

Abstract

Objective: The need to “win at the starting line” is a common belief within the Hong Kong society. Research on early specialization, which refers to the intense effort put on one activity at the expense of others, has gained momentum with psychological risks brought into attention. However, few studies have addressed *why* motivational outcomes may vary for different early specializers. Using the framework of motivation conceptualized in self-determination theory, this study tested parenting styles and regulatory focus as potential moderators in the relationship between early specialization and intrinsic motivation, with the aim to account for individual differences among young adults.

Method: College students were recruited to complete a questionnaire concerning their specialization history, motivation, perceived parenting styles of their parents, and chronic regulatory focus. The final sample constituted of 89 participants.

Results: Early specialization was related to external regulation, but not lowered intrinsic motivation. Both authoritative parenting style and promotion focus were not supported as significant moderators to the relationship between early specialization and intrinsic motivation. However, results suggested that the broader autonomy-supportive practices played a key role in facilitating early specializers’ intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the role of regulatory focus became prominent when the exploratory analyses incorporated both regulatory foci and parenting styles as joint interacting moderators.

Conclusions: The findings implicates that the motivational implications of early specialization may not be as clear-cut as postulated in existing literature. Future research may explore how various factors jointly impact such outcomes. Specifically, the present study highlighted the need to devote attention to the role of parental involvement.

Keywords: early specialization; motivation; parenting style; regulatory focus; cultural differences