



Predicting longitudinal trajectories of academic passion in first-year university students



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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether or not academic passion changes over the course of an academic year, and determined if membership in specific passion trajectories could be predicted by initial perceptions of university life. First-year university students ($N = 457$) completed online assessments of passion quantity and quality (harmonious and obsessive passion) at three time-points throughout the academic year. Using latent class growth modeling, we found that academic passion, both quantity and quality, changed very little for most students, changed a modest amount for some students, and changed dramatically for a small group of students. Also, initial levels of activity internalization, perceived opportunities for self-expansion, boredom, expectation violations, perceived pressure, and autonomy predicted membership in specific passion trajectories. These results indicate that academic passion changes for some students during the first year of university, and that initial perceptions of university life can predict the course that passion will take over time.

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1. Introduction

Students enroll in university for various reasons. Some students are not particularly interested in academics per se, but attend university as a way to increase job prospects, develop or maintain social relationships, or simply to experience a new adventure. Others go to university because they find pursuing academics as an enjoyable, meaningful, and valuable part of their lives, and wish to continue pursuing their academics at the university level. For these students, academics is a passion in their lives. Once at university, the extent to which students are passionate for academics could remain relatively unchanged for some but could change for others. Students who enter university without a passion for academics could remain uninterested in their studies throughout university, or they could discover new ideas or areas of study that ignite a passion for academics and cause it to increase over time. Those who enter university with an existing passion might also maintain this initial passion throughout their time at university, or this passion could change: The new experiences and opportunities afforded by university could allow their passion for academics to grow even stronger, or they may feel that university is boring or that there is excessive pressure to achieve high marks, which could cause their passion to decrease. To our knowledge, little research has examined if academic passion remains relatively stable, or if students tend to experience

fluctuations in academic passion. In this article, we describe research that examined changes in passion in students over the course of their first year in university, and tested if the course that one's passion took over time could be predicted by initial perceptions of university life.

1.1. Dualistic model of passion

Psychological research studying passions has relied on the dualistic model of passion (Vallerand et al., 2003), which proposes that people's passions can be differentiated based on dimensions of *quantity* and *quality* (Vallerand, 2010). The quantity dimension represents the amount of passion people feel for activities, and emerges when people find particular activities enjoyable, important, and valuable in their lives, leading them to internalize the activity as part of their identities. The more internalized these activities become, the greater the passion people will have towards them (Vallerand, 2010). The type of internalization that takes place determines the quality of passion that will develop. The dualistic model identifies two types of passions that emerge based on this internalization process. *Harmonious passions* emerge through autonomous internalization (Deci & Ryan, 2000), meaning that these activities are authentically integrated into people's identities and are a balanced part of their lives. On the other hand, *obsessive passions* emerge through controlled forms of internalization, leading them to occupy overpowering roles in people's identities (Vallerand et al., 2003). Harmonious passion is generally linked with more adaptive outcomes while obsessive passion is linked with more maladaptive outcomes (for reviews, see Vallerand, 2010, 2015). Research conducted specifically with students has found positive links

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between harmonious passion for academics and levels of deliberate practice, subjective well-being, dedication and persistence, the adoption of mastery-oriented goals, and inverse relationships with levels of cynicism towards one's studies. Obsessive passion towards academics has been positively associated with deliberate practice, level of absorption in academics, and the adoption of mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals (Bonneville-Roussy, Vallerand, & Bouffard, 2013; Stoeber, Childs, Hayward, & Feast, 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007).

The dualistic model of passion describes the development of passion, including harmonious and obsessive varieties, as an ongoing process that can change depending on fluctuating levels of activity valuation and factors influencing autonomous and controlled activity internalization (Vallerand, 2010). From this perspective, increases and decreases in passion over time are to be expected, particularly among those who experience change in the amount of value an activity has in their lives or change in levels of autonomy they feel towards their passion. In one of the few studies that examined change in passion, Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, and Guay (2008) assessed passion quality at two time-points separated by 3 months with a group of teachers, and found that levels of harmonious passion and obsessive passion for teaching were quite stable. However, it is possible that passion might change differently for different people, and that passion may be more amenable to change among people pursuing a new activity or among those pursuing a passion in a new context.

1.2. Predicting changes in passion quantity and quality

Despite the paucity of research that has tested whether or not passionate motivation changes over time, the passion literature has identified factors that might impact changes in passion quantity or quality. For overall levels of passion quantity, as discussed previously, the dualistic model specifies that increasing levels of activity valuation and internalization lead to increasing levels of passion quantity (Vallerand, 2010). As an activity becomes a more central part of a person's identity, one's passion for the activity will increase. Similar suggestions have emerged from the interpersonal relationship literature regarding how to heighten one's passion for another person. Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999), for example, proposed that increases in passion for a romantic partner emerge when levels of intimacy increase. This hypothesis predicts that any action that increases levels of intimacy with a partner, such as sharing new experiences, will lead to increased passion. Similar to this notion is the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986), which outlines that experiences of rapid self-expansion lead to increases in passion for others. Once again, the self-expansion model identifies that engaging in novel and challenging activities with a partner can lead to a sense of exhilaration and passion (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013). Others have also emphasized the importance of keeping relationships fresh, new, and exciting in order to keep the passion alive with romantic partners (e.g., Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Tsapelas, Aron, & Orbuch, 2009). What has yet to be tested is whether these recommendations for keeping the passion alive in relationships with other people apply to relationships with activities. Whether the amount of passion a person has for an activity increases or decreases over time might depend not only on levels of activity internalization, but also on the extent to which one's engagement in an activity remains new, exciting, and offers a chance for self-expansion.

Changes in passion quality are posited to depend on factors that facilitate either autonomous or controlled activity internalization (Vallerand, 2010). One key factor that has been implicated in this process is autonomy support. Perceptions of autonomy support should facilitate the development of harmonious passion for an activity, while less autonomous and more controlling environments should promote obsessive passion (Vallerand, 2010). Research studying the development of harmonious and obsessive passion has consistently found that high levels of perceived autonomy support predict the

development of harmonious passion while more controlling, high-pressure environments predict levels of obsessive passion for an activity (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013; Mageau et al., 2009).

1.3. The present research

The aim of this study was to determine if levels of passion quantity and quality change over time, and to determine if these changes could be predicted by students' initial perceptions of their university experience. Unlike some variables that likely change for all students, with only the magnitude of change differing between students (e.g., vocabulary, math ability), we expected that passion would follow a multinomial pattern in which both the magnitude and direction of change would vary between students (Andruff, Carraro, Thompson, & Gaudreau, 2009; Raudenbush, 2001). That is, it is likely that not all students experience change in the quantity or quality of their passion over time, and those who do experience change may not all change in the same direction or degree. To account for this potential pattern of multinomial heterogeneity in change (Louvet, Gaudreau, Menaut, Genty, & Deneuve, 2007), we used latent class growth modeling, a method that identifies distinct subgroups of students who follow similar trajectories of change over time (Nagin, 1999). Although we expected that levels of passion quantity and quality would change, we had no explicit hypotheses regarding the patterns of change that might emerge. The predictors of passion trajectories that we assessed have been identified as possible factors that impact the development of passion, and included levels of activity internalization, opportunities for self-expansion, activity boredom, the extent to which an activity violated prior expectations, perceived autonomy, and perceived environmental pressure. We studied these questions in a large sample of students who were in their first year of university. We chose to study this population because, although the students had extensive experience pursuing their education throughout high school, we reasoned that the transition to a university environment introduces new experiences that could either promote or suppress the level and type of passion they had for academics.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 457 ($n_{\text{female}} = 363$) first-year university students enrolled in Introductory Psychology at the University of Manitoba ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.89$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.17$). Most participants identified as having a White/European ethnic background (51.90%) followed by Filipino (20.40%).

Participants enrolled online for a study about the experiences of university students. The study involved completing three online surveys throughout the course of the academic year: at the start of October (Time 1, one month into the academic year), at the end of November (Time 2, before the mid-year exam period), and in March (Time 3, before the final exam period). The first survey was completed by all participants upon enrolling for the study, while the second and third surveys were sent to the participants via email. Informed consent was provided as part of each time-point of the study and, although the importance of completing each survey was emphasized, participants were not required to complete all time-points. Participants received one research credit towards their Introductory Psychology class for each survey that they completed. Ethics approval was obtained before the study began.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Passion

Harmonious passion, obsessive passion, and overall levels of passion for academics were measured with the Passion Scale (Vallerand et al.,

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