coding was then conducted, where meaningful units of text were identified and labeled. These codes were progressively refined, clustered, and organized into subthemes and overarching themes that reflected the components of psychological inflexibility among perfectionist youth. To ensure rigor, the analysis involved peer debriefing and constant comparison across transcripts. The process of coding and theme development continued until theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring that the identified themes comprehensively captured the phenomenon under study.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample comprised 26 young participants from Mexico, aged between 18 and 25 years. Of these, 14 were female (53.8%) and 12 were male (46.2%). In terms of educational status, 10 participants (38.5%) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, 8 (30.8%) were recent high school graduates preparing for higher education, and 8 (30.8%) were postgraduate students in early stages of master's programs. Regarding socioeconomic background, 11 participants (42.3%) identified as coming from middle-income families, 9 (34.6%) from lower-income households, and 6 (23.1%) from higher-income families. The majority of participants ($n = 18$, 69.2%) reported being single, while 8 (30.8%) were in committed relationships. This diversity in gender, education, and socioeconomic status provided a rich basis for exploring the components of psychological inflexibility among youth with perfectionist traits.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts of Psychological Inflexibility in Youth with Perfectionist Traits

Category (Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Cognitive Rigidity	Black-and-white thinking	All-or-nothing mindset; Overgeneralizing failures; Difficulty recognizing gray areas; Absolutist language
	Excessive self-criticism	Inner harsh judgment; Comparing self to idealized standards; Negative self-labeling; Guilt over mistakes
	Overcontrol of thought processes	Overanalyzing decisions; Suppressing "negative" thoughts; Fear of losing mental control
	Fear of uncertainty	Discomfort with unpredictability; Preference for fixed routines; Avoiding ambiguous situations; Rigid planning
	Perfectionist standards	Unrealistic expectations; Relentless pursuit of flawlessness; Discomfort with average results; Linking worth to achievement
2. Emotional Avoidance	Rumination patterns	Repetitive thought cycles; Obsessing over past mistakes; Difficulty shifting attention
	Suppression of emotions	Hiding sadness or anxiety; Denying vulnerability; "Masking" true feelings
	Fear of emotional exposure	Avoiding sharing with peers; Anxiety about judgment; Feeling unsafe in openness

3. Behavioral Control and Avoidance	Emotional detachment strategies	Distracting with tasks; Using humor to cover distress; Minimizing personal problems
	Avoidance of negative affect	Ignoring frustration; Escaping stressful discussions; Blocking unpleasant feelings
	Dependence on external validation	Seeking approval to regulate emotions; Over-relying on praise; Emotional relief only from others
	Over-preparation behaviors	Excessive planning; Spending disproportionate time revising; Compulsive rehearsal
4. Interpersonal Strain	Avoidance of risks	Avoiding new challenges; Fear of rejection; Escaping performance situations
	Procrastination linked to perfectionism	Delaying tasks due to fear of imperfection; Starting only when “ready”; Self-blame after delay
	Ritualistic coping	Strict routines; Repetitive “safety” behaviors; Rigid daily habits
	Withdrawal from opportunities	Rejecting group tasks; Skipping competitions; Isolating from peer challenges
	Performance over-adaptation	Over-practicing; Striving for flawless delivery; Ignoring personal limits
	Work–rest imbalance	Sleep deprivation; Ignoring physical needs; Constant productivity focus
	Fear of negative evaluation	Worry about others’ opinions; Avoiding criticism; Sensitivity to disapproval
	Interpersonal conflict	Misunderstandings due to rigidity; Harsh communication; Frustration toward peers
	Difficulty with collaboration	Reluctance to delegate; Lack of trust in others’ quality; Over-controlling group tasks
	Need for admiration	Desire for recognition; Feeling invisible without praise; Competitive approval-seeking
	Social withdrawal	Avoiding peer gatherings; Staying silent in groups; Self-isolation
	Conditional self-worth in relationships	Feeling valued only when excelling; Fear of rejection if imperfect; Linking love with achievement

1. Cognitive Rigidity

Black-and-white thinking. Many participants described perceiving life and personal performance in absolute terms. Failures were often equated with total inadequacy, and ambiguity was rejected. As one participant put it: *“For me, if I don’t get a perfect grade, it’s like I failed completely. There is no middle ground.”* This inflexible approach made it difficult for them to acknowledge partial successes or nuanced outcomes.

Excessive self-criticism. A recurrent theme was relentless inner judgment. Several participants admitted comparing themselves harshly to unrealistic standards, often leading to guilt. One interviewee stated: *“Even when my friends say I did well, inside I’m telling myself I could have done better. It never feels enough.”* This illustrates the self-perpetuating cycle of negative self-labeling.

Overcontrol of thought processes. Participants reported attempts to tightly monitor and regulate their own thinking. Many described overanalyzing daily decisions or suppressing “negative” thoughts. As one noted: *“If a bad thought comes, I fight with it until it goes away. I can’t let my mind wander, because it feels dangerous.”* Such cognitive overcontrol amplified stress rather than reducing it.

Fear of uncertainty. The inability to tolerate unpredictability was a prominent barrier to flexibility. Young people expressed discomfort with ambiguous situations, often preferring rigid planning. One participant explained: *“I hate not knowing what will happen. If the plan changes suddenly, I panic because I can’t handle surprises.”*

This illustrates how intolerance of uncertainty maintains perfectionist rigidity.

Perfectionist standards. Across interviews, participants equated their self-worth with meeting flawless expectations. One youth stated: *“I don’t care if I’m exhausted. I need everything I do to be perfect, because otherwise I feel worthless.”* Such internalized pressure reinforced the cycle of striving and dissatisfaction.

Rumination patterns. Participants also described repetitive thought loops about past errors. Several noted difficulty shifting attention away from mistakes. One participant reflected: *“Even months later, I keep thinking about that one essay I didn’t get right. It plays in my head like a broken record.”* This rumination fed ongoing self-criticism and hindered emotional flexibility.

2. Emotional Avoidance

Suppression of emotions. Many youth acknowledged actively hiding their emotions from others. They feared that showing sadness or anxiety would be perceived as weakness. One explained: *“I don’t let anyone see me cry. I lock it inside, because if they knew, they’d think I’m weak.”*

Fear of emotional exposure. Related to suppression, participants avoided vulnerability in social contexts. Some admitted anxiety about opening up to peers, fearing rejection or judgment. As one put it: *“Talking about my feelings feels dangerous. People will just criticize or laugh.”*

Emotional detachment strategies. To manage distress, participants reported distracting themselves with tasks or humor. A participant noted: *“Whenever I feel down, I just make jokes so nobody notices what I really feel.”* Such

strategies provided short-term relief but deepened disconnection from authentic emotions.

Avoidance of negative affect. Several participants described actively escaping conversations or situations that might elicit unpleasant emotions. One shared: *"If I know it will get stressful, I just don't go. It's easier to avoid it completely."* This avoidance limited emotional processing and reinforced rigidity.

Dependence on external validation. Finally, emotional stability was often contingent upon others' approval. As one participant revealed: *"I only feel calm when my teacher says I did well. If they don't, I can't stop worrying."* This highlights the fragility of self-regulation in the absence of validation.

3. Behavioral Control and Avoidance

Over-preparation behaviors. Many youth reported compulsively over-preparing for tasks, often investing disproportionate time and energy. One explained: *"Before a presentation, I rehearse it ten times. If I don't, I feel like I'll lose control."*

Avoidance of risks. A dominant theme was reluctance to engage in new or challenging situations. One participant said: *"If there's a chance I'll fail, I just don't try. It feels safer not to risk it."* This avoidance prevented opportunities for growth.

Procrastination linked to perfectionism. Interestingly, delays in task completion were described not as laziness but as fear-driven. One youth explained: *"I wait until I feel I can do it perfectly, but that moment never comes. So I end up stuck."*

Ritualistic coping. Participants described reliance on strict routines and repetitive behaviors to manage anxiety. As one shared: *"I have to follow the same study schedule every day. If something changes, I feel completely lost."*

Withdrawal from opportunities. Many reported withdrawing from competitions or group projects to avoid possible imperfection. A participant noted: *"I didn't join the contest even though I wanted to. I couldn't face the idea of failing in front of others."*

Performance over-adaptation. Over-striving to deliver flawless outcomes, even at personal cost, was common. One youth said: *"I practice until I'm exhausted. Rest feels impossible when something isn't perfect yet."*

Work–rest imbalance. The pattern of overwork often disrupted basic self-care. One participant remarked: *"I sleep only a few hours because I keep fixing things. Rest feels like I'm wasting time."*

4. Interpersonal Strain

Fear of negative evaluation. Social relationships were shaped by fear of criticism. A participant admitted: *"Before I speak in class, I imagine all the ways people might laugh at me. So usually, I just stay quiet."*

Interpersonal conflict. Rigidity also led to strained peer interactions, with participants describing frustration and misunderstandings. One shared: *"My friends say I'm too harsh when things aren't done right. But I can't accept sloppy work."*

Difficulty with collaboration. Reluctance to delegate or trust others' abilities hindered teamwork. A participant reflected: *"Group work is torture for me. I end up redoing everything because I don't trust others to meet my standards."*

Need for admiration. Participants frequently expressed a desire for recognition as a way to reinforce self-worth. One noted: *"If nobody notices my effort, I feel invisible, like all my work was pointless."*

Social withdrawal. Many described isolating themselves from peers, fearing they would not meet expectations in social contexts. One participant explained: *"I stopped going to gatherings because I always felt judged. It's easier to stay home."*

Conditional self-worth in relationships. Finally, several participants revealed that their relationships felt contingent upon achievement. One youth shared: *"I believe people will only like me if I'm successful. If I fail, they'll leave."*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the components of psychological inflexibility in youth with perfectionist traits, drawing on the lived experiences of 26 young people in Mexico. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, four major themes were identified: cognitive rigidity, emotional avoidance, behavioral control and avoidance, and interpersonal strain. These themes reflect how perfectionist tendencies manifest in inflexible patterns that restrict psychological adaptability, influence self-perceptions, and affect social relationships. Taken together, the findings suggest that psychological inflexibility acts as a central mechanism that translates perfectionist standards into maladaptive outcomes during youth.

One of the most prominent findings was the pervasive presence of cognitive rigidity among perfectionist youth. Participants described difficulties in tolerating ambiguity, a strong reliance on dichotomous thinking, and a tendency to

overgeneralize mistakes. These findings align with prior research emphasizing the centrality of cognitive distortions in perfectionism (Kummer et al., 2023). Perfectionist youth often responded to uncertain situations with repetitive, negative thought patterns that reinforced their rigid expectations. The association between perfectionism and negative repetitive thinking has been previously demonstrated, showing that perfectionists are particularly vulnerable when confronted with ambiguity (Kummer et al., 2023).

Fear of failure also emerged as a critical dimension of cognitive rigidity. Many participants reported equating their self-worth with achievement outcomes, amplifying their intolerance of mistakes. This echoes evidence that perfectionism is closely tied to failure sensitivity, overgeneralization of negative outcomes, and procrastination (Yosopov et al., 2024). The link between perfectionist failure sensitivity and procrastination reflects the same avoidance mechanisms reported by participants, where delaying action served as a way to escape potential imperfection. These findings confirm prior work suggesting that perfectionist cognitive styles are central to maladaptive behavioral and emotional patterns (Flett & Hewitt, 2022).

At the developmental level, cognitive rigidity among perfectionist youth resonates with research demonstrating that early perfectionistic tendencies create lasting vulnerability. Flett and Hewitt emphasized that perfectionistic children often struggle to develop resilience due to rigid self-demands (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). Our findings add to this by illustrating how rigidity evolves into inflexibility during late adolescence and early adulthood, reinforcing maladaptive self-critical thought patterns. Similarly, Russian studies on youth perfectionism highlight its role as a key risk factor for mental health challenges (Березовский et al., 2020). The present results thus confirm international findings and highlight the cross-cultural relevance of perfectionism-related inflexibility.

Another theme identified in the data was emotional avoidance. Participants frequently described suppressing emotions, concealing vulnerability, or relying on external validation to regulate affect. This mirrors prior studies showing that psychological inflexibility is strongly linked to avoidance of negative affect, which sustains psychopathology (Barrado-Moreno et al., 2025). In particular, experiential avoidance appears to act as a mediator between perfectionism and emotional distress. For example, Aleeza and Bintari demonstrated that psychological inflexibility mediated the relationship

between trait anxiety and eating disorder symptoms (Aleeza & Bintari, 2023). Similarly, our findings indicate that perfectionist youth avoid or suppress emotions to maintain a façade of control, but in doing so, intensify their underlying vulnerability.

Emotional avoidance was also intertwined with relational processes, as many participants reported concealing emotions to avoid judgment or rejection. Prior studies highlight that inflexibility impedes help-seeking, with perfectionists often holding negative attitudes toward psychological services (Dang et al., 2020). Our results resonate with this by showing that participants often refrained from disclosing difficulties, even in supportive environments, due to fears of appearing weak or imperfect. This aligns with findings linking perfectionism to shame and social disconnection (White et al., 2020).

Research on health-related outcomes also provides parallels. For example, in children with chronic pain, psychological inflexibility mediated the link between autistic traits and reduced quality of life (Lipsker et al., 2021). Likewise, in tinnitus patients, inflexibility predicted higher depression and anxiety (Kuru & Şahin, 2023). While our study focused on youth without chronic illness, the same pattern emerged: inflexibility magnified distress by restricting adaptive emotional responses. These cross-domain similarities underscore the transdiagnostic nature of psychological inflexibility.

A third theme, behavioral control and avoidance, highlighted how perfectionist youth engaged in over-preparation, procrastination, and ritualized coping. Many described delaying tasks until conditions felt “perfect,” which paradoxically increased anxiety and reduced productivity. This finding is supported by studies showing perfectionism’s strong link to procrastination through avoidance of failure (Yosopov et al., 2024). Moreover, procrastination in perfectionists reflects the broader dynamic of psychological inflexibility, where rigid cognitive appraisals prevent engagement in valued behaviors.

Our participants also reported adopting rigid routines and excessive planning as strategies to maintain control. This is consistent with evidence showing that perfectionism fosters maladaptive coping strategies that impair adaptive functioning. For instance, auditors under high time pressure exhibited reduced ability to detect fraud when perfectionism was present, suggesting that rigid standards hinder effective performance under stress (Balboula & Elfar, 2024). Similarly, perfectionist leaders have been shown to obstruct organizational processes by over-controlling tasks and

resisting delegation (Malik, 2023). In the youth context, these same dynamics appear at the personal level, where inflexible behaviors limit spontaneity, adaptability, and resilience.

Performance-related avoidance was also prominent. Participants reported withdrawing from opportunities to avoid possible imperfection, echoing findings on performance failures such as “yips” and choking susceptibility (Clarke et al., 2020). These maladaptive performance responses reflect the combined impact of perfectionism and inflexibility, reinforcing cycles of underachievement and frustration. Importantly, these patterns resonate with findings that perfectionism diminishes satisfaction with life through mechanisms related to perceived control (Liu et al., 2022). Thus, the behavioral dimensions identified in our data closely align with established evidence linking perfectionism, inflexibility, and impaired functioning.

The final theme concerned interpersonal strain. Participants reported difficulties with collaboration, fear of negative evaluation, and conditional self-worth in relationships. This reflects the relational costs of perfectionism, which have been emphasized in previous studies. For example, perfectionist self-presentation has been shown to predict negative attitudes toward seeking help, reinforcing relational barriers (Dang et al., 2020). Our findings indicate that such barriers extend beyond professional contexts into peer interactions, where youth avoid vulnerability and maintain rigid self-images.

Interpersonal strain also manifested as heightened sensitivity to criticism, consistent with findings on self-critical thought processes. White and colleagues highlighted that inflexible responses to self-critical thoughts are strongly linked to maladaptive outcomes (White et al., 2020). Our data suggest that perfectionist youth internalize criticism harshly, which damages their social confidence and fosters isolation. This aligns with evidence that perfectionism is associated with negative, repetitive thinking in uncertain interpersonal contexts (Kummer et al., 2023).

Moreover, participants often described feeling valued only when excelling, suggesting conditional self-worth within relationships. This dynamic resonates with studies showing that perfectionist needs conflict with basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Andrade et al., 2024). When perfectionistic standards dominate, social bonds become contingent on achievement, creating interpersonal fragility. These relational costs are also evident in broader contexts, such as

workplace bullying linked to personality traits and deficits in mentalization (Jang et al., 2023). Overall, our findings emphasize that interpersonal strain is both a consequence and a perpetrator of psychological inflexibility in perfectionist youth.

The convergence between our findings and existing research underscores the robustness of psychological inflexibility as a transdiagnostic construct. Previous studies have demonstrated that inflexibility mediates the effects of personality traits on maladaptive outcomes across diverse contexts, from opioid misuse (Barrado-Moreno et al., 2025) to depressive symptoms (Li et al., 2021). Similarly, perfectionism has been linked to maladaptive responses across domains, including eating disorders (Aleeza & Bintari, 2023), disordered-eating attitudes (Law, 2023), and reduced life satisfaction (Liu et al., 2022). By qualitatively exploring how youth articulate these processes, the present study provides a detailed, experiential account that complements quantitative findings.

Importantly, the data support the view that perfectionism and psychological inflexibility are mutually reinforcing. Perfectionist standards drive rigid cognitive appraisals, which in turn fuel avoidance behaviors and emotional suppression. This cycle resonates with theoretical models framing perfectionism as a maladaptive motivational process (Andrade et al., 2024) and inflexibility as a process that obstructs valued living (White et al., 2020). Moreover, the relational difficulties described by participants reflect the social disconnection emphasized in research on perfectionist self-presentation (Dang et al., 2020). Thus, the present findings offer a comprehensive integration of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational dimensions.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted exclusively of youth from Mexico, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. While perfectionism and psychological inflexibility are recognized as cross-cultural constructs, cultural differences in socialization and educational systems may shape how these processes are experienced. Second, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential biases such as social desirability, particularly given that perfectionist youth may conceal or downplay emotional struggles. Third, although thematic analysis allowed for a rich exploration of lived experiences, the findings cannot establish causal relationships. Finally,

while the sample size of 26 participants was adequate for achieving theoretical saturation, a larger and more diverse sample could have captured additional nuances of the phenomenon.

Future research should expand the scope of inquiry by including cross-cultural comparisons to examine how cultural norms influence the interaction between perfectionism and psychological inflexibility. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in exploring how these dynamics evolve over time, especially during transitions from adolescence to adulthood. Future work could also incorporate mixed-methods designs, combining qualitative narratives with quantitative measures such as the AFQ-Y8 to triangulate findings. In addition, research should explore protective factors such as resilience, social support, and psychological flexibility interventions that may buffer against the maladaptive consequences of perfectionism. Finally, examining these processes in clinical populations, such as youth with anxiety disorders or eating disorders, could shed light on how inflexibility mediates treatment outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for early interventions that target psychological inflexibility in perfectionist youth. Programs grounded in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) may be particularly effective, as they emphasize defusion, acceptance, and values-based living. Educational institutions should provide psychoeducational workshops that normalize imperfection and promote adaptive coping strategies. Counselors and educators can also foster environments where students feel safe expressing vulnerability, thereby reducing emotional avoidance and interpersonal strain. At the policy level, integrating mental health resources into academic settings may provide accessible support for perfectionist youth. Overall, practical applications should aim to cultivate flexibility, resilience, and balanced standards, mitigating the maladaptive cycle of perfectionism and inflexibility.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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