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RESEARCH

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Overprotective Parenting: Examining pressures to be perfect, social media comparisons, world instability and parent anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Overprotective parenting (OP) is defined as parents' inclination to take over children's tasks, overinvolvement in children's self-direction and decision-making, and interfering in age-appropriate autonomy. Past studies have focused on impacts of OP on child mental health and well-being, but few have considered what social circumstances could produce parents' OP. The aim of the current study was to investigate parents' perceptions of world scarcity and instability, perceived societal pressures related to parenting, and comparisons on social media as correlates of OP, considering direct and indirect (via parents' anxiety) associations. A secondary aim was to explore whether associations differed for mothers and fathers.

Method: Australian parents ($N = 909$; 67% mothers) of an adolescent aged 16 to 19 years completed an online survey.

Results: In a latent-variable structural equation model, OP was explained by perceived world threat and upward comparisons on social media; these associations were mostly direct but were partially mediated by parents' anxiety. Perceived world threat and social comparisons had moderate and large, respectively, direct associations with parents' elevated anxiety, resulting in significant indirect associations of societal pressures on OP via parents' anxiety. Parent gender moderated four model paths—one involving parents' anxiety and three involving OP. Most notable

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were a positive association of fathers' (but not mothers') anxiety with OP, and a positive association of world threat with mothers' (but not fathers') OP.
Conclusion: For those who interact with parents, such as teachers or support providers, it is important to be aware that OP could be a reaction to societal and social media pressures.
Implications: Overall, these findings indicate that reducing parents' anxiety and addressing social comparison and pressure, particularly in gender-sensitive ways, may help mitigate overprotective parenting in the context of perceived world threats.

KEYWORDS
adolescents, anxiety, overprotective parenting, social media, world threats and instability

Many parents are very involved in their adolescents' lives. This can include parents frequently structuring their adolescents' activities, attending to adolescents' feelings and beliefs, and providing frequent advice and problem-solving help. Parental involvement can be beneficial for adolescents' development (see, e.g., Castro et al., 2015), particularly when it is combined with autonomy-supportive communication (e.g., Lerner et al., 2022; Pomerantz et al., 2007). However, overprotective involvement, as a more autonomy-suppressing type of parental involvement, has been found to undermine adolescents' psychological needs and relates to poorer adolescent adjustment (Ryan et al., 2024; Van Petegem et al., 2020). In past research, this intensive overprotective parenting is defined to include restricting adolescents' opportunities for personal decision-making and problem-solving, parents' inclination to take over the child's tasks, overinvolvement in children's self-direction and choices, and interfering in age-appropriate privacy and autonomy (Brenning et al., 2017). Overall, this intensive form of overprotective parenting has been described as not consistent with the developmental level and autonomy needs of adolescents and emerging or young adults. When defined in this way, overprotective parenting overlaps with but differs from psychological control, with psychological control focused on specific parental behaviors of guilt induction, love withdrawal, criticism, and shame (Holmbeck et al., 2002).

Past studies have tended to focus on parental overprotection as an influence on adolescents' developmental or well-being outcomes. Comparatively fewer studies have considered the social forces that might help to explain parental overprotection of their adolescent children and whether the same social forces also yield more anxiety in parents. For example, the great deal of information and advice currently available to parents online and offline can be helpful when they need parenting information and support, and this information can be applied to improve relationships and well-being among all family members. The mass of information and advice available can be confusing and overwhelming, however, and it may be adding pressure on parents to achieve idealized parenting behaviors that can feel beyond their reach for many reasons. This may be associated with excess comparisons to other parents, especially via social media, in an attempt to understand whether they are meeting expectations and are competent as parents (Glatz et al., 2023; Sidani et al., 2020).

While parents are finding information online about parenting, they may be confronted with information about environmental risks for children, such as job availability, housing affordability, geopolitical instability, and climate changes. This information is omnipresent across digital media outlets, and information about parenting and risks for children is often found in the same

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written or video posts, blogs or other online material. Thus, information about the importance of being very involved in children's lives and details about the nature of worldwide risks may each yield more anxiety in parents and lead them to commit significant emotional resources and time to providing guidance, advice, protection, and support to their adolescents (Cucchiara & Steinbugler, 2021; Grolnick, 2012; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). For some, this may take the form of overprotective parenting. The aim of the current study was to test a model of the associations of such perceived world threats and social pressures on parenting with parents' anxiety symptoms and overprotective parenting. In addition, we also investigated parents' preoccupation with comparing themselves to other parents on social media as an explanation for parents' heightened levels of anxiety symptoms and overprotective parenting.

Grolnick and Apostoleris (2002) provided a framework that supports the aims of this study. In this framework, involvement in parenting occurs when parents' sense of self and their identity as a parent are tied to their children's successes and failures (Grolnick, 2003). Such views of success and failure as a parent are now often influenced by comparison to other parents and children online or offline (Chae, 2015, 2022; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022). These internal pressures can drive controlling and overprotective parenting behaviors that are targeted at child academic and other successes, with the hope of avoiding child risky behaviors, setbacks, or failures, while serving to boost one's self-perception of being a good or perfect parent (Grolnick & Apostoleris, 2002). The pressures can increase parents' worry and concern, which in turn, increases overprotective parenting behaviors (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001). In a recent theoretical paper focused on parental overprotection, parent-related factors (e.g., parent anxiety), child-related factors (e.g., inhibition, pediatric conditions), and macro-contextual factors (e.g., societal pressures, threat beliefs) were highlighted as determinants of parenting (Venard et al., 2023). This suggests that perceptions of parental pressures and the threat of world instability facing current and future generations may covary with each other and, at the same time, they may relate to anxiety in parents and overprotection of their children.

PRESSURES ON PARENTS: ASSOCIATIONS WITH PARENTS' ANXIETY AND OVERPROTECTIVE PARENTING

Parents have almost unlimited access to information about parenting (Curran & Hill, 2019; de los Santos et al., 2019). Parenting has thus shifted from a "natural" caregiving role to encompassing a range of activities specifically designed to enhance children's well-being and promote their optimal development, aligning with the ideology of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996; E. Lee et al., 2014). In some cases, this may be experienced as oppressive expectations to be a very involved parent or to strive to be the "perfect" parent. This pressure can result in worries and preoccupations that can yield more anxiety in parents (Chae, 2015, 2022; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022). For example, in one study, the perceived pressure to be a perfect mother was related to higher levels of maternal guilt and stress, as well as more burnout (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). Some of these messages about parenting may be found particularly on social media (Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022). Studies report that parents who strive to be perfect in their parenting tend to use social media more frequently and are more inclined to make social comparisons when on social media, which is detrimental to their mental health (Mohr & Sonnentag, 2023; Padoa et al., 2018).

There is some evidence that information about parenting practices online provides many opportunities for social comparisons, and these opportunities are more accessible and inescapable because of the prevalence of social media (Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022). For example, in one study of Korean mothers, more frequent contact with online childrearing information was associated with a stronger endorsement of an intensive mothering ideology, a stronger social comparison orientation, and mothers' elevated competitiveness (Chae, 2015). Another study found

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that online upward social comparisons predicted increased parenting distress and depressive symptoms, and lower self-efficacy (Glatz et al., 2023). A third study found that mothers who engaged in more social comparisons on social media perceived more role overload and less competence as a parent, and reported more depressive symptoms (Coyne et al., 2017). In turn, these comparisons and related pressures can increase parents' anxiety (Padoa et al., 2018). It may also be the case that these social pressures and the many opportunities for social comparison to other parents are linked to overprotective and controlling parenting practices (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021; Ryan et al., 2024). Research has found that parents who report more overprotection also report higher levels of perceived pressure to be a perfect parent, showing that these parents feel the pressure to be more demanding even though this is not aligned with the adolescents' developmental needs (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Venard et al., 2024). Evidence for interrelations between expectations and intensive parenting has been found in experimental and survey research. In one experimental study, mothers' concern about the view of others (in this case, other children) was positively related to their level of controlling parenting (Grolnick et al., 2007). Additionally, a longitudinal study found that parents who were more controlling of their children perceived more pressures in their social environment, believing they will be held accountable for their children's success or failure (Wuyts et al., 2015).

Pressures to be an ideal parent can be relevant for explaining parents' own level of anxiety and their overprotective parenting practices, but parents' perception of broader "world out there" threats to their adolescent children could fuel parents' anxiety and overprotective parenting as well. In a study of mothers' perception of the environmental threat to their children, perceiving more threat was associated with heightened parent-reported and observed controlling parenting (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005; Robichaud et al., 2020). In a longitudinal follow-up, greater perceived threat predicted more controlling parenting, which was linked to lower achievement among youth (Gurland & Grolnick, 2024). Another study using similar measures found that mothers who perceived lower neighborhood safety reported more parental controllingness (Levitt et al., 2022). Similar to these findings, perceived threats, including the perception of world instability and competitiveness, were positively correlated with mothers' helicopter parenting of university student-aged children across four time points, leading to youth reconsidering their educational identity and commitments (Wang et al., 2023).

In summary, one potential explanation for elevated anxiety symptoms in parents and overprotection of their children is the increasing availability of societal messages that encourage and portray normative conceptualizations of ideal or perfect parenting, which places performance pressure on parents, as well as amplifying the perception of a threatening world that is increasingly risky and harmful. However, no previous study has investigated whether perceived societal pressures, upward comparisons on social media, and perceptions of world threats and instability account for elevated levels of anxiety among parents and, in turn, explain heightened overprotection of adolescent children.

ASSOCIATIONS OF PRESSURES AND RISK WITH OVERPROTECTIVE PARENTING VIA PARENTS' ANXIETY

Many parents suffer from elevated anxiety symptoms, with anxiety being the most prevalent class of mental health disorders across the world (Kessler et al., 2012; Polanczyk et al., 2015). Anxiety symptoms include excessive worry, agitation, and feelings of uncontrollability (Rapee et al., 2023). In addition, anxiety symptoms appear to increase when parenting teenagers, which may be due to increased worries about risk and negative consequences as adolescents' increase their autonomous behaviors, have more risk-taking opportunities, and spend more time away from the family (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2021; Howell et al., 2021). In line with this, a large study in the United States ($N = 18{,}124$) found that parents reported significantly lower levels of

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happiness and more stress when parenting adolescents compared with parents of younger children (Meier et al., 2018).

Anxiety may be particularly high when parents experience pressures to meet the expectations of others and perceive high threat in the world for their children. For example, hearing that other parents are doing more extracurricular activities, such as engaging a tutor or sending their child on special sport camps to help their child get into college or other children being offered scholarships that theirs did not, can result in parents feeling like they or their children are falling behind, effectively heightening their anxiety (Grolnick & Seal, 2008). A recent systematic review found small to medium size effects between mothers' general anxiety and their overprotective behaviors (Jones et al., 2021). Thus, there may be a pathway linking pressure on parents and risk perception to elevated anxiety in parents, which in turn may lead to more overprotective parenting. Overprotective parenting may help alleviate parents' feelings of controllability and reduce the chance of negative outcomes for youth. Such a pattern may explain why research has found that maternal anxiety is associated with more overprotective parenting practices (for a review, see Jones et al., 2021; see also Bögels & van Melick, 2004; Clarke et al., 2013).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MOTHERS AND FATHERS

There continue to be important differences in parenting practices between mothers and fathers, even as gender roles in Western societies have evolved (Eira Nunes et al., 2025; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2016) posits that gender differences in behavior stem from the contrasting distributions of social roles, which are shaped by societal expectations and division of labor. In addition, according to the literature on intensive parenting ideology, societal pressures and expectations about parenthood are different for mothers than for fathers (e.g., Faircloth, 2023; Hays, 1996), yielding persisting inequalities in the family context. Mothers spend 2 to 3 times the amount of time with their children as do fathers (Craig & Brown, 2017). Furthermore, in studies of youth residing in North America, Israel, and Europe, mothers have been found to engage in more intensive parenting than fathers (Fingerman et al., 2012), mothers report more overprotection than fathers (Rousseau & Scharf, 2015; Scharf et al., 2017; Venard et al., 2024; Zimmermann et al., 2022), and mothers are more likely to be described (or classified) as helicopter parents than fathers (Schiffrin et al., 2019).

Despite the strong evidence of differing interrelations among pressures, roles, and time with children for mother compared with fathers, and the suggestion that these may result in different emotions and behaviors for mothers and fathers, we located only three studies that have considered whether there are mother–father differences in links between perceived world threats and pressures with their anxiety and their overprotective parenting (or similar constructs). In one study, parent gender did not significantly moderate the association of social pressures with overprotective parenting (Venard et al., 2024). In a second study, parent gender did not significantly moderate the association of perceived world threats with overprotective parenting of adolescents (Mouton et al., 2025). In a third study using actor–partner interdependence modeling, mothers and fathers who adhered to more negative beliefs about adolescence as a period of "storm and stress" (suggesting more concerns about risk and pressures on youth) were higher in overprotective parenting, but this association was not significantly different for mothers compared with fathers (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Thus, to date, there has been little research considering whether the associations of parents' perceived world threats and pressures with their own anxiety and overprotective parenting would differ between mothers and fathers, and the research to date provides little support for such gender moderation.

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THE CURRENT STUDY

In summary, world threats and societal pressures, as well as comparisons to other parents on social media, could be social forces that explain heightened levels of anxiety in parents and overprotective parenting. There is also evidence that parents who report more anxiety are higher in overprotective parenting. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated parents' perceptions of parenting-related pressures, their comparisons to other parents, and their perceptions of threat and risk as unique explanations for both parents' anxiety and overprotective behaviors, while also considering whether some of these linkages could be indirect via parents' anxiety. To test these possible associations, we fit a direct and indirect (via parents' anxiety) effects model of overparenting involving three independent variables: (a) social pressure from other parents, society, and the media; (b) parents' upward social comparison of their parenting on social media; and (c) parents' perceptions of worldwide threats, including world instability and scarcity. We also explored parent gender differences and moderation of model paths.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 909 parents (66% mothers, 33% fathers; six participants were other or did not answer) with a $M_{age} = 45.8$ years ($SD_{age} = 7.6$ years) of adolescents aged between 16 and 19 years (52% boys, 47% girls, 9 did not identify their child as male or female; $M_{age} = 16.9$ years, $SD_{age} = 0.6$ years). Most parents were married or in a de facto cohabiting relationship (74.5%), with 11% single, 8% divorced, and the remainder widowed or separated. Participants identified their ethnic group as White (69%), Asian (10%), First Nations Australian (7%), or other (14%). Educational background was 52% attending university or holding a bachelor's degree or higher; 22% high school to year 10, 11, or 12; 22% with a trade course; 4% who did not finish year 10. Most reported that they were employed (68%), with 13% stay-at-home carers, 10.5% self-employed, 3.5% unemployed, 2% retired, and 3% unable to work. Overall, 10% earned less than A$30,000 and 20% more than A$150,000 (the median 2024 income in Australia was A$80,100). These demographics are comparable to Australian-wide statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Procedure

The Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study before commencement. Following approval, 909 parents were recruited in two ways. First, 703 (77%) of the participating parents, were drawn from a Qualtrics panel, with criteria for inclusion being that the participant had a child in the home aged between 16 to 19 inclusive, with representation across Australian states and a gender mix of parents (with approximately 40% fathers). Qualtrics invites participants who meet the set criteria from a large pool of potential respondents who have agreed to be contacted for survey participation. Invited participants opt in to the survey and they are directly given a small remuneration by Qualtrics if they complete the survey (the remuneration was not disclosed to the researchers). A total of 852 parents who met eligibility criteria accessed the survey, but 143 (17%) did not complete any main survey items. Of the 709 parents who did attempt the survey, six had missing data on the measures of interest in this study ($n = 703$). Second, the other 206 parent participants (23%) were recruited via social

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media (e.g., Facebook), and word of mouth; these parents were offered a $10 gift voucher to complete the survey.

The two cohorts completed the identical survey. If a parent had multiple children in the age range, they were asked to report on their oldest child in the age range 16 to 19 years. Qualtrics carried out data integrity checks before finalizing our dataset. In replicating their approach for our separate recruitment of parents, we used multiple techniques to identify fraudulent and inattentive responses. CAPTCHA was used plus three attention-check questions scattered throughout the survey. Also, we closely scrutinized open-ended questions (not used in the present study), the time of survey completion, and patterns of answers across and within measures (see strategies described in Shaw et al., 2025).

We used independent groups t tests to compare demographic characteristics and primary measures between the two recruitment cohorts. There were three cohort differences on the primary study measure and one demographic difference (see Supplemental Table 1). First, the Qualtrics cohort ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.00$) was higher in overprotective parenting than the other cohort, $M = 2.12$, $SD = .94$), $t(907) = 3.50$, $p < .001$, $d = .28$. Second, the Qualtrics cohort was higher in social pressure ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.05$) than the other cohort ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(907) = 2.49$, $p = .006$, $d = .20$. Third, the Qualtrics ($M = 16.84$, $SD = .65$) cohort reported a younger child age than the other cohort, ($M = 17.19$, $SD = .68$), t (907) $= -6.72$, $p < .001$, $d = -.53$. To account for these differences, we controlled for the cohort in the primary models, but controlling for cohort did not substantially change the results.

Measures

Overprotective parenting

Overprotective parenting was measured with the short version of the anxious overprotection subscale of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (S-MOPS; Chevrier et al., 2023; e.g., "I often take tasks out of my child's hands without giving them the chance to try them first"). Item responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the S-MOPS has been good in past research ($\alpha = .86$; Chevrier et al., 2023). Averaging all items formed a total score, with higher scores indicating more overprotective parenting ($\alpha = .95$, $\omega = .95$).

Parent anxiety symptoms

Parents completed the trait subscale of the Short State–Trait Anxiety Inventory, the STAIT-5 (Zsido et al., 2020) to indicate their general level of anxiety symptoms (five items, e.g., "I feel that difficulties are piling up so that I cannot overcome them"). Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). The scale was validated by Zsido et al. (2020), the internal consistency has been good in past research (e.g., $\alpha = .82$; Rosenbaum et al., 2024). Averaging all items formed a total score, with higher scores indicating more anxiety ($\alpha = .90$, $\omega = .90$).

Social pressure on parents

Social pressures to be the ideal parent were measured with 12 items from Wuyts et al. (2015), with four items referring to society, four to other parents, and four to media (e.g., "Society expects me to be a perfect parent"). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In past research, the 12 items measuring pressure had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .94$

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(Lamprianidou et al., 2024). For use as three indicators of a latent variable referred to as "social pressure," total scores for each subscale were formed by averaging relevant items so that higher scores indicated more societal pressure (α = .90, ω = .90); other parents pressure (α = .93, ω = .93) and media pressure (α = .91, ω = .91).

Social media comparisons

Based on previous research on social comparison among parents (Chae, 2022; de los Santos et al., 2019; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022), seven items were created for this study to measure parents' upward social comparison to other parents on social media (i.e., comparison and envy; "I feel inadequate as a parent after viewing social media"). These items were worded to align with items measuring societal pressures (Wuyts et al., 2015; see above). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We examined the factorability of the upward social comparison items before conducting a factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .92, well above the commonly recommended value of .60 (Kaiser & Rice, 1974), and Barlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(21) = 4678.12$, $p < .001$. The analysis extracted one factor with an eigenvalue of 4.91, which explained 70.1% of the variance. All factor loadings were between .68 and .87. Averaging the items formed a total score, with higher scores indicating more upward social comparisons to other parents (α = .93, ω = .93).

World threats

The World Out There Scale measured parents' perceptions of world threat in their children's current and future environments (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005). Three items measured perceived scarcity ("There are only so many good jobs to go around") and three items measured perceived instability ("Kids today face an unpredictable future, there can be prosperity one minute and poverty the next"). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency has been good in past research (e.g., Instability α = .78; Scarcity α = .87; Wang et al., 2023). For use as two indicators of a latent variable of "world threat," total scores for each subscale were formed by averaging the relevant items so that higher scores indicated more perception of threat: world scarcity (a = .80, ω = .80); and world instability (a = .79, ω = .79). Notably, world scarcity and instability were correlated negatively with income, $r = -.17$ for scarcity and $r = -.24$ for instability.

Data analyses

Of the 909 parents, 10 had missed the anxiety measure. Little's missing completely at random test was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(7) = 13.98$, $p = .06$. Thus, missing scores were estimated using expectation maximization. Descriptive statistics were examined and Pearson's *r*s were computed with SPSS v29 for preliminary examination of the correlations between the measures, using Cohen (1992) guidelines of Pearson's *r*, .10 = small; .30 = medium, and .50 = large. In addition, independent groups *t* tests were used to compare fathers and mothers to test for differences in perceptions of world threat, parenting related social pressure, social media comparisons, anxiety, and overprotective parenting, including effect size of Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988). Latent-variable structural equation modeling (LVSEM) with AMOS v29 was used to test whether world pressure (world scarcity, world instability), parenting related social pressure to be a perfect parent (from media pressure, other parents' pressure and societal pressure), and social media comparison to other parents would uniquely account for overprotective parenting and parents' anxiety. In addition, we tested for the possibility of significant indirect associations

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of perceived risks and pressures on overprotective parenting via parents' anxiety. In this model, sample (1 = Qualtrics panel, 2 = other) was included as a control variable. Model fit was evaluated through multiple fit indices, including the χ^2 statistic, χ^2/df, comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). A nonsignificant χ^2 test statistic indicates a very good fitting model, but this statistic is highly sensitive to sample size, so it is standard practice to report other fit statistics. CFI and TFI values over 0.90 indicate a good model fit (Bentler and Bonett, 1980; Tucker et al., 1969). The RMSEA indicates a good fit when values are below .05, a fair fit between .05 and .08, and a mediocre fit between .08 and .10 (Kaplan, 2009). For SRMR, a value less than .08 is considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Indirect paths from world threat, social pressures, and social comparisons on social media to overprotective parenting via anxiety were estimated using bootstrapping (5,000 bootstrapped samples).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Means and standard deviations of measures and correlations are shown in Table 1. Parents' anxiety symptoms had a moderate positive correlation with overprotective parenting (r = .41). Also, perceived pressures, upward social comparisons on social media, and world scarcity and world instability were each positively associated with parents' anxiety and overprotective parenting (see Table 1). In particular, social comparison was positively and strongly correlated with overprotective parenting (r = .63) and parent anxiety (r = .51). Finally, pressures, social comparisons, and world threats were moderately to strongly positively intercorrelated with each other.

Parenting pressures and overprotective parenting mediated by parents' anxiety

Figure 1 illustrates the results of the tested LVSEM. As seen in Figure 1, all paths from the independent variables to parents' anxiety symptoms and to overprotective parenting were estimated, as was the path from parents' anxiety to overprotective parenting. The paths from world

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations between all measures (N = 909).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Overprotective parenting	—							
2. Parent anxiety	.41***	—						
3. World scarcity	.44***	.34***	—					
4. World instability	.15**	.38***	.57***	—				
5. Society pressure	.20***	.29***	.26***	.29***	—			
6. Other parent pressure	.34***	.35***	.31***	.24***	.69***	—		
7. Media pressure	.21***	.34***	.26***	.26***	.67***	.24***	—	
8. Social media comparisons	.63***	.51***	.39***	.21***	.41***	.51***	.52***	—
M	2.33	2.18	3.06	3.44	3.55	3.15	3.19	2.51
SD	1.00	0.80	0.93	0.92	0.95	1.04	1.04	1.08

Note. Means and standard deviations for mothers and fathers are reported in Table S1.
p < .05.*p < .001.

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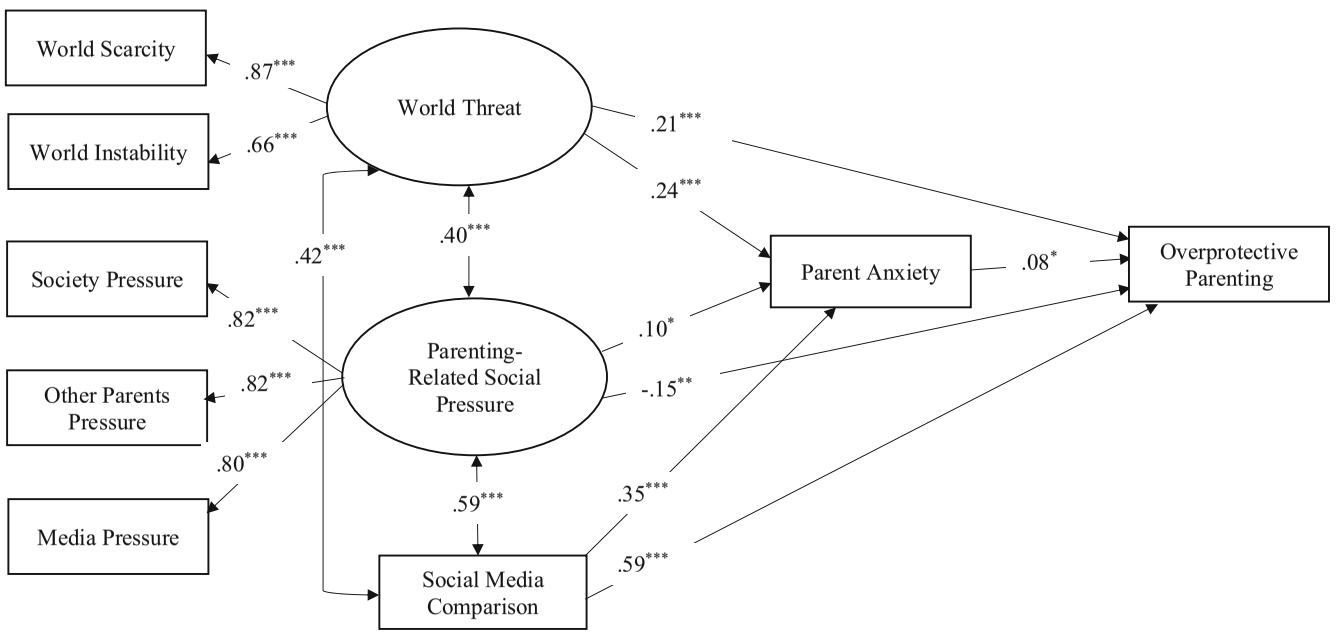

FIGURE 1 Results of path model analysis with parent anxiety as the mediating variable ($N = 909$). $\chi^2(17) = 244.50$, $p < .001$; comparative fit index = .934; Tucker–Lewis index = .849; standardized root mean squared residual = .043; root mean square error of approximation .121 [.108, .135]. *Note*. Cohort was included as a control variable but is not shown in the figure. Cohort (0 = Qualtrics, 1 = local) was significantly associated with world threat ($r = -.27$, $p < .001$) and overprotective parenting ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .037$). *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

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threat, parenting-related social pressure, and social comparisons on social media to parent anxiety were all statistically significant (β = .24, β = .10, and β = .35, respectively, all *p*s < .05). The direct paths of world threat and social media comparisons with overprotective parenting were also positive and statistically significant (β = .21 and β = .59, respectively, both *p*s < .01). On the contrary, social pressure was negatively associated with overprotective parenting (β = −.15, *p* < .01). The association between parents' anxiety symptoms and overprotective parenting was statistically significant (β = .08, *p* = .02), but much reduced compared to the zero-order correlation (see Table 1). Finally, when the three indirect paths from world threat, social pressures, and social media comparisons to overprotective parenting via parent anxiety were estimated using bootstrapping, all indirect paths were small but statistically significant (world threat, b = .019, *p* = .010; social pressure b = .008, *p* = .030; social media comparisons b = .027, *p* = .021; see Table 2). This model had a good fit to the data on the CFI (.934) and the SRMR (.043).Yet the chi-square, $\chi^2(17) = 244.50$, *p* < .001; the RMSEA (.121, 95% confidence interval [.108, .135]); and the TLI (.849) indicated less than adequate fit.

Parent gender differences and parent gender as a moderator

Parent gender differences

The mean-level differences between mothers and fathers on all measures are detailed in Supplemental Table 1. Fathers, relative to mothers, scored significantly higher in overprotective parenting and perceived more world scarcity and other parent societal pressure on their parenting, and reported more upward comparisons on social media.

Parent gender as a moderator of structural paths

After fitting the primary model for all parents, we tested whether parent gender (mothers/fathers) was a significant moderator of paths in the model. Before testing for moderation of the

TABLE 2 Standardized direct and indirect effects (via parents' anxiety), confidence intervals, and *p* values for the effects of the three independent variables on overparenting (also see Figure 1).

Independent variable	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	Indirect effect 95% CI [lower, upper]	Indirect effect *p* value
Full sample (*N* = 909)					
World threat	.211***	.019*	.230	[.005, .039]	.010
Parenting-related social pressure	−.154***	.008*	−.146	[.000, .023]	.033
Social media comparisons	.588***	.027*	.615	[.004, .054]	.021
Mothers (*n* = 611)					
World threat	.242***	.016	.258	[−.002, .041]	.074
Parenting-related social pressure	−.248***	.009	−.239	[−.001, .030]	.086
Social media comparisons	.578***	.024	.602	[−.006, .055]	.111
Fathers (*n* = 298)					
World threat	.069	.076***	.145	[.037, .135]	<.001
Parenting-related social pressure	.092	−.009	.083	[−.048, .023]	.524
Social media comparisons	.536***	.074***	.610	[.032, .129]	.001

Note. CI = confidence interval.
*p < .05.***p < .001.

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structural paths in the model, we tested whether the measurement portion of the model was invariant by parent gender. There was one significant gender difference in the measurement model, whereby the factor loading for world scarcity was stronger for fathers (.95) than for mothers (.75). However, given that both loadings were strong and the correlation between the latent variables of world threat and social pressure did not significantly differ for fathers (.43) and mothers (.42), the measurement model was fixed to gender equality, and a two-group model was then fit to the data to test for gender moderation of the structural paths. To determine whether the two-group model had a better fit than a model constrained to gender equality, we used the χ^2 difference ($\Delta\chi^2$) test. Finally, given that the two-group model did have a superior fit (discussed subsequently), we fit follow-up models to isolate the specific path coefficients moderated by gender.

The two-group model exploring parent gender as a moderator had a good fit to the data on multiple indicators, $\chi^2(40) = 275.83$, $p < .001$; CFI = .930; TLI = .917; SRMR = .054; RMSEA = .081, 95% confidence interval [.072, .090], $p < .001$. Also, the fit was significantly better than the fit of a model with all paths fixed to gender invariance, $\chi^2(50) = 327.07$, $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 51.24$, $p < .001$. This suggests that parent gender moderates some structural paths (i.e., direct effects). However, for the indirect effects, all 95% confidence intervals for mother and fathers overlapped, providing no support for moderated mediation (see Table 2). All paths for mothers and fathers are shown in Figure 2.

We fit follow-up models to isolate the paths that were moderated by parent gender. We started with the two-group model and then fixed paths to gender equality starting with the one with the least gender difference. We did this until the fit of the increasingly constrained model was significantly better than the original two-group model; this final two-group model with constraints suggested four paths were moderated by parent gender (bolded in Figure 2). First, the path from social pressure to parents' anxiety was positive and significant for mothers but not for fathers. The other three moderated paths were to overprotective parenting: the path from world threat to parenting was stronger for mothers than fathers and only significant (positive) for mothers; the path from anxiety to parenting was weaker for mothers than fathers and only significant (positive) for fathers, and the path from social pressure to overprotective parenting was stronger in mothers than fathers and only significant (negative) for mothers.

DISCUSSION

We investigated the connection among societal pressures, anxiety in parents, and parents' tendency to be overprotective of their adolescent children. Overprotection was defined as parents' inclination to take over the child's tasks, overinvolvement in children's self-direction and decision-making, and interfering in age-appropriate privacy and autonomy. Three societal pressures were considered, including perceived world threat, as indicated by perceived job scarcity and instability with a focus on challenges for youth (Gurland & Grolnick, 2005), perceived pressures to be a perfect or ideal parent from three sources (society in general, other parents, and the media; Lamprianidou et al., 2025), and the pressures that come from engaging in upward social comparisons of oneself to other parents on social media (Coyne et al., 2017). These associations were tested using LVSEM, with the model including the estimation of indirect associations through parents' anxiety. Our zero-order correlational results showed that parents who perceive more world threats and pressures to be ideal parents, as well as those who report more upward social comparisons to other parents on social media, reported higher levels of anxiety and overprotective parenting. Further, parents higher in anxiety reported more overprotection.

Within the LVSEM, world threat and social media comparisons were the pressures most strongly associated with heightened parents' anxiety and overprotective parenting, with pressures to be an ideal parent having mixed associations (i.e., associated with more anxiety but less

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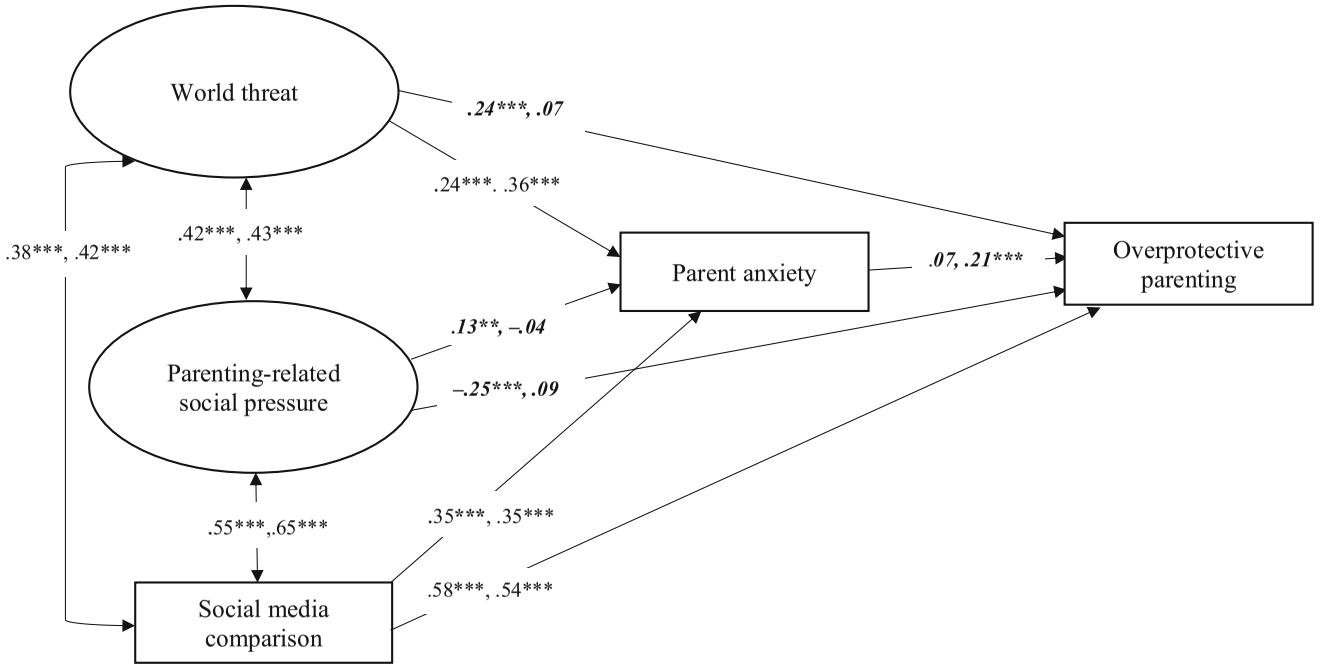

FIGURE 2 Results of path model analysis with parent anxiety as the mediating variable for mothers ($n = 611$) and fathers ($n = 298$).$\chi^2(40) = 275.83$, $p < .001$; comparative fit index = .930; Tucker–Lewis index = .917; standardized root mean squared residual = .054; root mean square error of approximation = .081 [.072, .090], p < .001. *Note*. The first coefficient on each path is for mothers, the second is for fathers. Cohort was included as a control variable but is not shown in the figure. Factor loadings were fixed to equality for mothers and fathers, so only one path coefficient is shown. The bold italic numbers represent those paths that were moderated by gender. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

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parental overprotection). Regarding parents' anxiety, the link between anxiety and overprotective parenting was considerably weaker, after accounting for the direct associations of perceived pressures and threats with overprotective parenting. Thus, most of the total association of world threats, societal pressures, and social comparisons on social media with overprotective parenting was direct, rather than indirect through parents' anxiety. This suggests that parents' perceptions of risks and pressures, more so than their anxiety, directly explain overprotective parenting. Considering parent gender as a moderating factor revealed that the strength of associations of predictors with overprotective parenting differ between mothers and fathers in some cases. For example, fathers' anxiety had a stronger impact on overprotective parenting than mothers' anxiety.

World threats, pressures to be an ideal parent, and social media comparisons

Parents scored higher in anxiety and overprotection when they perceived more world threats and made more upward comparisons to other parents on social media. World threats included parents' perceptions of the lack of opportunity and competitiveness for jobs and careers for youth today, as well as perceiving more world instability and unpredictability (Wang et al., 2023). Social media comparisons tapped parents' tendency to compare themselves on social media to other parents' skills and involvement with their children and to feel that they were not measuring up (Park & Baek, 2018). Such perceptions and comparisons were associated with higher levels of anxiety and overprotective behaviors in parents. As described in the framework of Grolnick and Apostoleris (2002), these associations may reflect an underlying concern about youth's progress combined with parents' feelings of responsibility and ego involvement in this progress. Together, these concerns could contribute to feelings of pressure, increased social comparisons on social media, heightened anxiety, and a greater reliance on overprotective parenting behaviors. In support of such relationships, parental perceptions of world threat and making social comparisons to other parents have been associated with concerns about youth's progress in life, including parents' perceptions of whether their children are able to compete and make progress in education and the job market (e.g., Coyne et al., 2017; Gurland & Grolnick, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022; J. A. Lee et al., 2025). Thus, anxiety and overprotective parenting may stem from parents' perceptions of their children's opportunities or progress. This aligns with the findings of Gurland and Grolnick's (2005), whereby mothers who perceived environmental threats tended to adopt more controlling parenting practices and with Wuyts et al.'s (2015, 2017) findings that societal pressure can drive parents to micromanage their children's performance and engagement.

Parents who engaged in more social comparisons to other parents on social media were higher in anxiety and overprotection. This finding is consistent with emerging research on the associations of accessing online information about parenting with parents' attitudes, beliefs, or mental health (for reviews, see Beuckels & De Wolf, 2025; Chee et al., 2023). Our findings are novel by identifying that parenting-related upward social comparisons on social media are associated with a higher level of parents' anxiety symptoms and overprotective parenting practices. This suggests that parents may continue to engage in social comparison as their children enter adolescence, which is linked to their own anxiety and may influence their tendency to exhibit overprotective parenting behaviors. However, past research has not yet tested alternative models of influence (given the unanimous use of cross-sectional designs; Chae, 2015; Coyne et al., 2017; Glatz et al., 2023), such as testing bidirectional associations of parents' mental health with their consumption of online parenting information. Given our use of a cross-sectional design, we also could not test the possibility that anxiety in parents could be a precursor of elevated social media social comparisons and parental threat perceptions, rather than a

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consequence of these factors. Such an alternative model is certainly plausible, and future longitudinal research should test these ideas.

In addition to world threat and social comparisons on social media, a third pressure considered in the LVSEM was parents' perception of societal pressures (from other parents, the media, and others) to be an ideal or perfect parent. Although these pressures had significant zero-order correlations with more elevated levels of anxiety in parents and overprotective parenting, these findings were different in the LVSEM. In the LVSEM, pressures remained (weakly) associated with parents' higher level of anxiety, but there was an unusual finding of a negative direct path to overprotection. This unexpected association could be a result of statistical suppression due to strong covariation among the predictor variables in this model. Given this pattern of findings, it appears that it is social comparisons on social media, rather than perceived pressure to be an ideal parent, that has the most notable role in increasing parents' anxiety and overprotection. Once social comparison is accounted for, it is possible that the perceptions of pressures from society regarding ideal or perfect parenting of older teenagers is not having a great deal of additional influence on parents' anxiety or their overprotective parenting and may even be reducing it. It could be that this type of social pressure may be more relevant in the prediction of achievement-oriented controlling parenting (Soenens et al., 2010). When parents feel more pressure to be a perfect parent, they may want their children to be top achievers. They could then use guilt-induction and pressuring language to demand achievement, a type of control that can be distinct from general overprotective parenting. These messages may address a range of parenting practices and could be as informative because they are strongly anxiety-provoking, resulting in not much of a direct effect on overprotective parenting (either more or less). Alternatively, the messages from society to be a perfect parent of teenagers could be understood as expectations of reducing control and promoting more youth autonomy, rather than being a more overprotective parent. Nevertheless, the pattern of findings suggests that there are many interrelated types of pressures and ways to compare oneself to other parents, which need to be considered to identify how they all impact on parents' anxiety and their parenting behaviors.

Parents' anxiety as a link between societal pressures to overprotective parenting

One of the unexpected results was the moderate-sized correlation between parents' anxiety and overprotective parenting ($r = .41$), which was greatly reduced ($r = .08$) in the LVSEM when the influences of perceived world threats, societal pressures, and social comparisons on social media were also considered. This resulted in small but significant indirect path coefficients of these perceived risks and pressures on overprotection via parents' anxiety in the LVSEM. Given this modest role of anxiety, the model could be expanded to consider other links, such as child separation anxiety (see Brenning et al., 2017), parental worries about children's opportunities and progress, concern about children's risk for psychological or physical harm, or overall parental anxiety, rather than general anxiety. Online therapeutic resources (e.g., www.choosingtherapy.com/overprotective-parents) and qualitative research (Brussoni & Olsen, 2012) suggest that it is parents' fears about their children's exposure to physical or psychological injury that can increase overprotective parenting, at least when children are younger. Grolnick and Apostoleris (2002) also described how parents who are more ego-involved and overprotective can experience anxiety when they are highly personally invested or involved in their child's achievements and well-being. As suggested earlier, there are also "youth-driven" factors that could play a role in overprotective parenting behaviors as a predictor, a mediator, or a moderator (Wang et al., 2023, p. 1377). These factors include youth's developmental progress, anxiety, and problem/risk-taking behaviors or child physical vulnerabilities, as found in past research with children and young adolescents (Hudson & Rapee, 2001; Hullmann et al., 2010). In addition, other

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drivers of overprotective parenting for adolescents could be family functioning, whereby the coparenting environment may play a role (Van Petegem et al., 2022). Finally, the model could be expanded to consider additional parental practices as outcomes, such as those that directly measure support for autonomy of adolescents (Soenens et al., 2015).

Differences between mothers and fathers

In the present sample, fathers were, on average, higher in overprotective parenting compared with mothers. This contrasts with a previous study of younger adolescents (ages 11 to 18 years) that reported no difference between mothers and fathers when they reported on their parents' overprotection (Arslan et al., 2023) and no difference in psychological control when reported by adolescents or their parents (Chubar et al., 2020; Soenens et al., 2006). Our findings differ from studies from North America, Europe, and Israel on older adolescents (average age over 20), such as Fingerman et al. (2012), which reported that mothers are more likely than fathers to provide excessive support. Similarly, Rousseau and Scharf (2015) found that in a study of 89 families, mothers reported more overprotection of their young adult children than fathers. It is not completely clear why our findings diverge from these past research findings. It could be that parenting is more intensified for fathers in Australia than these other parts of the world, but no research could be found to support this view. Yet one Australian study found that fathers' parent–child time has increased more than mothers' time in recent years, but that mothers still spend more time with children than do fathers (Craig et al., 2014). Overall, we recommend more research on overprotective parenting among mothers and fathers in Australia and encourage the investigation of overprotective parenting across countries and cultures.

Fathers, compared with mothers, also differed in other ways. Fathers perceived more threats from world scarcity, perceived more pressure on parenting from other parents, and reported more upward social comparisons on social media. It is notable that these differences align with the elevated level of overprotective parenting in fathers relative to mothers. Yet, given the rather limited research that has compared these perceptions between mothers and fathers, future research is certainly needed to replicate these findings and to move beyond them to understand and explain how they relate to parenting behaviors in mothers and fathers.

Parent gender was also explored as a moderator of the paths in the LVSEM. These analyses identified four directional paths that differed in strength between mothers and fathers. These moderated paths included one from social pressures to parents' anxiety and three paths to overprotective parenting. However, the path from anxiety to overprotection was most notable and revealed a stronger association among fathers than mothers. Examining the role of anxiety among parents in their parenting practices is a relatively new area of research, so this finding is surprising and novel. We encourage future research to unpack this further. Fathers who are anxious might be particularly susceptible to over protective parenting as their older adolescents start spending more time involved in areas that fathers feel responsible for, such as career development.

The other three moderated paths showed stronger connections for mothers than for fathers. First, world threat was more strongly connected to overprotection for mothers, whereby mothers who perceived more world threat reported more overprotection; this was not found for fathers. Second, parenting-related social pressure was more strongly connected to anxiety for mothers, although this association was small for mothers and not significant for fathers. Third, a significant negative direct path from parenting-related social pressure to overprotective parenting was found for mothers but not fathers, indicating that mothers (but not fathers) who felt more social pressure to be an ideal parent engaged in less overprotective parenting. Together, these moderated paths could suggest that the differences in the sample sizes of mothers compared with fathers (more power to detect effects in mothers than fathers) played a

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role. Also, given the unanticipated suppression effect found for mothers and not fathers, the findings suggest that the variance accounted for in overprotective parenting could overlap more across the perceptions of pressures and risk for mothers than for fathers (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). This highlights the possibility of real differences in the interface between perceived risk and social pressures in the reports of mothers compared with fathers and the need to consider multiple risks and pressures to identify unique associations in parent gender groups. Furthermore, the different paths for mothers and fathers could also suggest that the social pressures on parenting that confront mothers are different from those that confront fathers, so they have different links with parenting behaviors (Venard et al., 2024). Thus, the finding that mothers' perception of social pressures to be an ideal parent is associated with less overprotective parenting could be suggesting that the pressures mothers' experience give the message that overprotective parenting is not ideal, and this is changing mothers' behaviors accordingly. However, the pressures that fathers experience for specific types of parenting behaviors may not have this same impact on their overprotective parenting. Overall, these findings suggest that more research is needed to understand the differences in the messages and pressures that form views of the ideal mother versus the ideal father, to identify the parenting content mothers and fathers are most likely to consume, and to investigate how these differences may relate to their views of what it means to be an ideal or perfect parent. We also emphasize that these analyses were exploratory and await further consideration in future research.

Limitations, future research directions, and implications of the findings

This study had a large sample size of mothers and fathers from Australia. The study design was cross-sectional, however, which precludes directional or causal interpretations. It is important to conduct longitudinal research that focuses on how associations may be bidirectional (e.g., overprotection and parents' anxiety may fuel more pessimistic worldviews). It is also important to note that the parents were all residing in Australia. Australia is a multicultural country but has a majority White European population, so the findings may not be generalizable to other nations or regions around the world. Cultural differences could also result in under- or overreporting of overprotective parenting; future research should focus on differences, both within and between cultural contexts, as parenting norms and expectations about "good parenting" are partly culturally determined. This could be due to how autonomy-supportive parenting may be differently emphasized in majority world contexts compared with minority world contexts. Moreover, the mothers and fathers were not drawn from within families, which differs from most other past research that has included a gender mix of parents and makes it difficult to compare the results regarding parent gender to past research.

Another study limitation was the use of a measure of general anxiety as the mediator in this study, rather than anxiety specific to parenting. This may have impacted on the results. Future studies could consider parent-related mental health indicators, such as parental anxiety or parenting stress. Finally, we introduced a new measure of parents' upward comparisons on social media, focusing on their comparisons to other parents and parenting behaviors. Although this new measure had a solid one-factor structure and high internal consistency, we did not ask parents to report on the social media they consume. Therefore, the measure of social comparisons requires further testing to validate it against other social media use measures and to replicate these findings.

The findings support the idea that environmental risk and pressures partly explain parental overprotection. Thus, overprotection seems to occur partly in response to environmental risk and other external pressures. It should be noted that one dimension of environmental risk can include socioeconomic status (Song et al., 2020), particularly given its potential to influence parents' worldviews and therefore overprotective parenting behaviors. These findings make it

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relevant to consider environmental risk in combination with overprotective parenting in future research, especially research that focuses on adolescent developmental and well-being outcomes. It may be that environmental risk, pressures on parents, and overprotective parenting all have unique impacts on adolescent outcomes. It may also be that risk moderates the association of overprotective parenting with adolescent outcomes, whereby overprotective parenting has less impact on outcomes when environmental risk is high compared with low. However, given that overprotective parenting in this study was defined as parental behaviors that diverge from developmentally appropriate support and protection of adolescents and autonomy-restricting behaviors, we do expect that parental overprotection defined is this way will have some detrimental impact (even if small) on adolescents either in the short-term or the long-term regardless of the level of environmental risk.

Other theoretical implications of this research include providing a more contextualized understanding of overprotective parenting by considering the external pressures of society, other parents, and the media, as well as focusing on the impact of social media comparisons on parenting. The interesting, unexpected findings related to gendered differences in the correlates of anxiety and overprotection in parents points to the importance of focusing of fatherhood experiences of parenting adolescents in future research. Moreover, theories need to be expanded to consider how social media may be involved in parenting and child development.

The findings from this research have practical implications for those who interact with overprotective parents, such as teachers and clinicians. It may be useful to keep in mind how perceived financial and other world threats, and particularly social pressures and social media, may result in confusion about when involvement and support may become overprotective of adolescents. It may also be helpful to know when and why parents present as overly critical and demanding of perfection in their children and others, and to gather information from parents regarding messages they receive about parenting.

Conclusion

The current study is one of the first to investigate parents' perceptions of world instability and scarcity, as well as parenting-related pressures and social comparisons to other parents on social media, as unique explanations for both anxiety in parents and their overprotective parenting behaviors of adolescents. We found that parents who perceived greater world threat and made more upward social comparisons to other parents on social media had a higher level of anxiety and reported more overprotective parenting. Most of the associations of threats and pressures with overprotective parenting were direct, but some of the connections were through parents' own level of anxiety. Overall, however, the strongest links were direct from perceived world threats and upward comparisons on social media to more overprotective parenting. Moreover, some of the findings were significantly different when comparing mothers and fathers—in particular, showing a larger effect of fathers' than mothers' anxiety on heightened overprotective parenting, and suggesting greater interrelations among threat, pressure, anxiety, and overprotective parenting in mothers than fathers.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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