



Brief report

How do academic stress and leisure activities influence college students' emotional well-being? A daily diary investigation

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ABSTRACT

China has one of the largest bodies of college students who face growing academic stress that influences their well-being. Using a daily diary method in a group of Chinese college students ($n = 139$, mean age = 19.50 years, 27% males) who reported their daily positive and negative emotion consecutively for two weeks, this study investigated the dynamic relations between daily academic stress, leisure activities engagement, and emotion, and further examined the moderation of sex on these links. The results showed that at both between- and within-person level, academic stress was positively associated with negative emotion, and leisure activities engagement was positively associated with positive emotion. The association between leisure activities engagement and positive emotion were stronger among female students than among male students. These results suggest that effectively reducing academic stress and actively engaging in leisure activities are both important in promoting and enhancing daily emotional well-being.

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1. Introduction

Facing growing competition in the job market (Liu & Cheng, 2010) and academic excellence as a social norm in Asian culture (Chen, Chang, & He, 2003), Chinese college students are burdened with high academic stress. Chronic exposure to stress could negatively influence mental health (Charles, Piazza, Mogle, Sliwinski, & Almeida, 2013). Particularly, academic stress could lead to negative emotion without proper and timely coping (Farrelly, Sun, & Mack, 2013). Engaging in leisure activities can decrease school-related stress in adolescents (Haugland, Wold, & Torsheim, 2003), reduce negative feelings (Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2014), and increase life satisfaction and subjective well-being (Kuykendall, Tay, & Ng, 2015; Newman et al., 2014). Meanwhile, previous studies have found that negative events and experience (e.g., stress) have stronger links with negative emotion than with positive emotion, whereas positive events and experience (e.g., leisure activities) have stronger links with positive emotion (e.g., Reich, Zautra, & Davis, 2003; Watson, 1988). Additionally, studies have also indicated that physical activities moderated the relationship between stress and well-beings (e.g., Haugland et al., 2003).

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Therefore, it is worthwhile to further investigate differential and interactive associations of leisure activities and stress with emotions.

Stress and leisure activities engagement are daily events that influence daily emotion in a dynamic way (Patnaik, 2014). However, most previous studies have focused on between-person differences and at a macro time level (e.g., years). Daily diary design can disentangle between-person differences and within-person differences at a micro level (i.e., daily). Furthermore, it provides a better way to investigate dynamic within-person processes of emotion through assessments that are more reliable and ecological (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008; Stone, Shiffman, Atienza, & Nebeling, 2007). Notably, in a daily diary study, Greene and Maggs (2017) found that college students' positive affect was negatively associated with time spent on academics across days.

Given the increasing levels of mental health problems among Chinese college students, it is important to understand how academic stress and leisure activities engagement affect emotional well-being on a daily basis, the primary aim of the current study. Furthermore, current literature is inconsistent in sex differences in emotion and its association with stress or leisure activities engagement (Bradley & Inglis, 2012; Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009; Misra & McKean, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Therefore, the second aim of the study was to examine how sex moderates these associations.

Based on prior studies, we expected that (1) at both between- and within-person level, more academic stress and/or less leisure activities would be associated with higher negative emotion and lower positive emotion; (2) male and female students could have different associations between leisure activities, stress, and emotion. However, due to limited previous studies and inconsistent findings, no specific direction regarding this moderation was hypothesized.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Data for the study were collected at universities in Guangdong Province, China. College students in introductory-level psychology courses were contacted with invitation letter and information about the sampling procedures, and were instructed to fill out the online questionnaire for daily diary assessment. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. A total of 140 college students agreed to participate in the study. Data collection on positive and negative emotion, academic stress, and leisure activities was conducted in the evening (22:00 to 24:00) for 14 consecutive days. After excluding one older participant aged 27, a total of 1851 daily reports from 139 participants (27% males, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.50$, $SD = 1.07$, ranging from 17 to 22) were collected (4.9–6.6% missing on the investigated variables), with participants reporting 5–14 days of valid reports (average = 13.31).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Daily emotion

Participants self-reported daily emotion on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “rarely”, 5 = “strongly”) on how they felt on that particular day with 12 types of emotion (Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002; Zhang, Diao, & Schick, 2004). The 12 types of emotion included four for positive emotions (enthusiastic, excited, positive & active, proud) and eight for negative emotions (sad, ashamed, perturbed, nervous, guilty, fear, panic, angry). Items were averaged to create a mean score for daily positive emotion (α s ranging 0.80–0.91) and negative emotion (α s ranging 0.77–0.89), respectively.

2.2.2. Academic stress

Participants rated the academic stress they experienced per day from 1 (no stress) to 10 (extremely stressful).

2.2.3. Leisure activities

Participants were asked to choose the activities they have engaged in during that day from 10 popular activities in leisure time among Chinese college students (Li, 2014; Xu, Cheng, & Yang, 2008), with 1 indicating “yes” and 0 indicating “no”. Example activities included “chatting with friends”, “watching movies”, “exercising”, “playing video game”, “dining out”, and “shopping”. The total sum scores of activities participants endorsed were created as the score for leisure activities.

3. Results

There were significant sex differences in between-person levels of leisure activities and stress (see Table 1). Intra-class correlations for positive and negative emotion were 0.43 and 0.54, respectively, suggesting substantial between- and within-person variation.

As shown in Table 2, positive emotion was predicted by leisure activities at both daily ($B = 0.10$) and individual level ($B = 0.10$), but not by academic stress. Negative emotion was positively predicted by academic stress at both daily ($B = 0.03$) and individual level ($B = 0.10$), but not by leisure activities. At within-person level, controlling for other covariates, college students reported higher positive emotion on days when they reported more leisure activities than usual; they reported

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