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7 Perfectionistic self-presentation and emotional experiences in music students: A  
8 three-wave longitudinal study

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10 Andrew P. Hill<sup>1</sup>, Karen Burland<sup>2</sup>, Elaine C. King<sup>3</sup>, & Stephanie E. Pitts<sup>4</sup>

11 <sup>1</sup>York St John University, UK

12 <sup>2</sup>University of Leeds, UK

13 <sup>3</sup>University of Hull, UK

14 <sup>4</sup>University of Sheffield, UK  
15

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21 Author Note

22 Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew P. Hill, York St John  
23 University, York, YO31 7EX. E-mail: [a.hill@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:a.hill@yorks.ac.uk). The data collection associated  
24 with this project was undertaken while the lead author was at the University of Leeds.

1 Abstract

2 Research has found perfectionism predicts emotional experiences among amateur,  
3 professional, and adolescent musicians. In examining these relationships, previous research  
4 has measured trait perfectionism and employed cross-sectional designs. The current study  
5 builds on existing research by examining whether perfectionistic self-presentation (as  
6 opposed to trait perfectionism) predicts negative and positive emotional experiences in music  
7 students over time. One hundred and forty-three music students ( $M$  age 18.92 years,  $SD =$   
8 2.96) enrolled in music-related degree programmes completed measures of perfectionistic  
9 self-presentation (perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisplay of imperfection, and  
10 nondisclosure of imperfection) and emotional experiences (positive and negative feelings) at  
11 the start, middle, and the end of the academic year. Path analysis revealed that perfectionistic  
12 self-promotion at the start of the year predicted lower positive feelings in the middle of the  
13 year, and nondisclosure of imperfection in the middle of the year predicted lower positive  
14 feelings at the end of the year. In addition, negative feelings in the middle of the year also  
15 predicted higher nondisclosure of imperfection at the end of the year. The findings suggest  
16 that the desire to present oneself perfectly and avoid disclosure of imperfections may  
17 contribute to less positive emotional experiences among music students.

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1 Perfectionistic self-presentation and emotional experiences in music students: A three-wave  
2 longitudinal study

3 When students enrol on music-related degrees they might reasonably expect the  
4 experience to be a challenging but ultimately rewarding experience. Research suggests,  
5 however, that the experiences of music students differ considerably with many students  
6 reporting mixed and/or negative experiences (e.g., Burt & Mills, 2006). These experiences  
7 extend to the emotions music students have and whether they come to develop positive or  
8 negative feelings towards the study of music. In the current study, we sought to better  
9 understand the factors that might contribute to the emotional experiences of music students.  
10 We did so by examining whether positive and negative feelings towards studying music were  
11 predicted by the perfectionistic self-presentational styles exhibited by music students across  
12 the first year of university.

13 *Multidimensional perfectionism and musicians*

14 Perfectionism is a personality characteristic broadly defined as a combination of a  
15 commitment to exceedingly high standards and a preoccupation with harsh self-critical  
16 evaluation (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). It is typically considered to be a trait  
17 in that it reflects consistency in thoughts, feelings, and emotions evident across contexts and  
18 time (McAdams & Pals, 2006). There are multiple models and measures that have been used  
19 to examine perfectionism. These models and measures often differ in terms of their content  
20 and place varying degrees of emphasis on personal and interpersonal dimensions. However,  
21 in line with the broad definition of perfectionism, researchers typically differentiate between  
22 dimensions of perfectionism that encapsulate striving towards very high personal standards  
23 or flawlessness (referred to as perfectionistic strivings) and dimensions of perfectionism that  
24 encapsulate self-evaluative concerns, doubts, and perceived pressures from others (referred to  
25 as perfectionistic concerns) (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

1           Research examining these two dimensions of perfectionism attests to their importance  
2 in a number of contexts (e.g., sport and education; Hill, Mallinson-Howard, & Jowett, 2018;  
3 Speirs Neumeister, 2007). This research has typically found perfectionistic concerns to be  
4 associated with maladaptive correlates, processes, and outcomes (e.g., neuroticism, avoidant  
5 coping, and burnout). By contrast, research has typically found perfectionistic strivings to be  
6 more complex and associated with a mix of adaptive and maladaptive correlates, processes,  
7 and outcomes (e.g., conscientiousness, problem-focussed coping, and better performance  
8 versus self-criticism, worry, and anxiety). There is also evidence that some dimensions of  
9 perfectionistic strivings may make people vulnerable to motivation, performance, and well-  
10 being issues under some circumstances (e.g., Curran & Hill, in press). Overall, then,  
11 perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings are distinct and both need to be taken  
12 into account when considering the likely consequences of perfectionism.

13           A small number of studies have examined perfectionism among musicians including  
14 professional musicians, amateur musicians, and talented adolescent musicians (Kenny,  
15 Davis, & Oates, 2004; Kobori, Yoshie, Kudo, & Ohtsuki, 2011; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007).  
16 The findings of these studies are generally consistent with research in other contexts.  
17 Specifically, research has found that perfectionistic strivings can be highly motivating and  
18 have some desirable achievement-related benefits (e.g., hours spent practicing and awards  
19 received associated with music; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Kobori, Yoshie, Kudo, &  
20 Ohtsuki, 2011). By contrast, perfectionistic concerns have no such benefits and are instead  
21 associated with more negative emotional experiences such as performance anxiety (Stoeber  
22 & Eismann, 2007). Qualitative research has also corroborated these findings with evidence  
23 that professional musicians (along with other elite performers) considered their perfectionism  
24 to be both central to their success and a source of significant problems in their professional  
25 and personal lives (Hill, Witcher, Gotwals, & Leyland, 2015).

## 1 *Limitations of previous research*

2           While studies are beginning to emerge that suggest perfectionism is important to the  
3 experiences of musicians, there is considerable scope for additional research. Two  
4 particularly notable areas that need to be addressed are that (i) research to date has focused  
5 exclusively on trait perfectionism and (ii) previous studies have adopted cross-sectional  
6 designs.

7           In terms of the first limitation of existing research, although examination of trait  
8 perfectionism is most common, perfectionism is thought to manifest in a number of other  
9 ways. Hewitt et al. (2003) have argued, for example, that perfectionism is also evident in the  
10 manner in which individuals seek to present themselves to others. Perfectionistic self-  
11 presentation is a separate, expressive, and distinctly interpersonal aspect of perfectionism. It  
12 is an attempt to create and maintain an image of perfection in public settings. There are three  
13 facets of perfectionistic self-presentation: perfectionistic self-promotion (seeking to  
14 demonstrate one's perfection), nondisplay of imperfection (minimising the public display of  
15 mistakes, flaws, and shortcomings), and nondisclosure of imperfection (minimising  
16 admission of mistakes, flaws, and short-comings). The first facet is thought to be approach-  
17 oriented and the other two facets are thought to be avoidance-oriented (i.e., motivation to  
18 demonstrate competence or avoid demonstrating incompetence). In differentiating between  
19 perfectionistic self-presentation and dimensions of perfectionism like perfectionistic  
20 standards and strivings, Hewitt et al. consider perfectionistic self-presentation to provide  
21 "expressive" aspects of perfectionism, rather than "content-related" aspects (i.e., it is  
22 concerned with whether an individual seeks to project a perfect image to others, rather than  
23 whether someone pursues perfection).

24           Research examining perfectionistic self-presentation has provided a number of  
25 noteworthy findings. In particular, unlike for trait perfectionism, there is much less ambiguity

1 regarding its implications as facets of perfectionistic self-presentation are almost always  
2 associated with maladaptive correlates, processes, and outcomes. This includes negative  
3 emotional experiences (e.g., negative affect and anxiety; Hewitt et al., 2003) as well as more  
4 severe pathological experiences (e.g., depression and suicide ideation; Flett, Besser &  
5 Hewitt, 2014; Roxborough et al., 2012). In addition, facets of perfectionistic self-presentation  
6 have been found to predict a range of outcomes after taking trait perfectionism into account  
7 (anxiety, depression, self-esteem; Hewitt et al., 2003). Finally, when considered  
8 independently (i.e., controlling for the relationship between the facets), the two avoidance-  
9 based facets (nondisplay and disclosure of imperfection) tend to be the most problematic (see  
10 Hewitt et al., 2003). Overall, then, research suggests that perfectionistic self-presentation is  
11 an important dimension of perfectionism that warrants examination alongside, and in  
12 addition to, trait perfectionism.

13         In terms of the second limitation of existing research, the weaknesses of cross-  
14 sectional designs are well documented. Cross-sectional designs do not allow inference of  
15 causality between variables as there is no temporal component in the design (i.e., all  
16 variables are measured at the same time point). In addition, as these designs provide only a  
17 static ‘snapshot’ of the relationship, they offer no means of assessing whether the magnitude  
18 or direction of the relationships change over time or whether variables act on one another to  
19 varying degrees over time (i.e., whether reciprocal effects exist). Such reciprocal effects have  
20 begun to receive attention in perfectionism research with some evidence emerging of how  
21 perfectionism and its various outcomes may often influence each other (e.g., Nordin-Bates,  
22 Hill, Cummings, Aujla, & Redding, 2014). Longitudinal designs are required to examine  
23 reciprocal relationships and, although such designs do not have sufficient control to rule out  
24 the influence of other variables, they also provide a necessary further step towards  
25 establishing causal relationships.



1 Participants were 143 (75 males, 68 females) students enrolled in the first year of  
2 music-related programmes at three universities in the UK (age  $M = 18.92$ ,  $SD 2.96$ , range 18-  
3 51). The music-related programmes were similar in that they all had a broad musical  
4 curriculum incorporating elements of Western music history, theory and analysis,  
5 ethnomusicology and music psychology alongside performance and composition. Entry on to  
6 the programmes was also based on academic qualifications rather than performance skill. All  
7 participants played one or more musical instruments. The most common instruments were  
8 voice, piano, and guitar. The average number of hours they reported practising was 8.08 hrs  
9 per week ( $SD = 2.96$  hrs). Participants completed a multi-section questionnaire that contained  
10 measures of perfectionistic self-presentation and emotional experiences at the beginning,  
11 middle, and end of the academic year (weeks 3, 10, and 15 of a 22 week academic year or  
12 weeks 1, 8, and 20 calendar months; all data collection +/- 2 weeks). Of the 143 students in  
13 the study, 44 completed the questionnaire on one occasion, 21 on two occasions, and 78 on  
14 all three occasions. Institutional ethical approval was gained prior to conducting the research.  
15 Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis in taught sessions on their degree  
16 programmes. All participants provided informed written consent.

### 17 *Measures*

18 *Perfectionistic self-presentation.* The Perfectionistic Self-presentation Scale  
19 developed by Hewitt et al. (2003) was used to measure a perfectionistic self-presentational  
20 style. The scale includes 27-items that measure the three facets of perfectionistic self-  
21 presentation: perfectionistic self-promotion (10-items; "I strive to look perfect to others"),  
22 nondisplay of imperfection (10-items; "I hate to make errors in public"), and nondisclosure  
23 of imperfection (7-items; "Admitting failure to others is the worst possible thing").  
24 Responses are scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly*  
25 *agree*). Hewitt et al. (2003) have provided evidence of the validity and reliability of the scale.



1 *Preliminary analysis*

2           The data were screened for univariate and multivariate outliers (see Tabachnick &  
3 Fidell, 2007). Standardised z-scores larger than 3.29 ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed) were used as  
4 criteria for univariate outliers and Mahalanobis distance  $\chi^2 (15) = 37.70$  ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed)  
5 was used as criterion for multivariate outliers. This led to the removal of three participants.  
6 The remaining data ( $n = 140$ ) were considered to be approximately univariate normal with  
7 three instances of non-normality: positive emotions time 2 (zskew = -2.22), negative  
8 emotions time 1 and 2 (zskew = 2.02 and 2.37). After transformation, these variables were  
9 normally distributed (all +/-SQRT transformations). Transformed variables and original  
10 variables were almost perfectly correlated. Transformed variables were used for bivariate  
11 correlations and path analysis. Finally, internal reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was  
12 performed on each scale. All instruments demonstrated sufficient internal consistency ( $\alpha \geq$   
13 .70 for scales with 10 items or more and  $\alpha \geq .60$  for scales with 5 items or more; Loewenthal,  
14 2001). Cronbach's alphas are displayed in Table 1.

15 *Descriptive Analyses and bivariate correlations*

16           The descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are displayed in Table 1.  
17 Participants scored low-to-moderate levels of perfectionistic self-promotion. Scores were  
18 highest for nondisplay of imperfection. Participants also reported moderate-to-high positive  
19 feelings and low-to moderate negative feelings. Mean scores were similar across all three  
20 time points.

21           Bivariate correlations revealed statistically significant positive correlations between  
22 the facets of the perfectionistic self-presentation and statistically significant negative  
23 correlations between positive and negative feelings at all time points. In addition, at time 1,  
24 nondisplay and nondisclosure of imperfections had significant positive correlations with  
25 negative feelings. At time 2, nondisplay of imperfections had a significant positive



1 positive feelings at the end of the year. These particular findings are consistent with those of  
2 Mackinnon and Sherry (2012) who found total perfectionistic self-representation predicted  
3 decreases in total well-being over time (a composite of positive affect, negative affect, and  
4 life satisfaction). However, our findings also build on their work by indicating that in order to  
5 better understand the relationship between perfectionistic self-presentation and emotional  
6 experiences, distinguishing between its three facets may be required. In this regard, our  
7 findings allude to a more complex pattern of relationships whereby different facets of  
8 perfectionistic self-presentation are important at different times. Here, actively proclaiming  
9 perfection initially detracted from the development of positive feelings, later when students  
10 became more accustomed to the setting it was the more defensive concealment of  
11 shortcomings that was problematic.

12 Another noteworthy finding was that facets of perfectionistic self-presentation  
13 predicted changes in positive feelings but not changes in negative feelings. This is something  
14 that is potentially lost when examining total well-being. Why perfectionistic self-presentation  
15 was important to positive feelings but not negative feelings is not clear, especially when  
16 previous research has found facets of perfectionistic self-presentation to predict negative  
17 affect (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003). However, it is important to note that it is not uncommon for  
18 individuals to express a mix of positive and negative emotions and the absence of positive  
19 emotions does not necessitate the presence of negative emotions or vice versa (Larsen,  
20 McGraw, & Cacippo, 2001). Therefore, instances when factors influence one but not the  
21 other are possible. Lower positive or negative emotions might, for example, be considered to  
22 reflect indifference (“I feel neither enthusiastic nor apprehensive about my study”). If so,  
23 here we may have identified a scenario in which facets of perfectionistic self-promotion are  
24 not sufficient to arouse increases in negative feelings but nonetheless detract from the  
25 development of more positive feelings.

1           In terms of reciprocal effects, negative feelings in the middle of the academic year  
2 predicted decreases in nondisclosure of imperfection at the end of the academic year. This is  
3 an especially novel finding in that it is the first instance, to our knowledge, in which a  
4 reciprocal effect involving perfectionistic self-presentation has been observed (reciprocal  
5 effects were not examined by Mackinnon and Sherry, 2012). In terms of possible  
6 explanations for this finding, it may be that negative feelings exacerbate interpersonal  
7 sensitivity and threat so to create a greater sense that deficiencies should be hidden and not  
8 shared with others. It is also possible that increasing negative feelings reinforce the low self-  
9 regard thought to underpin the need to hide deficiencies from others (see Hewitt et al., 2003).  
10 Regardless, in combination with other relationships in the model, the model provides  
11 evidence of a possible downward spiral of feelings and facets of perfectionistic self-  
12 presentation acting on each other in an undesirable manner over time.

### 13 *Limitations and future research*

14           The findings must be considered alongside the study's limitations. The current study  
15 examined the relationship between perfectionistic self-promotion and emotional experiences  
16 in a specific context (studying music at university). Future research may wish to explore the  
17 degree to which these findings extend to other settings and samples (e.g., conservatoire  
18 students). In the meantime, caution is required in regards to generalising the findings beyond  
19 the current context.

20           The study also included a large amount of dropout across the three time points. Any  
21 systematic difference between students who completed the study and those who dropped out  
22 will influence the generalisability of the findings. For example, it is possible that the music  
23 students who did not complete some of the later questionnaires were not present in classes  
24 when the questionnaires were distributed. This could be for any number of reasons but might  
25 include factors relevant to the current study such as more negative emotional experiences on

1 the programme. As such, our findings may only apply to students who are more likely to  
2 attend and complete the first year of the programme.

3 The modest sample size means smaller effect sizes were not statistically significant  
4 and, indeed, the ability to detect smaller effects decreased across time due to dropout. This is  
5 evident in that one of the relationships is notable in regards to its size but was not statistically  
6 significant (nondisplay of imperfection to positive feelings). This relationship is consistent  
7 with the findings that other facets of perfectionistic predict changes in positive feelings but  
8 not negative feelings. Employing strategies in future research to help retain participants  
9 across time points (e.g., participant incentives or targeted follow-up of non-completers) will  
10 help address this issue as well as help ensure a more representative sample.

11 Finally, the lack of control of other variables, a common problem in non-experimental  
12 research, means that unmeasured variables may account for the observed relationships. To  
13 address this issue, future research might include a wider array of variables and covariates.  
14 Based on research examining perfectionism, variables worth considering include trait  
15 perfectionism and perfectionistic cognitions (ruminative thoughts about the need to be  
16 perfect; Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998).

### 17 *Conclusion*

18 The study examined whether perfectionistic self-presentation predicted changes in  
19 positive and negative emotional experiences in music students over time. It was found that  
20 the desire to present oneself perfectly and avoid disclosure of imperfections was related to  
21 decreases in positive feelings while studying music. No facets of perfectionistic self-  
22 presentation were associated with changes in negative feelings. As such, facets of  
23 perfectionistic self-presentation may influence the experience of students on music-related  
24 degrees primarily by decreasing positive feelings but not necessarily by affecting negative  
25 feelings. Attesting to the importance of examining these relationships over time, just as facets

1 of perfectionistic self-presentation may act on positive feelings, negative feelings were found  
2 to increase a desire to avoid disclosure of imperfections during the academic year.

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Table 1 *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for perfectionistic self-presentation and emotional experiences*

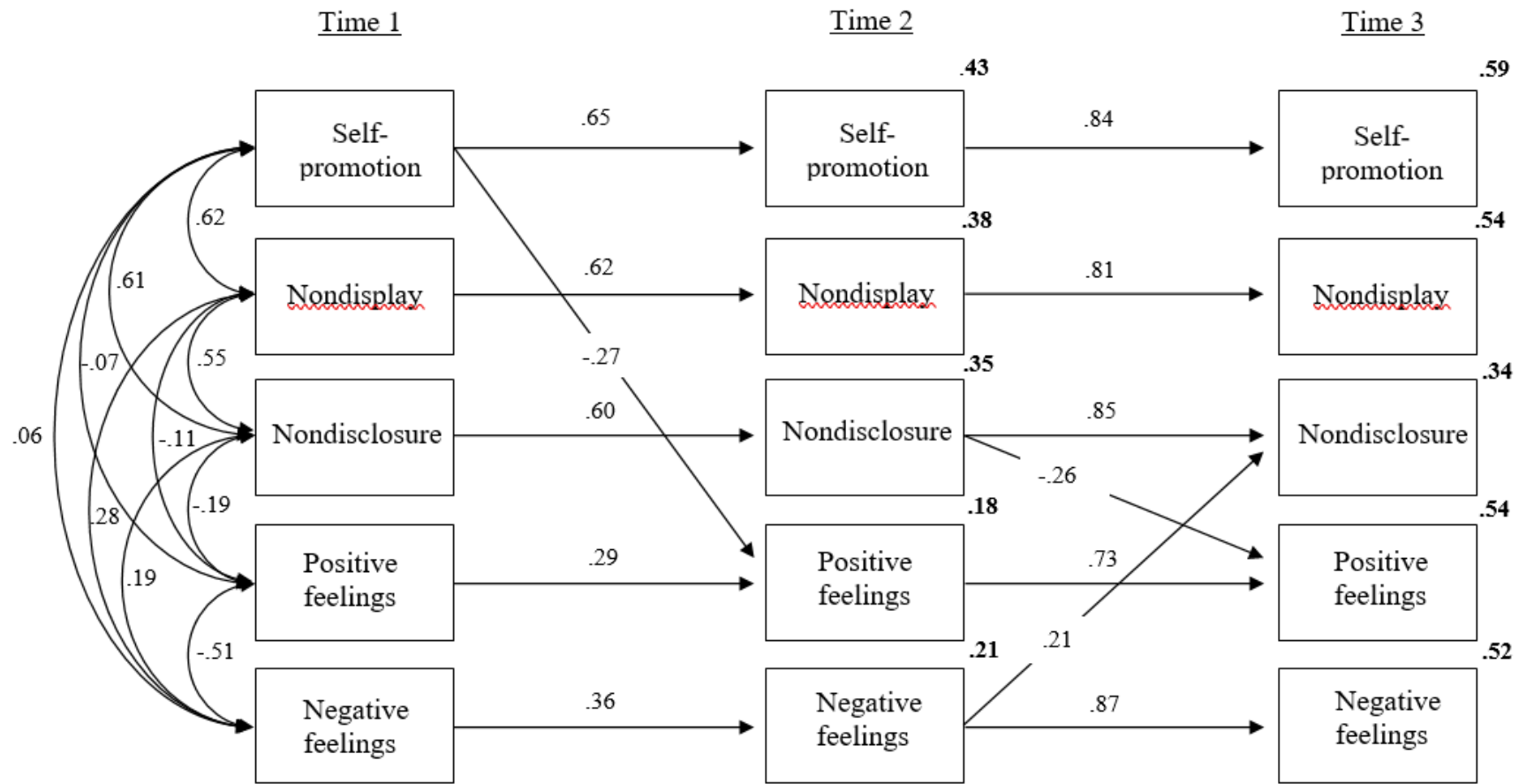
Variable	Wave 1					Wave 2					Wave 3											
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Perfectionistic self-promotion	3.69	0.92	.80					3.71	0.98	.86					3.52	1.10	.90					
2. Nondisplay of imperfection	4.59	0.99	.61**	.85				4.49	0.88	.66**	.82				4.32	1.05	.73**	.87				
3. Nondisclosure of imperfection	3.10	0.91	.59**	.54**	.73			3.24	0.96	.57**	.51**	.78			3.16	0.99	.65**	.63**	.79			
4. Positive feelings	3.89	0.68	-.06	-.10	-.18	.86		3.84	0.56	-.17	-.15	-.16	.83		3.91	0.59	-.29**	-.27*	-.32**	.85		
5. Negative feelings	2.25	0.77	.07	.29**	.20*	-.50**	.86	2.41	0.78	.17	.20*	.20	-.60**	.85	2.40	0.70	.21	.41**	.25*	-.59**	.82	

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is reported on the diagonals.

1 Table 2 *Cross-lagged standardised path coefficients for model*

Paths	$\beta$
Time 1 to Time 2	
Perfectionistic self-promotion to positive feelings	-.27*
Nondisplay of imperfection to positive feelings	.20
Nondisclosure of imperfection to positive feelings	-.14
Perfectionistic self-promotion to negative feelings	.06
Nondisplay of imperfection to negative feelings	.06
Nondisclosure of imperfection to negative feelings	.12
Positive feelings to perfectionistic self-promotion	.03
Negative feelings to perfectionistic self-promotion	-.05
Positive feelings to Nondisplay of imperfection	.03
Negative feelings to Nondisplay of imperfection	.01
Positive feelings to Nondisclosure of imperfection	.01
Negative feelings to Nondisclosure of imperfection	-.06
Time 2 to Time 3	
Perfectionistic self-promotion to positive feelings	-.01
Nondisplay of imperfection to positive feelings	.09
Nondisclosure of imperfection to positive feelings	-.26*
Perfectionistic self-promotion to negative feelings	-.07
Nondisplay of imperfection to negative feelings	-.01
Nondisclosure of imperfection to negative feelings	.03
Positive feelings to perfectionistic self-promotion	-.06
Negative feelings to perfectionistic self-promotion	.11
Positive feelings to Nondisplay of imperfection	-.05
Negative feelings to Nondisplay of imperfection	.17
Positive feelings to Nondisclosure of imperfection	-.03
Negative feelings to Nondisclosure of imperfection	.21*

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed.



1

2

Figure 1. Perfectionistic self-promotion and positive/negative feelings over time. Standardised paths coefficients are displayed. All path coefficients are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). Correlations among variables (time 1) below .12 are not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ). Residual errors not displayed. Non-significant path coefficients are not displayed ( $p < .05$ ). Bolded values denote variance explained by predictor variables.