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Parental Overprotection and Young Adults' Autonomy: The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to examine the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived parental overprotection and autonomy in Malaysian young adults.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational research design was employed involving a sample of 423 university students in Malaysia, selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table. Participants completed standardized measures including the Parental Bonding Instrument (Overprotection subscale), General Self-Efficacy Scale, and the Autonomous Functioning Scale. Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations, and AMOS-21 for structural equation modeling (SEM). Assumptions such as normality, multicollinearity, and linearity were checked and confirmed before inferential analysis.

Findings: The results indicated a significant negative correlation between parental overprotection and autonomy ($r = -.47$, $p < .001$), and between parental overprotection and self-efficacy ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). Self-efficacy was positively correlated with autonomy ($r = .53$, $p < .001$). SEM results showed that parental overprotection significantly predicted lower self-efficacy ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < .001$) and autonomy both directly ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < .001$) and indirectly via self-efficacy ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < .001$). The total effect of parental overprotection on autonomy was substantial ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < .001$). Model fit indices supported the adequacy of the hypothesized model ($\chi^2/df = 1.74$; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.041).

Conclusion: These findings suggest that parental overprotection has a significant negative impact on young adults' autonomy, both directly and through its detrimental effect on self-efficacy. Promoting self-efficacy may help mitigate the negative developmental consequences of overprotective parenting, especially in collectivist cultures where parental control is often normative.

Keywords: *Parental Overprotection; Self-Efficacy; Autonomy; Young Adults*

1 Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood marks a critical period of psychological development during which young individuals strive for autonomy, identity formation, and self-directed decision-making. Among the many psychological constructs central to this developmental stage, autonomy—the ability to function independently while maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships—stands as a core marker of successful psychosocial adaptation. Parental behaviors during childhood and adolescence have been widely acknowledged as foundational to this transition, with overprotective parenting emerging as a key inhibiting factor in the development of autonomy in young adults (Campbell-Salome, 2018; Godino et al., 2018). Overprotective parenting, characterized by excessive control, risk aversion, and restricted freedom, has been shown to negatively affect a child's capacity for self-regulation and decision-making, which are vital components of adult autonomy (Panhwar & Tariq, 2024).

Parental overprotection has been defined as a style of parenting that limits children's exposure to risks, decision-making opportunities, and autonomy-supportive experiences under the guise of protection and concern (Jeydhakshana et al., 2025). While well-intentioned, such parenting may impede the development of critical life skills and psychological resources, such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, and confidence in one's capabilities (Meena et al., 2024; Rattaz et al., 2017). Young adults raised under these conditions often experience reduced self-efficacy and diminished capacity for autonomous functioning, resulting in psychological distress, academic indecision, and relational difficulties (Jessop et al., 2022; Lei & Traylor, 2023). Notably, several scholars have emphasized the long-term psychosocial consequences of controlling parenting practices, pointing to links with anxiety disorders, low resilience, and impaired identity development in adulthood (Fairuzza et al., 2023; Shanoora et al., 2025).

Emerging adulthood (typically between ages 18 and 25) is widely considered a sensitive period for the consolidation of autonomy, with increased expectations for independent decision-making, career development, and relationship building (Alam & Bose, 2021; Liu et al., 2020). However, when emerging adults carry forward the psychological residue of parental overcontrol, their progression toward autonomous functioning can be hindered (Luailik & Sa'diyah, 2023). Indeed, studies on young adult adjustment suggest that autonomy is not merely a personality trait but a developmental outcome shaped by the quality of early parent–child relationships (E. et al., 2024; Lei & Traylor, 2023). For instance, individuals who experienced excessive parental involvement during adolescence may report greater dependence on external validation, decreased initiative, and lower life satisfaction (Blake & Hopper, 2022a, 2022b).

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to manage tasks and overcome challenges, has emerged as a potential mediator in the relationship between parenting behaviors and young adult outcomes (Ndou, 2023). The role of self-efficacy is particularly salient in buffering the negative effects of parental overprotection. When young adults possess strong self-efficacy, they are more likely to interpret life challenges as surmountable and exert greater agency over their decisions (Liang et al., 2019). Conversely, diminished self-efficacy may amplify the deleterious consequences of overparenting, such as feelings of helplessness, dependency, and avoidance behaviors (Calandri et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2022). Several theoretical models, including Bandura's social cognitive theory, position self-efficacy as a central mechanism by which environmental influences (such as parenting) shape adaptive functioning (Godino et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020).

Empirical studies lend support to the mediating function of self-efficacy in the development of autonomy. For example, adolescents reporting overprotective maternal behaviors scored significantly lower on measures of self-confidence and higher on dependency-related tendencies (Fifield et al., 2025; Tuazon & Gressard, 2021). These findings suggest that autonomy may not be directly undermined by parental behavior alone, but rather through internalized beliefs about personal competence shaped in the context of parent–child interactions (Ndou & Ngwenya, 2022). In turn, these internalized beliefs become pivotal in shaping young adults' capacity for independent living, career-related exploration, and interpersonal functioning (Sandler et al., 2018; Stormshak et al., 2019).

Parental overprotection has also been found to limit opportunities for experiential learning, which is crucial for the cultivation of efficacy beliefs. Young people who are consistently shielded from challenges are deprived of chances to build resilience and acquire problem-solving skills, which weakens their confidence in managing new situations (Cabral et al., 2024; Campbell-Salome, 2018). Furthermore, this pattern of control may foster psychological dependence, reinforcing the perception that success is contingent on parental guidance rather than

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individual competence (Tuazon & Grunhaus, 2025). In collectivist cultures where parental authority is highly valued, these dynamics may be intensified, potentially creating a cycle of inhibited autonomy and learned helplessness (Lei & Traylor, 2023; Shanoora et al., 2025).

Compounding the concern is the growing trend of "helicopter parenting," a behavioral manifestation of overprotectiveness, which involves close monitoring and frequent interference in the personal and academic lives of young adults (Jeydhakshana et al., 2025). Research indicates that helicopter parenting may undermine intrinsic motivation and discourage initiative-taking among youth (Meena et al., 2024). In such contexts, self-efficacy may serve as a protective factor by enabling young adults to develop a sense of personal agency despite parental over-involvement (Edwards et al., 2017; Fairuzza et al., 2023). Studies have shown that self-efficacious individuals are better equipped to resist parental pressure, assert their preferences, and pursue autonomous goals even within controlling family environments (Liang et al., 2019; Ndou, 2023).

Cultural dimensions also play a pivotal role in shaping how overprotection and autonomy are perceived and enacted. In collectivist societies such as those in Southeast Asia, overprotective parenting is often rationalized as a form of care and moral responsibility rather than intrusion (Cabral et al., 2024; Lei & Traylor, 2023). This cultural nuance complicates the interpretation of parental control and may obscure its psychological consequences. Nonetheless, studies in various Asian and African contexts confirm that excessive parental regulation—regardless of intent—can result in lowered psychological well-being and diminished developmental competence in emerging adults (Aarthy, 2023; Ndou & Ngwenya, 2022). These cross-cultural findings underscore the importance of contextualizing parenting practices when assessing their developmental outcomes.

The interplay between parenting styles, self-efficacy, and autonomy also bears practical implications for educational institutions, mental health professionals, and family intervention programs. Enhancing young adults' self-efficacy through targeted interventions may serve as an effective strategy to counterbalance the restrictive effects of early parental control (Liu et al., 2020; Sandler et al., 2018). Programs that promote decision-making skills, encourage goal setting, and foster resilience have demonstrated success in improving both self-efficacy and autonomous functioning in youth (Fifield et al., 2025; Jessop et al., 2022). Additionally, psychoeducational efforts aimed at parents may help mitigate overprotective behaviors by promoting autonomy-supportive parenting techniques that value children's input and encourage responsibility (Calandri et al., 2021; Tuazon & Grunhaus, 2025).

Taken together, the current body of research points to a significant and complex relationship between parental overprotection and young adults' autonomy, mediated by the level of self-efficacy developed during earlier life stages. While much is known about the direct consequences of parenting styles on youth outcomes, relatively few studies have empirically tested the mediating mechanisms underlying this association. Moreover, there is a growing need for culturally sensitive investigations that consider how social norms and family structures influence both parenting practices and developmental expectations (Luailik & Sa'diyah, 2023; Malik et al., 2022).

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived parental overprotection and autonomy in young adults.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships among parental overprotection, self-efficacy, and young adults' autonomy. The sample comprised 423 undergraduate students from various public universities across Malaysia. The sample size was determined based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for a population exceeding 10,000, ensuring adequate statistical power. Participants were recruited using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender and academic faculties. Eligibility criteria included being between the ages of 18 and 25, currently enrolled in a university program, and having lived with at least one parent until the age of 16.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Parental Overprotection

Parental overprotection was assessed using the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI) developed by Parker, Tupling, and Brown (1979). This widely used self-report measure contains 25 items that assess individuals' perceptions of their parents' behavior during their first 16 years of life. The PBI consists of two primary subscales: Care and

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Overprotection/Control. The Overprotection subscale specifically captures controlling, intrusive, and overprotective behaviors. Respondents rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (very unlike) to 3 (very like). Higher scores on the Overprotection subscale indicate greater perceived parental overprotection. The instrument has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding 0.85, and its construct validity has been supported across various cultural contexts and age groups.

2.2.2 Self-Efficacy

To measure self-efficacy in young adults, the study utilized the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995). This 10-item unidimensional scale is designed to assess an individual's belief in their ability to cope with a variety of demanding situations and to exert control over one's own functioning. Participants respond to each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (exactly true), with higher total scores indicating stronger general self-efficacy. The GSE has been validated in numerous languages and populations and has shown strong psychometric properties, including Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally ranging from 0.76 to 0.90, indicating good internal reliability. Its convergent and predictive validity have also been well established in both clinical and non-clinical samples.

2.2.3 Adults' Autonomy

Autonomy in young adults was measured using the Autonomous Functioning Scale (AFS) developed by Weinstein, Przybylski, and Ryan (2012). The AFS consists of 15 items divided into three subscales: Self-Congruence (reflecting alignment between behaviors and values), Interest-Taking (reflecting curiosity and self-reflection), and Resistance to Control (reflecting the ability to resist external pressures). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true), with higher scores reflecting greater autonomy. The AFS has demonstrated solid internal consistency, with subscale alphas ranging from 0.72 to 0.83, and the total scale exhibiting good reliability. The validity of the AFS has been supported in studies across diverse cultural backgrounds and is considered a robust tool for assessing subjective autonomy in emerging adults.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were computed for demographic variables. To assess the relationships among variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the dependent variable (autonomy) and the independent variables (parental overprotection and self-efficacy). Additionally, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed in AMOS-21 to examine the hypothesized mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between parental overprotection and autonomy. Model fit was evaluated using standard indices including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Chi-square/df ratio.

3 Findings and Results

Of the 423 participants, 158 (37.35%) were male and 265 (62.65%) were female. Regarding age, 221 participants (52.25%) were between 18 and 21 years old, while 202 participants (47.75%) were aged 22 to 25. In terms of academic level, 174 students (41.13%) were from year one, 107 (25.29%) from year two, 82 (19.38%) from year three, and 60 (14.18%) from year four. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines, with the largest proportion coming from social sciences (n = 167, 39.48%), followed by health sciences (n = 129, 30.50%), and technical/engineering fields (n = 127, 30.02%).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables (N = 423)

Variable	Mean	SD
Parental Overprotection	42.68	7.53
Self-Efficacy	31.12	5.86
Autonomy	52.39	6.97

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The results in Table 1 show that the mean score for perceived parental overprotection was 42.68 (SD = 7.53), indicating a moderately high level of perceived overcontrol among participants. The mean self-efficacy score was 31.12 (SD = 5.86), suggesting a moderate belief in personal capabilities. The mean autonomy score was 52.39 (SD = 6.97), reflecting a moderate level of self-governance among young adults in the sample.

All statistical assumptions were tested and met prior to conducting correlational and SEM analyses. The assumption of normality was evaluated through skewness and kurtosis values, which ranged between -0.72 and 0.81 for all study variables, indicating acceptable normal distribution. Linearity was confirmed by inspecting scatterplots, and homoscedasticity was assessed through residual plots, showing no major violations. Multicollinearity was checked using variance inflation factors (VIF), all of which were below 2.5, suggesting no significant multicollinearity. Additionally, Mahalanobis distance was used to detect multivariate outliers, resulting in the exclusion of 6 cases, leaving 423 valid cases for analysis. These findings confirm the suitability of the data for both correlation and structural equation modeling.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Parental Overprotection	—		
2. Self-Efficacy	–.41** (p < .001)	—	
3. Autonomy	–.47** (p < .001)	.53** (p < .001)	—

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients. Parental overprotection was significantly and negatively correlated with self-efficacy (r = –.41, p < .001) and autonomy (r = –.47, p < .001). In contrast, self-efficacy was positively correlated with autonomy (r = .53, p < .001). These results support the hypothesized relationships between the study variables.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Criterion
χ^2 (Chi-Square)	128.42	—
df	74	—
χ^2/df	1.74	< 3.00 (acceptable)
GFI	0.94	> 0.90 (good)
AGFI	0.91	> 0.90 (good)
CFI	0.96	> 0.95 (excellent)
TLI	0.95	> 0.95 (excellent)
RMSEA	0.041	< 0.06 (excellent)

As shown in Table 3, the structural model demonstrated good fit to the data. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df = 1.74) was within acceptable limits. Goodness-of-fit indices such as GFI (0.94), AGFI (0.91), CFI (0.96), and TLI (0.95) exceeded recommended thresholds. RMSEA was 0.041, indicating an excellent fit. These indices confirm that the hypothesized model was appropriate and statistically sound.

Table 4

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Parental Overprotection → Self-Efficacy	–0.48	0.06	–0.41	< .001
Self-Efficacy → Autonomy	0.59	0.07	0.53	< .001
Parental Overprotection → Autonomy	–0.33	0.08	–0.28	< .001
Parental Overprotection → Autonomy (Indirect via SE)	–0.28	0.05	–0.22	< .001

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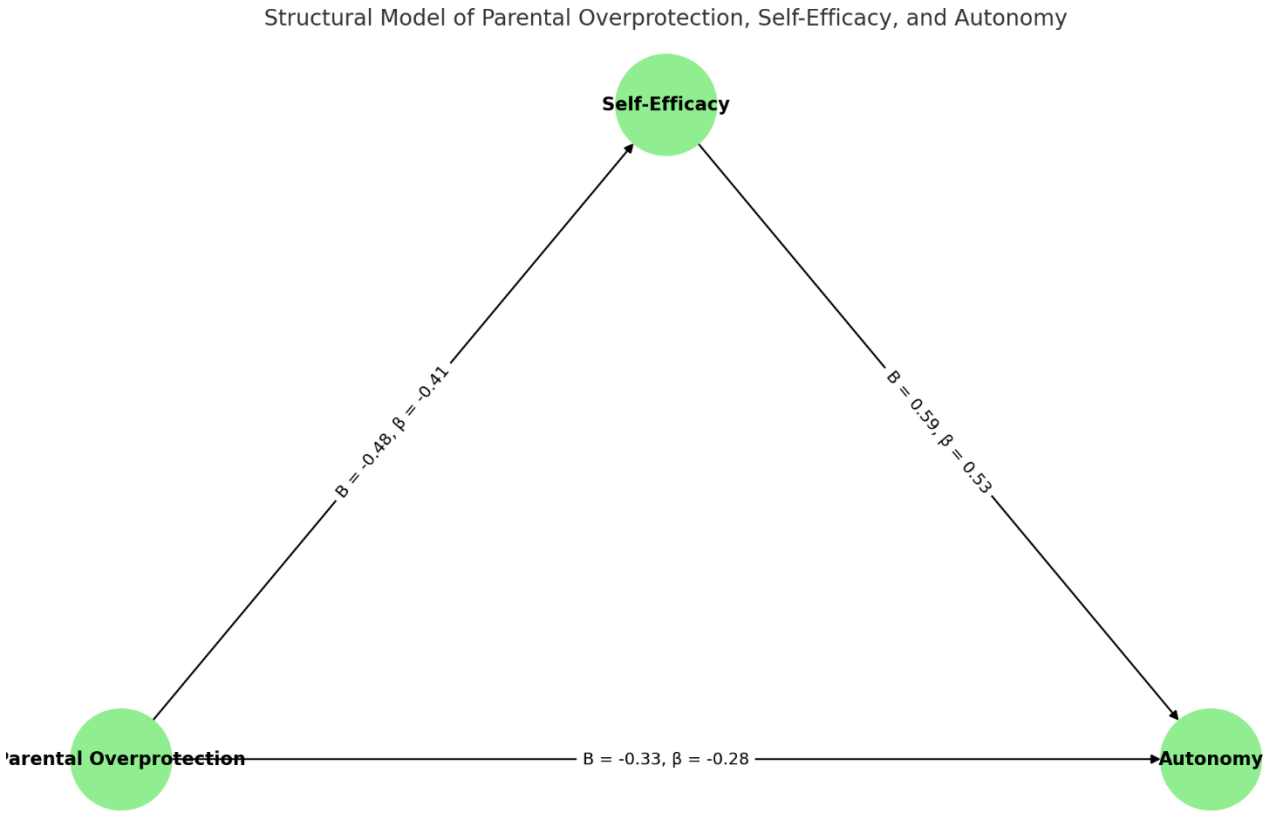
Parental Overprotection → Autonomy (Total)	–0.61	0.07	–0.50	< .001

In Table 4, the path coefficients indicate that parental overprotection significantly predicted lower self-efficacy (β = –0.41, p < .001) and lower autonomy both directly (β = –0.28, p < .001) and indirectly through self-efficacy (β = –0.22, p < .001). Self-efficacy positively predicted autonomy (β = 0.53, p < .001). The total effect of parental overprotection on autonomy was β = –0.50, combining both direct and indirect influences. These findings confirm the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between parental overprotection and autonomy.

Figure 1

Model with Beta Coefficients



4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed a significant negative relationship between perceived parental overprotection and young adults' autonomy, while self-efficacy played a statistically significant mediating role in this association. These results suggest that higher levels of overprotective parenting are associated with diminished autonomy in emerging adulthood, and that this relationship is partially explained by lower levels of self-efficacy. The structural equation modeling confirmed a good fit for the proposed model, underscoring the theoretical relevance of self-efficacy as a mediating mechanism in the parenting-autonomy pathway.

These results support prior empirical findings indicating that excessive parental control and intrusion during developmental years restrict the acquisition of competence and independence in children, ultimately leading to compromised autonomy in adulthood (Meena et al., 2024; Panhwar & Tariq, 2024). When parents engage in overprotective behaviors, they often deprive their children of experiences that foster initiative, decision-making, and resilience. Consequently, young adults may internalize feelings of inadequacy and incompetence, thus weakening their self-efficacy beliefs. This aligns with prior work by (Jeydhakshana et al., 2025), who found that helicopter parenting correlates with reduced self-esteem and impaired decision-making capacity in young adults. Moreover, the

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observed negative association between overprotection and autonomy is consistent with findings by (Fairuzza et al., 2023) who demonstrated that restrictive parenting reduces psychological flexibility and the ability to engage in autonomous goal-setting.

The mediating role of self-efficacy in this study is supported by the theoretical proposition that belief in one's own capabilities is shaped early through interpersonal experiences, especially within the parent–child dyad (Liu et al., 2020; Ndou, 2023). The data suggest that when parental behaviors discourage independent thought and agency, self-efficacy is compromised, which in turn inhibits the development of autonomy. This echoes findings by (Fifield et al., 2025), who noted that youth with developmental conditions who experienced overregulation by caregivers often demonstrated less confidence in transitioning to independent roles. Similarly, (Godino et al., 2018) found that young adults making complex life decisions—such as genetic testing or career moves—relied heavily on their sense of self-efficacy, which was often grounded in earlier relational experiences with parents.

The findings also reflect culturally relevant patterns, especially in collectivist societies where familial cohesion and interdependence are emphasized. In such contexts, overprotection may not be perceived negatively by parents but can nonetheless stifle youth development by discouraging initiative-taking and autonomous behavior (Lei & Traylor, 2023; Tuazon & Grunhaus, 2025). While the cultural framing of parental concern may differ, the psychological outcomes appear consistent across diverse cultural settings. As (Cabral et al., 2024) observed, the transmission of values and communication patterns in culturally conservative families may serve as both a source of emotional support and a barrier to autonomy when they become overly prescriptive. Similarly, (Shanoora et al., 2025) emphasized that secure attachment and open communication with parents foster better outcomes in romantic relationships—an indicator of healthy autonomy in adulthood.

Furthermore, the results suggest that interventions aimed at promoting self-efficacy in youth may be instrumental in mitigating the long-term effects of overprotective parenting. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more resilient, more autonomous, and more likely to take responsibility for their own decisions and behaviors (Liang et al., 2019; Ndou & Ngwenya, 2022). This is in line with (Stormshak et al., 2019), who reported that positive psychological outcomes among young adults are strongly associated with internal confidence in coping mechanisms and decision-making skills, even when early family environments were restrictive or conflicted.

Importantly, this study also contributes to the growing body of literature on how early life experiences influence later developmental outcomes through intermediary cognitive and emotional mechanisms. The inclusion of self-efficacy as a mediator offers empirical support for a more nuanced model that goes beyond direct effects of parenting style. (Sandler et al., 2018) similarly adopted a mediation model in exploring mental health outcomes in bereaved families, illustrating how internal cognitive processes bridge external family environments and psychological functioning in young adulthood. Moreover, the current findings converge with studies that demonstrate how perceived parental behaviors influence not just tangible life outcomes, but also deeply rooted beliefs about one’s own capabilities (Calandri et al., 2021).

The significant indirect effect found in this study underscores the potential of targeting self-efficacy in educational and therapeutic interventions designed for emerging adults. By improving self-efficacy, it may be possible to promote autonomy even among individuals who have experienced overprotective parenting. This supports the argument made by (Tuazon & Gressard, 2021) that developmental recovery and posttraumatic growth are feasible across the lifespan, especially when internal psychological resources are enhanced. The alignment of our results with previous longitudinal studies, such as those by (Jessop et al., 2022) and (Campbell-Salome, 2018), confirms that long-term outcomes of childhood experiences are malleable, particularly when targeted support and skill-building programs are introduced.

Despite the consistency with prior literature, it is also noteworthy that some studies suggest the effects of overprotection may vary depending on other moderating variables such as socioeconomic status, gender, or mental health history. For example, (Malik et al., 2022) and (Aarthy, 2023) found that the psychological impact of single parenting and overprotection differs across family structures and individual psychological resilience. These potential moderators were not explored in the present study but represent a compelling avenue for future investigation. Nonetheless, the robustness of the current mediation model, supported by acceptable fit indices and significant path coefficients, validates the theoretical relevance of self-efficacy in explaining autonomy development.

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Several limitations must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the reliance on self-report questionnaires introduces the possibility of response bias, including social desirability and recall distortion. Participants may have either exaggerated or minimized their perceptions of parental behavior and their own autonomy and self-efficacy. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits causal inference. Although the proposed model is grounded in theory and supported by structural equation modeling, the directionality of the relationships cannot be definitively established. Longitudinal research designs would allow for a more accurate examination of how overprotection affects self-efficacy and autonomy over time. Third, while the sample size was adequate and representative within the Malaysian context, cultural generalizability remains a concern. The findings may not fully extend to other cultural settings with different parenting norms or youth developmental expectations. Finally, other potentially relevant variables—such as emotional intelligence, attachment style, or resilience—were not included in the model but could offer further explanatory power if examined in future research.

Future studies should consider adopting a longitudinal design to assess the developmental trajectories of autonomy and self-efficacy from adolescence into adulthood. This would provide stronger evidence regarding the causal mechanisms underpinning the influence of parental overprotection. Additionally, future research should investigate potential moderators such as gender, family income, birth order, or cultural values to examine whether the effects of overprotective parenting vary across subgroups. Expanding the research to include diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds would enhance the external validity of the findings. Further exploration of other mediating variables—such as coping styles, emotion regulation, or identity development—may also provide a richer understanding of how parenting behaviors shape young adult outcomes. Including parents' perspectives alongside self-report from youth could offer a more balanced and objective evaluation of parental behaviors. Lastly, integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could help to uncover the lived experiences of autonomy development among youth and the nuanced effects of perceived overprotection.

The findings of this study offer valuable implications for educators, counselors, and parents seeking to foster healthy autonomy in young adults. Intervention programs at the university level can integrate self-efficacy training modules to help students build confidence in their decision-making and problem-solving abilities. Counseling services can incorporate family-based therapy sessions to address controlling parenting behaviors and promote more autonomy-supportive practices. Educators and academic advisors can be trained to identify students who display dependency or lack of initiative and provide them with resources that cultivate independence and self-direction. For parents, psychoeducational workshops that stress the importance of fostering autonomy and allowing for age-appropriate decision-making can shift overprotective tendencies toward more empowering parenting strategies. Policies aimed at holistic youth development should also prioritize psychosocial skill-building alongside academic performance to ensure that young adults are equipped with both competence and confidence as they navigate the challenges of adult life.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

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

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