



University Students' Coping with Compulsory Extracurricular Activities Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract. This study takes college students' coping with daily extracurricular activities as the starting point, uses the self-determination theory framework, and conducts qualitative research on six undergraduates of a science and engineering specialized university through semi-structured interviews, and examines their evaluation and behavior adjustment methods for school-arranged daily extracurricular activities. Students generally summarize the experience of compulsory activities with "meaningless", which is manifested in the formalization of process orientation, the ambiguity of income and cost of input-output imbalance, and the participation load of encroaching on private time. The above experience forms a closed loop of psychological need frustration through the interaction of the three dimensions. At the behavioral level, respondents have formed three coping modes, including various ways to manage time, redefine the purposes of the events, and selectively attend the activities. These strategies are not derived from value identity, but students' adaptive survival skills under institutional pressure. The paper sheds lights to the understanding of self-determination theory in low-intensity and high-frequency stressors in university extracurricular settings, and suggestions are provided for university to help improve the mental well beings of students.

Keywords: Self-determination Theory, Coping Strategies, University Students, Compulsory Extracurricular Activities, Basic Psychological Needs.

1 Introduction

College students are in the critical development period of transition from adolescence to adulthood. They are facing multiple stressors such as academic competition, career planning, and interpersonal relationships. Mental health problems are receiving increasing attention. According to the national mental health development report, about 28 % of college students have different degrees of anxiety or depression symptoms, and mental health has become one of the core issues of college education [1]. It is of great the-

oretical value and practical significance to deeply explore the source of college students' psychological pressure and its coping mechanism, and to find a scientific and effective mental health intervention path.

In explaining individual psychological development and behavioral motivation, self-determination theory (SDT) provides an explanatory theoretical framework [2]. This theory suggests that individual's mental health and positive development depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs, namely, autonomy, competence and relatedness. In recent years, SDT has been widely used in the field of educational psychology. It has become an important theoretical tool to understand college students' motivation, adaptation and well-being, and one of the core indicators to measure individual mental health. However, there are still obvious deficiencies in the existing research. First, most studies pay more attention to major stress events (e.g., examination failure, job rejection, interpersonal conflict, or family emergencies), but ignore the daily chores, the most common and lasting source of stress [3]. Although these high-frequency fragmentation problems have limited individual effects, their cumulative effects often have a more far-reaching long-term impact on the emotional state and mental health of college students. Secondly, most of the existing researches examine the relationship between psychological needs and coping strategies through quantitative methods, lacking in-depth understanding of students' subjective experience, and it is difficult to reveal the cognitive logic behind their strategy choices. Hence, qualitative approach is essential here since it captures how students subjectively interpret, negotiate, and strategize within institutional constraints, which is something that quantitative scales cannot reveal.

In response to the above research gaps, this study selects six full-time undergraduates from a science and engineering specialized university in eastern China as the research object, and uses semi-structured in-depth interview methods to investigate college students' perception of school-arranged trifles and their coping strategies. The research mainly raises the following two questions: (1) How do students perceive the value of extra-curriculum by the university; (2) What are their coping strategies? Adopting the theoretical framework of SDT, this paper explains why individuals adopt specific behaviors (whether psychological needs are met or not), and reveals how to maintain psychological balance in structural constraints. The findings of this study would help to deepen the understanding of the daily stress coping mechanism of college students, and provide empirical evidence for the practice of mental health education in colleges and universities.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Core Framework of SDT

SDT is a macro theory to explain human motivation, personality development and mental health. Its core hypothesis is that the individual's intrinsic motivation stimulation, healthy psychological development and positive behavior pattern formation depend on the satisfaction of three innate and cross-cultural basic psychological needs, namely, the need for autonomy, the need for competence and the need for belonging [2].

The need for autonomy refers to the individual's feeling that his own behavior is out of self-selection and inner will, rather than external control or coercion. The essence is the sense of control over his own behavior. Competency needs refer to the individual feels that they have the ability to cope with environmental challenges, can obtain a sense of achievement and self-efficacy in related activities, the core is self-efficacy. Relatedness needs refer to the individual's feeling of stable emotional connection with others, being accepted, cared for and understood by the people around him. The SDT theory clearly points out that when the external environment can support the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs of the individual, the individual will show stronger internal driving force, more active behavior pattern and better environmental adaptability. On the contrary, when the basic psychological needs are in a state of frustration for a long time, the individual's internal motivation opportunities are significantly attenuated, which in turn leads to negative behavior, emotional disorders and poor environmental adaptation.

After more than 40 years of development, SDT has been widely used in education, mental health, organizational behavior, sports psychology and other fields. In the field of education, studies have shown that autonomously supported classroom environments can significantly improve students' learning engagement and academic achievement [4]; in the field of mental health, basic psychological needs satisfaction has been proved to be a key variable to predict individual well-being and resilience [5]. The above studies have jointly verified the explanatory and predictive power of SDT on individual behavior choice and psychological development. However, the existing SDT research mostly focuses on formal situations with strong structure such as study and work, and pays insufficient attention to low-intensity and high-frequency stressors in extra-curricular activities. The erosion mechanism of individual basic psychological needs and the psychological adaptation process of individuals have not been systematically discussed.

2.2 The Concept of Coping Strategies and Related Research on University Students

Coping strategy refers to a series of cognitive and behavioral responses taken by individuals to regulate negative emotions, solve stressors, and maintain psychological balance when facing stress events [6]. It is a key intermediary variable that connects stress events and mental health outcomes.

In recent years, domestic scholars have systematically reviewed coping strategies within the Chinese context, and found some consensus results. First, coping strategies are the core predictive variables of college students' mental health and campus adaptation [7]. Positive coping can significantly buffer the negative impact of stress events, and positively predict life satisfaction, academic adaptation and psychological resilience. Negative coping enlarges psychological damage and is a risk factor for anxiety, depression and academic burnout. Secondly, the choice of coping strategies is influenced by both individual cognitive assessment and social context. When individuals evaluate stress events as controllable, they are more inclined to adopt problem-focused coping; when the assessment is uncontrollable, it is more likely to use emotional focus

coping [8]. Thirdly, the coping strategies are malleable and can be cultivated and adjusted through educational intervention [9]. However, there are still limitations in the existing research. Most of the studies use questionnaires to quantitatively investigate the relationship between coping strategies and mental health variables, and less in-depth exploration of students' strategy selection logic in specific situations; at the same time, in view of the specific stress scenario of compulsory campus activities, there is also room for research on how students develop cognitive and behavioral coping styles in the face of low-intensity and cumulative daily minor stress events frequently encountered in campus life under institutional constraints.

3 Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a semi-structured interview method, which combines the standardization of structured interviews with the flexibility of open interviews, allowing researchers to ask questions based on the respondents' answers on the basis of the preset outline, so as to obtain more abundant and in-depth information [10]. The interview is conducted through online voice calls, and all the recordings are compiled into verbatim texts. The interview encourages participants to narrate in the first person and express their true feelings in a relatively private and open atmosphere, which provides qualitative depth for the study and solves the inherent limitations of the questionnaire method. Based on the core framework of SDT, this interview focuses on two research questions in the introduction section. The core content includes describing the overall situation of college students' daily trifles coping strategies, and analyzing the different adjustment forms and coping strategies of college students.

Table 1. Coding examples.

Original Quotation	Initial Codes	Theme	Dimensional Definition
It's not that I'm against exercise or lectures per se, but I don't like that mechanical requirement of "just finishing the required number of times".	Mechanical requirement, fulfilling quotas	Activities for show purposes	The core objective of the activity is to complete procedures or check-ins rather than the intrinsic value of the content itself.
Too draining to afford.	High energy depletion, no output	Activities with unclear benefits	The activity fails to deliver competence enhancement or tangible outcomes yet demands substantial investment.
Not going makes me seem like an outsider... forcing myself to participate out of guilt.	Social pressure, emotional burden	Activities that drain one's emotion	Compulsory participation incurs emotional costs (guilt, resistance) and social costs (pressure to conform).
I paying attention the first time to figure out what to sign in and what to write, then bringing earphones afterward to do my own things.	Understanding rules, minimizing investment	Ways to manage time	Minimizing participation investment after mastering the procedural requirements.

Original Quotation	Initial Codes	Theme	Dimensional Definition
I try to convince myself that the college is urging us to develop good habits, to maintain a positive learning state, which helps improve academic performance.	Self-persuasion, ascribing meaning	Meaning re-definition	Alleviating discomfort from frustrated psychological needs through reinterpretation of activity significance.
The comprehensive assessment isn't just about grades. Your participation in activities, check-ins, and meetings — all of these are visible to instructors.	Visibility, administrative compliance	Selective attendance	Internalizing “being managed” as an implicit standard of the “good student” identity.

Thematic analysis is used for data analysis. First, the researcher repeatedly reads the transcribed text, openly encodes the original data, and extracts the meaning units related to “psychological need frustration” and “coping strategies”. Secondly, the initial codes are organized into potential themes, and then systematically mapped onto the SDT theoretical framework. Thirdly, through the continuous comparison method, the theme is refined and named, and finally the three themes of “activities for show purposes”, “activities with unclear benefits”, and “activities that drain one’s emotion” and several subcategories of coping strategies are formed. The encoding examples are shown in Table 1. In order to ensure the credibility of the coding, a peer researcher is invited to encode the text independently. The final result is that the coding consistency of the two people is more than 90%, and the inconsistency is reached through discussion and negotiation.

3.2 Research Participants

In this paper, convenience sampling is used to select a total of 6 full-time undergraduate students from a science and engineering specialized university in eastern China. The six selected participants come from different academic years and disciplinary backgrounds, with a balanced gender distribution. This sampling comprehensively accounts for variations in academic performance, learning stages, and professional backgrounds, thereby capturing the general circumstances of the broader student population to an adequate degree. Detailed information is presented in Table 2. All names used are pseudonyms. All interviewees have signed the consent form, which includes the information regarding the purpose of the study and the principle of data anonymization. During the research process, the participants’ right to withdraw are fully guaranteed.

Table 2. Respondents’ information.

Name	Year of Study	Faculty	Gender
Student 1: Jackie	Second year	College of materials science and technology	Male
Student 2: Ethan	Third year	College of energy and power engineering	Male
Student 3: Henry	Third year	College of energy and power engineering	Male
Student 4: Emma	Second year	College of materials science and technology	Female
Student 5: Sophia	Third year	College of materials science and technology	Female
Student 6: Ava	Second year	College of energy and power engineering	Female

Note: Given that first-year students are still in the university adjustment period and have not yet developed a full understanding of the institutional logic and evaluation rules governing campus activities, while fourth-year students face graduation pressures such as employment searches, operating under severe time constraints that render their coping behaviors unrepresentative of routine, ongoing coping mechanisms, students from these two years are not sampled in this study.

4 Findings

4.1 College Students' Perception of Extracurricular Activities: Three Dimensions of Meaninglessness

Through in-depth interviews with six college students, this study identifies three core dimensions of students' perception of "meaningless" campus activities: formalization, unclear benefit-cost ratio, and high cost of participation.

First of all, a couple of students mentioned that they completed many activities just for show. They only want to complete the process, rather than obtain the value of the content itself. Such activities include mandatory check-in tasks, meetings lacking substantive content, and aimless social gatherings designed merely to create a sense of presence. Student 2 described the experience of mandatory campus running and check-in lectures: *"It's not that I'm against exercise or lectures per se, but I don't like that mechanical requirement of 'just finishing the required number of times.' Often, we have our own plans, yet we have to 'fulfill the quota' for the system record or to avoid point deductions. That feeling makes one sense that they are not living actively but being arranged to live."* Students 4 and 6 expressed similar sentiments. Student 4 remarked that the post-midterm review meeting *"felt completely unnecessary, especially at the university level"*; Student 6 noted, *"What I dislike most are social activities where form outweighs substance, as these activities have no clear objectives and serve primarily to create a sense of presence."*

SDT holds that the need for autonomy refers to the individual's feeling that his own behavior is out of self-selection and inner will, rather than external control or coercion, and the core is the sense of control over his own behavior [2]. The above quotes show that formalistic activities directly harm students' autonomy needs, since students are not motivated by self-selection to participate in these activities, but are driven by external pressures such as completing indicators and avoiding deductions. Although activities such as running, lectures, and resumption meetings may have positive significance, these activities cannot stimulate their intrinsic motivation because students fail to understand their intrinsic value and lack the right to choose independently.

Second, several students reported engaging in activities with unclear benefits. These activities fail to deliver improvements in professional competence, academic assistance, or personal growth outcomes, yet demand substantial investments of students' time and energy. Student 1 mentioned that group performances requiring repeated rehearsals were *"too draining to afford"*. Student 3 described how morning self-study check-ins encroached upon rest time: *"Given the prevalence of staying up late nowadays, combined with considerable academic pressure, sleep quality is not very good and rest time is already somewhat limited... The morning self-study check-in activity*

forces me to cut nearly an hour from already scarce sleep time, preventing adequate rest.” Student 5 added: *“Some lectures are completely unrelated to my major. I just sit there scrolling on my phone, but skipping them affects attendance records. It feels like a waste of time.”*

At present, college students are facing fierce competitive pressure. They need to cope with multiple tasks such as learning, internship and activities at the same time, and hope to see practical results that help the goals in their efforts. However, the compulsory activities arranged by the school occupy students’ limited time resources to a large extent, but they cannot provide corresponding output or ability improvement. From the perspective of SDT, competence needs refer to the individual’s feeling that they have the ability to cope with environmental challenges and can gain a sense of achievement and efficacy in related activities. When the activity cannot bring actual output or ability improvement, the students’ competence needs will not be met.

Third, students also highlighted the high costs of participation, which extended beyond mere time expenditure. These activities encroach upon extracurricular hours, rest periods, and even sleep, disrupting individual rhythms of study and daily life. Moreover, compulsory participation generates emotional resistance; organizational chaos produce discomfort; and the pressure to conform socially imposes additional burdens.

Student 1 explicitly stated: *“What I dislike most are cultural performances or evening galas that require mandatory attendance by all members, mainly because they are collective tasks assigned by the class or student organization. Teachers and classmates are all watching; not going makes one seem like an outsider.”* Student 3 noted: *“These activities are typically unified requirements from the university or college, requiring a certain number of attendances per semester; otherwise, one faces public criticism from the college.”* Student 5 mentioned: *“I don’t like attending activities with too many people. If the organizer’s management is not particularly appropriate, it feels very chaotic,”* as well as *“forcing myself to participate out of guilt.”*

These quotes show that the cost of participation includes not only time cost, but also emotional cost (guilt, conflict, internal friction) and social cost (the pressure to comply with group norms). When students’ personal rhythm conflicts with the requirements of the school system, they are forced to reduce “already scarce rest time”, which further aggravates their stress and fatigue. In addition, the pressure to conform detrimentally undermines genuine relatedness needs, that is, individuals should feel a stable emotional connection with others and be accepted, cared for and understood by others around them, rather than forcing themselves to participate out of guilt or pressure.

4.2 Coping Strategies

Although compulsory activities bring negative experiences, students do not passively bear them, but develop a variety of coping strategies to maintain psychological balance and operability of academic life. Through the analysis of the interview data, this study identifies the following three main coping strategies.

The first is the cost minimization strategy, that is, students reduce the loss caused by activities by reducing time and energy input, while meeting the system requirements. Student 2 scheduled campus running along the route back to the dormitory: *“I just treat*

running as something on the way. Since I have to return to the dormitory anyway, I take a slight detour and finish it without spending extra time." Student 4 adopted a strategy of "attending once to learn the procedure, then minimizing investment thereafter": *"I pay attention the first time to figure out what to sign in and what to write; afterward I bring earphones and do my own things."* Student 6 collaborated with peers to reduce costs: *"Our dormitory group chat sends each other check-in codes. We proxy-sign whenever possible to avoid unnecessary trouble."*

The second category is the strategy of meaning reconstruction. Some students try to find or give meaning from the activities to alleviate the discomfort caused by the frustration of psychological needs. Student 3 noted: *"I try to convince myself that the college is urging us to develop good habits, to maintain a positive learning state, which helps improve academic performance."* Student 5 stated: *"Some activities are rather meaningless, but comprehensive assessment points help with graduate school recommendation. I treat it as an investment in the future."* Such strategies reflect students' cognitive adjustment efforts within institutional constraints.

The third category is selective participation strategy. Students prioritize multiple activity requirements and devote limited resources to higher "cost-effective" activities. Student 1 indicated: *"I pick activities that yield more points with less time commitment; I push back on the rest whenever possible."* Student 4 similarly mentioned: *"When class activities conflict with student organization activities, I assess which contributes more to the comprehensive assessment. I don't attend every single one."*

It is worth noting that students' selection criteria are not based on the intrinsic value of the activity itself, but on its visibility in the management system. Student 3, in describing the comprehensive assessment scoring system, explicitly stated: *"The comprehensive assessment isn't just about grades. Your participation in activities, check-ins, and meetings — all of these are visible to instructors. If you don't do them, you certainly won't get excellence evaluations."* Student 5 added: *"Sometimes it's not that I want to attend, but rather that I'm afraid not attending will affect my evaluation for excellence. Instructors might perceive me as unengaged."* These quotes show that students have internalized "manageable," that is, punctual check-ins, attendance at routine meetings, fulfillment of prescribed quotas as implicit criteria for "good student" identity. The coping strategies developed by them are not derived from the recognition of the value of activities, but through strategic adaptation to the requirements of the system to maintain an operational balance between life and study.

5 Discussion

This paper finds that the three dimensions of formalization, unclear benefit-cost ratio and high participation cost actually do not exist in isolation, but influence and strengthen each other, which together constitute students' negative experience of compulsory campus activities. The frustration of independent needs will further affect the needs of competence and relatedness. When students feel that they are "not active in life, but in the arrangement of life", their engagement in activities and self-efficacy will decline, which will damage the need for competence; at the same time, the experience

of being forced to participate rather than voluntarily connected is also difficult to generate a real sense of belonging. In turn, when the activity cannot bring about ability improvement or relationship satisfaction (the cost of income is not clear), and it requires a high time and emotional cost (high participation cost), students' autonomous needs will be further squeezed, and they feel trapped in the system and unable to control their time and pace of life. Therefore, formalization, unclear benefit-cost ratio and high participation cost constitute a mutually reinforcing cycle, which together lead to the frustration of students' basic psychological needs, thus triggering their negative experience.

The deeper findings involve students' re-understanding of the "good student" identity. The quotes from Student 3 and 5 show that students have incorporated "manageable" into the self-definition of "good student." This finding conflicts with the core hypothesis of SDT, since it believes that the need for autonomy is the premise of intrinsic motivation, but what students in this study actually acquire is not autonomy, but strategic obedience to survive in an environment where autonomy needs are frustrated. They are not "becoming themselves," but "becoming good students that can be systematically identified." This effect is actually misplaced with the official goal of promoting the holistic development of students [11]. Students do not internalize the value of the activity itself, but acquire another set of cognition about obedience and strategic action through organizational forms and evaluation rules. Therefore, the paradox of the goal and practical effect of education is still worthy of further discussion.

6 Conclusion

Based on the SDT, this study investigates college students' perception of compulsory extracurricular activities and their coping strategies through semi-structured interviews with six undergraduates from a science and engineering specialized university in eastern China. The study finds that students mainly perceive the meaninglessness of activities from three dimensions, including formalization, unclear benefit-cost ratio and high participation cost. The three strengthen each other and jointly lead to the frustration of independent needs, competence needs and relatedness needs. In the face of these difficulties, students have developed three coping strategies, which are cost minimization, meaning reconstruction and selective participation. However, their common feature is that they do not internalize the intrinsic value of activities, but carry out functional adaptation in institutional constraints. The deeper discovery is that students have internalized "manageable" as the implicit standard of "good student" identity, and their coping behavior serves identity construction rather than autonomous development, reflecting the deep dislocation between the current higher education goals and practical effects.

Based on the above findings, this study puts forward the following suggestions for universities. First, grant students autonomy by providing diverse pathways for meeting requirements and minimizing "one-size-fits-all" mandates. Second, optimize the evaluation mechanism, weaken the direct link between activity participation and comprehensive evaluation, and reduce students' instrumental coping motivation [12]. Third, the basic psychological needs are incorporated into the activity design framework, and

the SDT should be used to examine whether the activity supports the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. It should be admitted that this study is a qualitative exploratory study. The sample size is small and concentrated in a single university. Future research can verify the findings of this study through large sample quantitative research, and further examine the differences between different types of colleges, subject backgrounds and grade students. In addition, the longitudinal follow-up study helps to reveal the development and changes of students' coping strategies and their impact on long-term mental health [13].

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