Shaped by Choice or Shadowed by Expectation? Parental Influence on Leisure Activities

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Summary

This study examined whether individuals choose their hobbies based more on personal preference or parental expectations, a question that helps us better understand how family influence shapes identity and motivation. The research aimed to determine if age and sex affect how much influence parents have over their children's leisure activities. The main hypothesis was that individuals prioritize fun over parental approval when selecting hobbies. An anonymous

survey was completed by 37 participants, who ranked their reasons for participating in their top three hobbies based on whether they found the hobby fun, believed it would help their future, or felt pressure from their parents. The results showed that fun was the most important factor, followed by future benefits, with parental influence ranked the lowest. There was no significant difference in parental influence based on sex or the type of hobby. However, a negative correlation between age and parental influence was found, suggesting that older participants felt less pressure from parents. These results indicate that most individuals pursue hobbies out of personal enjoyment rather than to meet parental expectations, especially as they grow older. This finding contributes to the broader discussion about autonomy and the influence of family on personal development.

Introduction

Leisure activities are the pursuits people voluntarily choose in their free time, regardless of whether they are solitary, social, seemingly unproductive, or essential for their future (Stebbins, 2017). As Coatsworth et al. (2005) explain, these activities reflect individual identity and support well-being. Ranging from highly engaging hobbies to more passive pastimes, leisure offers outlets for freedom and self-expression (Kleiber et al., 2014). According to Asquith et al. (2022), “Leisure activities such as creative hobbies, physical activity and socialising offer young people opportunities for autonomy and identity exploration and can contribute both positively and negatively to wellbeing” (pg. 2). Leisure shapes self-perception and interaction with the world, underscoring its importance as a field of study (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As Iso-Ahola and Baumeister (2023) argue, “the essence of leisure lies less in the specific activity than in the subjective perception of freedom, choice, and intrinsic motivation,” (pg. 1) which makes it essential for psychological health.

Research has examined whether personal choices of leisure activities are shaped more by environmental factors or by genetic predispositions (Fisher, 2015). Twin studies suggest an equal impact from nature and nurture, with heritable influences observed when the monozygotic twin correlation is twice the dizygotic twin correlation (Haberstick et al., 2013). Identical twins often share similar interests more than fraternal twins, highlighting a genetic component, although family culture and exposure play an equally critical role (Plomin et al., 2013). Bouchard (2004) notes, “genetics may provide the initial interest, but environmental factors can significantly shape and nurture these preferences over time.” Additionally, in non-adoptive families, passive gene-environment correlation implies that parents provide “both their children’s genotypes and rearing environment, influencing their preferences and values” (Dick, 2013).

My study builds on prior research, focusing exclusively on parental influence over leisure choices. While Haberstick (2014) previously compared nature and nurture experimentally, this study takes a quantitative approach to understand participants’ perceptions of parental impact on their hobbies. Parental pressure on leisure choices can impact well-being, as Randall et al. (2016) found that “involvement for fun in hobbies was associated with fewer depressive symptoms, while involvement for parents was linked to more depressive symptoms.” This research examines whether participants feel their hobbies reflect personal aspirations or parental expectations, also exploring the impact of sex and age on perceptions of parental influence.

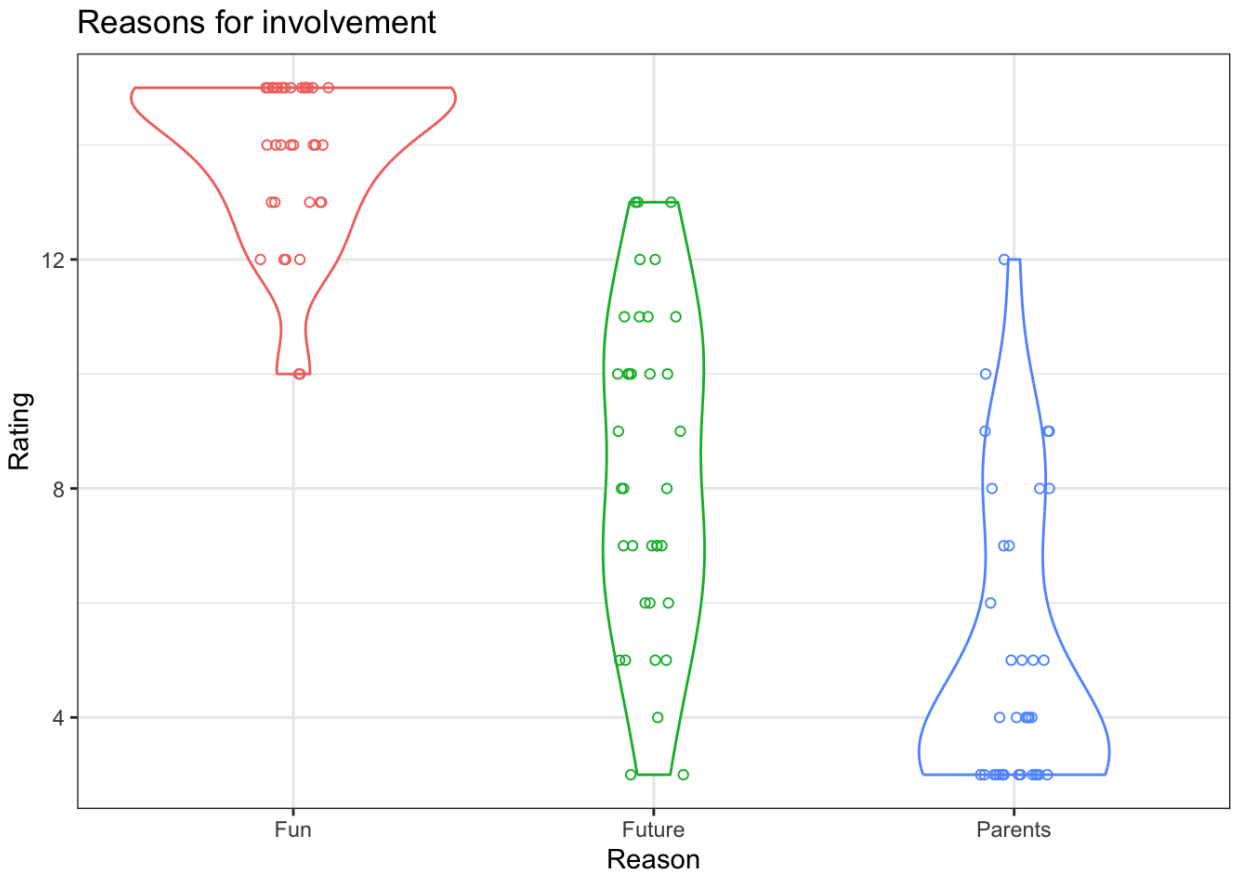
I also wanted to explore if different sexes and ages were affected any differently. I expect to find that women and younger people, primarily those under eighteen or living with their parents, will succumb to the expectations of their parents more. This is because many of my friends who are under eighteen are Asian. In many Asian cultures, women are told to portray obedience much more than men are. I also believe once people no longer live with their parents, they cannot be expected to do everything their parents want anymore, since they are independent. As people grow older, I believe elders expect less and less obedience, especially as individuals begin supporting themselves. Focusing on parental influences is crucial because adolescents are often significantly affected by their parents' expectations and values when choosing their hobbies. "Involvement for Fun (in hobbies) was associated with fewer depressive symptoms while involvement for Parents (in hobbies) with more depressive symptoms" (Randall, 2016). During this developmental stage, young people may feel pressured to engage in activities that align with their parents' desires or societal expectations, rather than pursuing their own interests. This pressure can shape their leisure activities and, ultimately, their identity. Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehensively analyzing how hobbies are formed and maintained, as parental influence plays a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' choices and motivations.

Through this study, I aimed to explore whether hobbies reflect intrinsic, personal aspirations or if they are chosen based on parental expectations. I hypothesized that women and younger individuals, especially those under eighteen or living at home, would report greater influence from their parents in choosing hobbies. While my data did not support sex-based differences in parental influence, it did suggest that age played a more important role. Most participants reported choosing hobbies based on enjoyment rather than expectations. These results highlight the importance of autonomy in leisure selection while also acknowledging the ongoing influence of family, particularly during adolescence.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Participants engage in their hobbies because their parents want them to.
To test this hypothesis, we conducted paired t-tests comparing participants' ratings for engaging in their hobbies across three categories: fun, future benefits, and parental influence. Participants rated fun an average of 13.89, compared to 8.31 for future benefits and 5.06 for parental influence. These differences were statistically significant: fun was rated significantly higher than future benefits ($t(51.09) = 10.52$, $p < .001$) and parental influence ($t(54.83) = 18.30$, $p < .001$). Additionally, future benefits were rated significantly higher than parental influence ($t(68.99) = 5.11$, $p < .001$). These results suggest that parental expectations play a lesser role in participants' hobby choices compared to personal enjoyment or future prospects.

Figure 1
Graph Showing Reasons for Involvement in Hobbies



Hypothesis 2: Parental influence is stronger for academic hobbies.
This hypothesis was tested by comparing parental influence ratings for academic versus non-academic hobbies. A t-test revealed no significant difference in parental influence between the two groups ($t(26.12) = 0.47$, $p = .643$). For academic hobbies, participants rated fun significantly higher than future benefits ($t(27.02) = 2.38$, $p = .025$) and parental influence ($t(29.50) = 8.85$, $p < .001$). Future benefits were rated significantly higher than parental influence for academic hobbies ($t(37.13) = 4.58$, $p < .001$). Therefore, while academic hobbies are not significantly more influenced by parental expectations, future benefits still play a stronger role compared to parental pressure.

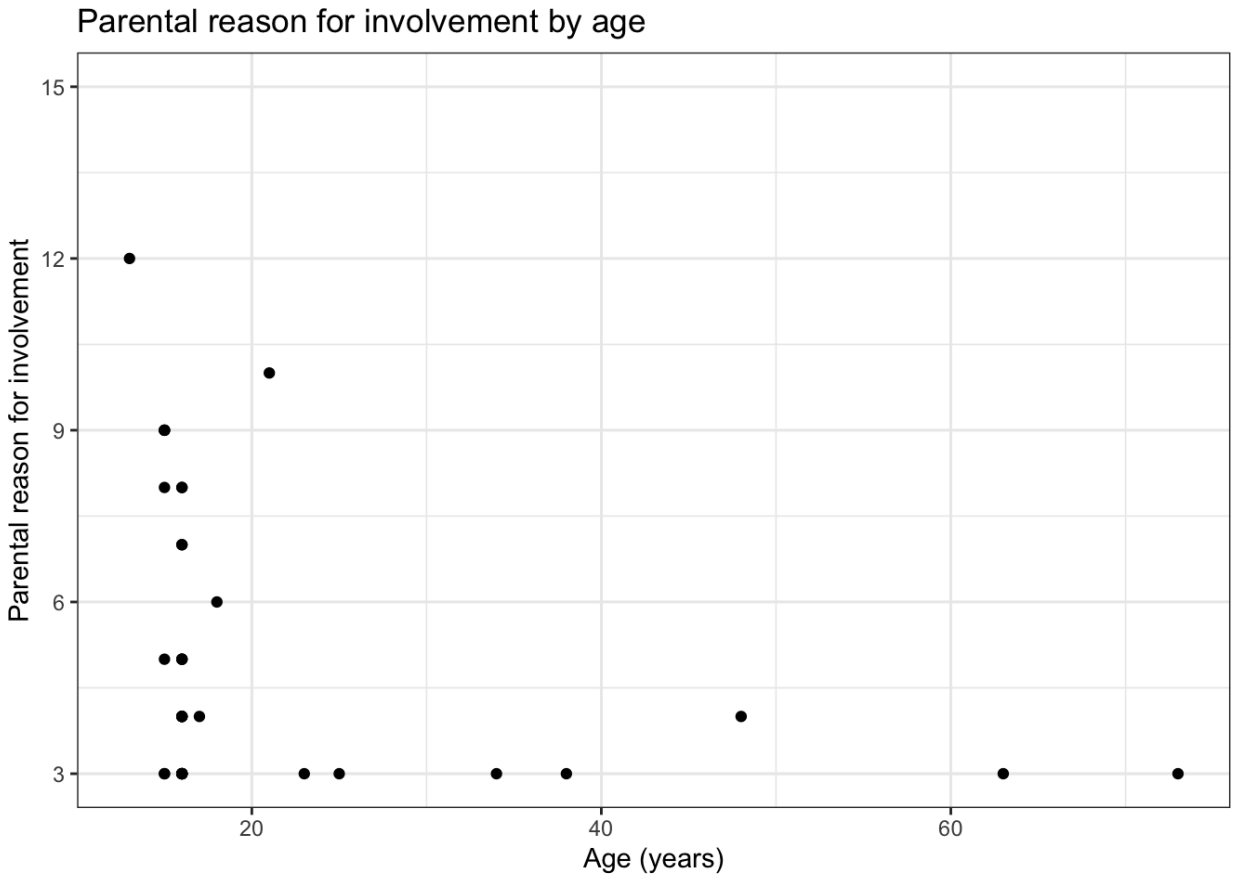
Hypothesis 3: Parental influence is stronger for women.
This hypothesis was tested by comparing male and female participants' ratings on parental influence in their hobby choices. T-tests revealed no significant gender differences in ratings for fun ($t(31.52) = -0.19$, $p = .848$), future benefits ($t(28.31) = -0.15$, $p = .879$), or parental influence ($t(32.69) = 0.38$, $p = .705$). Thus, there is no evidence to support that women experience stronger parental influence in their hobby choices compared to men.

Hypothesis 4: Parental influence decreases with age.
To test this hypothesis, I examined the correlation between participants' age and their ratings of parental influence in their hobby choices. A significant negative correlation was found

(Spearman's rs = −.42, S = 11,066.47, p = .010), indicating that as participants get older, they feel less influenced by their parents in their hobby choices. However, most of my participants were under 18, so to properly answer this question, a better range of ages would be needed.

Figure 2

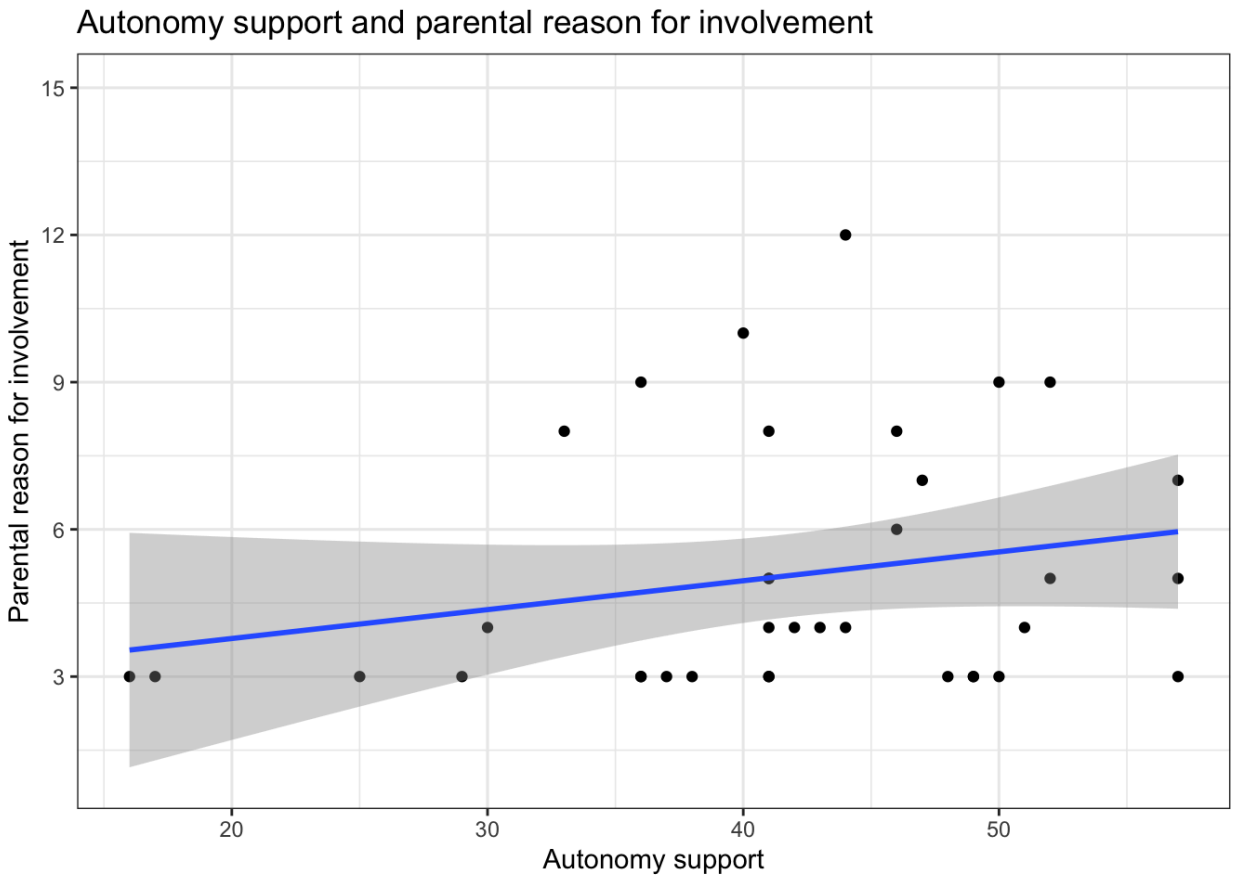
Graph for parental reason for involvement by age



Hypothesis 5: More autonomy support is associated with less parental pressure into hobbies. A Spearman's correlation was used to assess the relationship between perceived autonomy support and parental influence in hobby choices. No significant correlation was found (rs = .26, S = 5,744.82, p = .125), suggesting that perceived autonomy support does not strongly predict parental pressure in choosing hobbies.

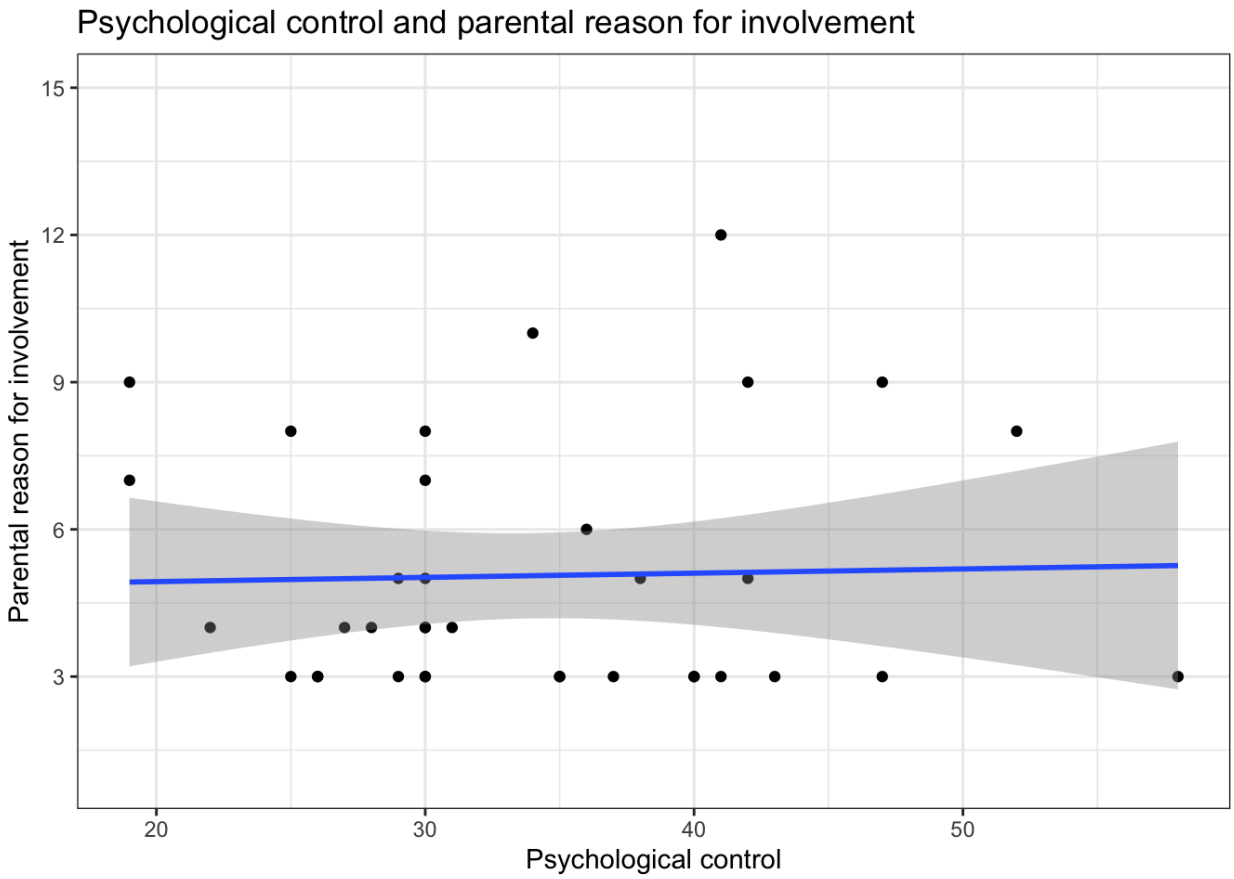
Figure 3

Graph for autonomy support and parental reason for involvement



Hypothesis 6: More psychological control is associated with greater parental pressure into hobbies.
To test this hypothesis, we examined the correlation between perceived psychological control and parental influence in hobby choices. The results showed no significant correlation (rs = −.03, S = 7,985.04, p = .873), indicating that perceived psychological control is not related to increased feelings of parental pressure in selecting hobbies.

Figure 4
Graph for psychological control and parental reason for involvement



Discussion

The goal of my study was to examine whether individuals' leisure activities were shaped more by parental expectations or personal preferences. By exploring the roles of age, gender, and parental influence, my findings provide valuable insights into how hobbies are developed and sustained. Overall, my results suggest that personal enjoyment and intrinsic motivation are the dominant factors in hobby selection, while parental influence plays a relatively minor role.

One of the key findings of this study is that participants rated "fun" as the most important motivation for engaging in hobbies, followed by "future benefits," and lastly, "parental influence." Figure 1 illustrates these choices. Specifically, participants rated "fun" much higher than both "future benefits" and "parental influence," with statistical significance between the three categories. This suggests that personal preference and enjoyment are central to hobby selection, reinforcing the idea that leisure activities are primarily motivated by intrinsic desires rather than external expectations. These results align with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation in leisure activities, which are often seen as an avenue for self-expression and psychological well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Stebbins, 2017).

While parental influence did exist, it was rated significantly lower, indicating that even in the face of external pressures, individuals tend to prioritize their own interests and enjoyment. This finding contradicts my initial assumption that parental influence might be as significant as

personal preference, or that the two would be equally influential. My data clearly show that personal enjoyment and intrinsic motivation are far more important drivers of hobby choice than parental expectations.

An important pattern present in the data was the significant negative correlation between age and perceived parental influence, which indicates that younger participants (especially those under 18) were more likely to feel parental pressure in their hobby choices. This finding supports the hypothesis that parental influence is stronger during adolescence, a period when individuals are heavily dependent on their parents. As participants age and gain more independence, parental influence appears to diminish, and personal preferences become more prominent. However, it is important to note that the majority of the sample in this study was under the age of 18. This age distribution limits the ability to fully explore how parental influence changes across the lifespan. Future studies should aim to include a broader age range to better understand the relationship between age and parental influence on leisure activities across different life stages.

One unexpected result of my study was the lack of significant gender differences in the degree of parental influence. Despite the hypothesis that women would experience stronger parental pressure, my data did not show any significant differences between male and female participants in terms of how much they felt their parents influenced their hobby choices. This finding challenges my hypothesis that gender plays a significant role in how parental expectations shape leisure activities.

It is important to acknowledge that the sample in this study was predominantly composed of Asian participants, which could introduce assumptions about cultural influence. However, since ethnicity and cultural identity were not explicitly measured or analyzed in this study, it would be inaccurate to make strong claims about the experiences of Asian participants based solely on the data gathered here. Furthermore, cultural assimilation, particularly among participants raised in the United States, may have lessened the impact of traditional gendered expectations, as American culture tends to emphasize individualism and gender equality more strongly than some traditional Asian cultures. This highlights the complexity of cultural influences and the need for more nuanced research that explores how cultural background interacts with parental expectations in shaping leisure activities. Ideally, a larger variety of ethnicities in my sample would have provided a more accurate representation of diverse experiences, but due to my personal connections, the majority of participants were of Asian descent. This overrepresentation is an important limitation to acknowledge, as it restricts the applicability of the findings across different ethnic groups. While the survey was designed to be inclusive, ethnicity was not directly explored as a variable in my analysis, which should be considered when interpreting the results.

The study also explored the relationship between perceived autonomy support, psychological control, and parental influence. However, no significant correlations were found between autonomy support and reduced parental pressure, or between psychological control and increased parental pressure. This suggests that parental influence may not be as straightforward as initially anticipated. Autonomy support, as measured by the Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale (Mageau et al., 2015), may not directly translate into greater

freedom in hobby selection. Similarly, psychological control may not be as strongly linked to increased parental pressure in the context of leisure activities. Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate these results.

This study has several important limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small (N = 37) and the sample composition was skewed toward a particular ethnic group. While the findings provide valuable insights into the role of parental influence in shaping leisure activities, the results cannot be generalized to the broader population. Future research should aim for a more diverse sample, including a broader range of ethnic backgrounds and ages, to explore how cultural and demographic factors impact parental influence on hobbies.

In addition to the limitations related to sample size and diversity, another challenge of this study was the reliance on self-reported data. Self-report measures are susceptible to various biases, including social desirability bias or retrospective bias, where participants may overstate or understate the influence of their parents based on societal expectations or personal perceptions. Future studies could benefit from incorporating mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative interviews or open-ended questions with quantitative surveys. Mixed-methods research could provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of parental influence, personal agency, and the role of cultural and familial contexts in shaping leisure activities. For example, interviews might reveal how participants perceive the nuances of parental pressure—whether it is direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional—and how these pressures interact with personal interests.

Additionally, this study did not examine the role of socioeconomic status or peer influences, both of which could significantly shape individuals' choices of hobbies. Future research should consider these factors and their interaction with parental influence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape leisure activities.

In conclusion, my study contributes to the understanding of how parental expectations and personal motivations interact in the development of hobbies. The results clearly indicate that personal preference and enjoyment are the dominant factors in hobby selection, with parental influence playing a much smaller role. Age emerged as a key factor, with younger individuals feeling more pressure from parents, while older individuals exhibited greater autonomy. The study also highlighted the complexity of gendered expectations, with no significant differences found between men and women, challenging cultural assumptions about gender roles in parenting. However, the limitations of the sample size, lack of ethnic diversity, and reliance on self-report data mean that these findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research should include more diverse samples, employ mixed-methods approaches, and explore additional factors such as socioeconomic status, peer influences, and cultural identity to gain a fuller understanding of how parental expectations and personal motivations intersect in the development of leisure activities.

Methods

IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the commencement of the study.

The approval process was delayed due to the need for multiple signatures. The first signature was secured from a Biology teacher at the author's school, followed by the second signature from a doctor, a family friend. The final signature took longer to obtain, as the author navigated between multiple individuals before receiving approval.

Survey Administration

The survey was created and administered using Google Forms (Google LLC). To maintain participant anonymity, IP addresses were not tracked, and the only personal information requested was age and sex. Participants were required to be at least 10 years old to take part in the study. For the purpose of this study, participants' sex was categorized as either male or female.

Definition of Hobby

A "hobby" was defined as a leisure activity or something done in one's spare time. Participants were asked to identify their top three hobbies and the primary motivations behind them. The survey also included questions about perceived parental influence, with a focus on whether hobbies were primarily driven by personal interests or external influences. External influences were defined as parental pressures to pursue certain activities, which were interpreted as potential reflections of the parents' interests or desires.

Parental Influence Measurement

To assess parental influence, the Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale (Mageau et al., 2015) was used. This scale helped measure how much participants felt their hobbies were motivated by personal desire versus parental expectations.

Survey Distribution

The survey was distributed via the author's personal network, including direct contact and social media (Instagram), and remained open for seven days. A total of 37 responses were collected. The online format minimized physical interaction, reducing potential courtesy bias, and allowed participants to feel more comfortable answering honestly.

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