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Involution or Lying Flat? How Competitive Pressure Affects Psychological Compensation

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Abstract

In the face of competitive pressure, individuals adopt two diametrically opposed strategies: involution and lying flat. To explain this seemingly paradoxical choice, the present study distinguishes the dimensional attributes of competitive pressure and, grounded in psychological compensation theory, examines individuals' compensatory strategies when confronted with different types of competitive pressure. Specifically, competitive pressure comprises two dimensions: competitive outcome pressure and competitive process pressure. Competitive outcome pressure threatens individuals' self-esteem, thereby motivating them to adopt mobility compensation strategies, which manifests as the involution effect. Conversely, competitive process pressure threatens individuals' well-being, prompting them to adopt avoidance compensation strategies, which manifests as the lying-flat effect. The findings will effectively contribute to the literature on competitive pressure, psychological compensation, self-esteem, and well-being.

Full Text

Preamble

“Rat Race” or “Lying Flat”? How Competition Stress Influences Psychological Compensation

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Abstract

In the face of mounting competition stress, individuals have adopted two diametrically opposed strategies: “Rat Race” (involution) and “Lying Flat.” To explain

this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon, this research distinguishes the dimensional attributes of competition stress and, grounded in psychological compensation theory, examines how individuals employ different compensation strategies when confronting distinct types of competitive pressure. Specifically, competition stress comprises two dimensions: competition result stress and competition process stress. Competition result stress threatens individuals' self-esteem, thereby prompting fluid compensation strategies and creating the "Rat Race" effect. Conversely, competition process stress undermines well-being, leading to escapism compensation strategies and producing the "Lying Flat" effect. These findings will substantially enrich the literature on competition stress, psychological compensation, self-esteem, and well-being.

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1. Introduction

"Natural selection is inevitable; without excellence comes inferiority, without progress comes extinction." From ancient times to the present, competition has been an unavoidable and essential lesson for nearly everyone. Sociologist Goffman's (1978) dramaturgical theory likens society and life to a grand stage, where all members are performers with their own roles. Regardless of the role they play, competition remains a frequently enacted drama. For students, examinations—essentially competitive talent screening mechanisms—are unavoidable. The intensity of competition in testing has reached fever pitch. Take China's National Postgraduate Entrance Examination as an example: the number of applicants has surged from 1.65 million in 2015 to 4.74 million in 2023, nearly tripling in less than a decade. For "working professionals," workplace competition is even more ubiquitous and self-evident. As university faculty ourselves, we face relentless competition across research, grants, and teaching throughout our careers, with outcomes determining performance evaluations and promotions. Similarly, corporate employees must outperform colleagues to secure valuable opportunities for advancement or salary increases. In labor markets with excess supply, some companies have even adopted brutal "rank-and-yank" systems, where employees in the bottom performance percentile face termination. In short, competition is an inescapable leitmotif of life, intensifying further in today's fast-paced modern society.

Existing research reveals that competitive environments exert multifaceted effects on individuals' physical and mental states. Some scholars have identified positive stimulative effects, finding that moderate competition can enhance academic achievement and work performance (Kalra et al., 2020). Additionally, competition stress facilitates information integration within groups, serving as

a lever to promote internal knowledge sharing and better equip teams to confront rivals (Moyano-Fuentes & Martínez-Jurado, 2016). However, a larger body of research highlights detrimental consequences. Baumeister (1984) noted that when competition stress becomes internalized, performance on skill-based tasks deteriorates, an effect amplified under cash incentives. Moreover, competition stress generates substantial psychological and physical strain. At the physiological level, Decety et al. (2004) found that competition reduces the medial orbitofrontal cortex' s motivational control over goal-directed behavior. Similarly, competition increases susceptibility to depression and anxiety (Gilbert, 2001) and induces retrieval-induced forgetting, or selective memory suppression (Deng & Guo, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Psychologically, Reh et al. (2018) discovered that competition readily breeds envy and anxiety, while Mohd. Shamsudin et al. (2022) found that intense competition exacerbates conflict of interest, undermining individuals' sense of control. Furthermore, high-level competition diminishes empathy, making people more callous (Chen et al., 2019) and triggering emotional exhaustion that reduces job and life satisfaction while elevating depression risk (Huang et al., 2016).

Although everyone seeks ways to cope with competition stress, interestingly, chosen strategies diverge dramatically—sometimes completely contradicting one another. The term “Rat Race” (内卷) was selected as one of China' s top ten buzzwords in 2021. Originally an anthropological term describing how population growth fails to increase productivity or innovation, it now broadly refers to excessive competition across social domains. Similarly, “Lying Flat” (躺平) was a top buzzword in 2022, signifying complete withdrawal from competition. Thus, while some respond to intensifying competition by doubling down to become top performers, others seek to remove themselves entirely from the fray. Observing these seemingly contradictory psychological and behavioral responses, we must ask: Why do people adopt such divergent strategies when facing competition stress? Are they driven by different sources of pressure? What are the underlying psychological mechanisms? What boundary conditions exist? These questions remain unanswered in existing literature.

To address these research gaps, this study focuses on three core questions. First, what are the dimensional attributes of competition stress, and does it include different types? Second, what triggers the “Rat Race” effect, and what are its psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions? Third, what triggers the “Lying Flat” effect, and what are its psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions? To answer these questions, we first distinguish competition stress dimensions based on the goal-outcome duality, categorizing it into result stress and process stress. Building on psychological compensation theory, we then examine how different types of competition stress lead to “Rat Race” and “Lying Flat” effects respectively.

2.1 Competition Stress

Competition refers to activities where individuals vie for limited resources or goals against others or groups, representing a psychological need and behavior to win (Clutton-Brock & Huchard, 2013; Galvin et al., 2020). Sociality drives all members to compete for various resources, and such competitive activities directly generate perceived competition stress. Conceptually, competition stress denotes the internal psychological state and defensive coping process triggered by external competitive stimuli, often stemming from setbacks during competition, obsession with success, and internal contradictions (Emond et al., 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Competition stress produces a range of effects on physical and mental states. Some studies identify positive functions. At the individual level, competition mechanisms introduced in educational and workplace settings can promote better academic performance, work outcomes, and even innovation (Kalra et al., 2020). From a group perspective, competition's positive impact primarily manifests in fostering understanding of competitive cooperation. Competition stress encourages individuals to form strategic groups to navigate unpredictable social environments and avoid unnecessary cutthroat competition (Ketchen et al., 2004). Additionally, it facilitates inter-group information integration, improving information quality and decision-sharing to better confront powerful rivals (Moyano-Fuentes & Martínez-Jurado, 2016).

However, more research points to negative consequences. Contradicting findings about performance enhancement, Baumeister (1984) demonstrated that when competition stress shifts attention to self-consciousness, performance on skill-based tasks deteriorates, particularly with cash incentives. Moreover, to protect team interests in competition, individuals may engage in pro-team unethical behaviors such as disparaging others, withholding negative information, or malicious rule-breaking (Zhang et al., 2023). Empirical studies also reveal that competition often creates immense physical and psychological pressure. Physiologically, the medial orbitofrontal cortex fails to activate under competitive conditions, diminishing motivational control over goal-directed behavior (Decety et al., 2004). Deng and Guo (2021) proposed that interpersonal comparisons in competition damage emotional trust, and high-intensity competition can even produce retrieval-induced forgetting (Liu et al., 2022). Competition also focuses attention on social hierarchies and increases depression risk (Gilbert, 2001). Psychologically, Reh et al. (2018) argued that even non-threatening competitors can trigger envy and anxiety based on future predictions. Similarly, Mohd. Shamsudin et al. (2022) found that intense competition environments exacerbate conflict of interest, destroying control sense and breeding envy. Furthermore, competition stress threatens psychological safety, reducing empathy and increasing callousness or even aggression (Chen et al., 2019). Ultimately, massive workplace competition stress causes emotional exhaustion, reducing life satisfaction and elevating depression 倾向 (Huang et al., 2016).

2.2 Psychological Compensation

Psychological compensation refers to behaviors where individuals, upon perceiving self-discrepancies, increase time and energy investment or shift to alternative skills to weaken or offset these discrepancies (Bäckman & Dixon, 1992). For instance, when loneliness becomes chronic, people gravitate toward niche activities recognized by few to match their lonely self-concept (Wang et al., 2012). If loneliness is temporary, individuals instead engage in prosocial behaviors like donations, even sacrificing personal material welfare for social good (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Wang et al., 2021). Compensation strategies are diverse, 主要包括:

First, **direct resolution** involves taking measures to directly improve one's status in the domain where self-discrepancy emerged, addressing the root cause (Mandel et al., 2017; Mandel et al., 2021). For example, individuals may exercise or undergo cosmetic surgery to improve appearance and reduce self-discrepancy in that domain (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999). Park and Maner (2009) found that after receiving negative appearance evaluations, individuals show greater interest in appearance-enhancing clothing. Researchers have also documented direct resolution strategies for belongingness, intelligence, and competence deficits. When lacking social support, people frequent service establishments (e.g., restaurants, cafés) to build relationships with staff or patrons and increase attachment (Rosenbaum et al., 2007). Kim and Gal (2014) discovered that after experiencing intelligence-related self-discrepancies, people prefer intelligence training to compensate. Further, direct resolution can address social issues: Nguyen et al. (2022) noted that because competence confidence brings enjoyment, as perceived competence in environmental protection activities grows, so does motivation for eco-friendly behaviors.

Second, **symbolic self-completion** involves using self-symbolizing behaviors to mask shortcomings (Mandel et al., 2021; Rucker & Galinsky, 2013). Unlike direct resolution, this targets psychologically perceived self-discrepancies rather than their root causes. Harmon-Jones et al. (2009) found that academically lower-ranked researchers more frequently mention professor or doctoral titles in email signatures. Cutright (2012) discovered that when feeling control threats, individuals seek various boundaries to maintain control and stability. While sometimes effective, symbolic self-completion can also remind individuals of self-discrepancies, triggering rumination on threat cues that undermines self-repair and amplifies negative effects (Lisjak et al., 2015; Rustagi & Shrum, 2019). Norberg et al. (2018) found that individuals with attachment anxiety satisfy belongingness needs through anthropomorphic experiences, but this can escalate into excessive purchasing and even hoarding disorder. Moreover, while anthropomorphic activities provide short-term loneliness relief, long-term dependence prevents establishing real social connections, ultimately intensifying loneliness (Fumagalli et al., 2022).

Third, **dissociation** involves avoiding and escaping domains where self-discrepancies occur (Mandel et al., 2021; White & Dahl, 2006). For example,

when “imported” labels become the sole evaluation criterion, ethnocentrism increases self-negation and negative psychology, leading people to avoid domestic products (Wang et al., 2005). Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) found that individuals discard items associated with negative emotions or memories, such as divorced individuals selling wedding dresses. White and Argo (2009) argued that when women experience gender identity threats, they prefer gender-neutral over feminine publications. Similarly, students who successfully reconstruct their identity after identity threats avoid items symbolizing university identity (White et al., 2012). At the group level, negative stereotypes about social groups also trigger disidentification, prompting dissociation strategies (Zuo et al., 2021).

While these strategies differ markedly in direction, they share a common starting point: using certain behaviors to weaken or eliminate self-discrepancies. As for fluid and escapism compensation strategies, we will elaborate further in our research framework.

2.3 Literature Review

Intense social competition has spawned increasingly prevalent and acute competition stress. Interestingly, when facing massive competitive pressure, people exhibit diametrically opposite coping methods, reflecting different compensation strategies. This study’s core concepts are competition stress and psychological compensation, focusing on relationships between different competition stress types and compensation. To synthesize existing research and identify gaps, this section reviews literature on both domains. By filling these gaps, our work makes significant theoretical contributions.

First, existing competition stress literature has two limitations: it neglects potential multidimensional attributes and fails to address behavioral coping strategies. Specifically, current research treats competition stress as a unidimensional concept—discomfort from vying for shared, limited resources with others. Given competition’s complexity and multifaceted nature, its potential multidimensional attributes have been overlooked. Second, while existing studies have examined how competition stress alters physical and mental states (e.g., negative health indicators, inhibited memory function, envy/anxiety emotions, reduced control sense), they have not addressed behavioral coping strategies. This paper will be the first to distinguish competition stress types and examine how different stresses influence psychological compensation.

Notably, our focus on competition stress differs significantly from simple stress, social comparison stress, and resource scarcity stress mentioned in prior literature. Simple stress refers to psychological pressure from adapting to environmental changes (e.g., job transitions, family 变故) (Chang et al., 2020; Kessler, 1997). Social comparison stress arises when people use others as benchmarks to evaluate themselves, creating psychological discomfort (Xing & Yu, 2005; Diel et al., 2021). Resource scarcity stress denotes states where available resources

cannot meet demands (Lei & Wang, 2020; Fan et al., 2018). While all four stress types involve stress responses and psychological resource consumption, they differ in four key aspects. First, **stress sources** differ: competition stress stems from 争夺 social resources in zero-sum games. Resource scarcity stress encompasses all resource types, including non-social resources like time. Simple stress is more generalized, sometimes lacking specific sources. Social comparison stress originates from comparison rather than resource 争夺 (Hao et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2019; Zell et al., 2020). Second, **social attributes** differ: competition and social comparison stress have clear social attributes, while resource scarcity and simple stress do not. Third, **stress agents** differ: competition stress agents are typically individuals or groups with conflicting interests, whereas simple, social comparison, and resource scarcity stress rarely involve direct interest relationships with agents (Han & Chi, 2012; Zhang et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2015). Finally, **duration** differs: competition processes are lengthy, so their stress spans longer timeframes. Simple and resource scarcity stress have uncertain durations. Since social comparison can be completed quickly, its stress is typically brief (Galvin et al., 2020). For clarity, we summarize these differences in Table 1 .

Second, while psychological compensation literature has yielded fruitful results, most studies approach antecedents from theoretical perspectives, neglecting popular social phenomena like pervasive, intense competition stress. Given competition stress' s significant impact on self-discrepancies, its resulting compensation strategies urgently require investigation. Therefore, this study enriches psychological compensation antecedent research by examining competition stress-induced compensation behaviors.

3. Research Framework

Based on existing research and theoretical gaps, this study addresses the three core questions above with the following objectives: revealing competition stress' s multidimensional nature; identifying triggers, psychological mechanisms, and boundary conditions for the “Rat Race” effect; and identifying triggers, mechanisms, and boundary conditions for the “Lying Flat” effect. To achieve these objectives, we designed three studies with the following logical relationships: Study 1 distinguishes two competition stress types—result and process stress. Studies 2 and 3 then examine compensation strategies triggered by each stress type, including their antecedents, mechanisms, and boundary conditions (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). Notably, we did not combine both stress types in a single study because we sought to comprehensively and meticulously examine the distinct compensation strategies, mechanisms, and boundary conditions each triggers. Combining them would create excessive content and hinder readability.

Figure 1. Research Design Logic Diagram¹² [Figure 12: see original paper]

¹ To maintain consistency with Mandel et al.'s (2017, 2021) compensation theory,

we adopt their terms “fluid compensation” and “escapism compensation” rather than directly using “Rat Race” and “Lying Flat” compensation.

² While stress states may simultaneously pose multiple threats, we argue result stress more easily threatens self-esteem, whereas process stress more likely threatens well-being. The rationale: competition result stress is triggered by outcome-related feedback (e.g., fear of failure), which directly lowers self-evaluation and threatens self-esteem. In contrast, competition process stress involves prolonged, high-intensity uncertainty, making its negative impact on well-being more pronounced (see detailed arguments in sections 3.2.2 and 3.3.2).

3.1.1 The Process-Outcome Duality Effect

Motivation is the internal force determining individual behavior, guiding activities toward goals to satisfy physiological or psychological needs (Tseng et al., 2017). Goal theory represents a crucial framework in motivational psychology, positing that behavior can be explained as the result of need satisfaction or goal pursuit (Covington, 2000). Goal pursuit is a process where individuals exhibit different psychological states across stages (Yang et al., 2022). For example, Kivetz et al. (2006) found that as people approach reward goals, they exert more effort—the goal-gradient effect. Huang and Zhang (2011) discovered that when goal progress is slow, high perceived progress speed signals higher goal expectancy, generating greater pursuit motivation, though this reverses after substantial progress. Laran et al. (2016) argued that unconscious goal pursuit is possible but cannot optimally match goals with goal-consistent attributes, as it merely matches achievable goals with available alternatives without evaluating each attribute’s efficacy.

When people realize they must expend increasing self-control resources to progress, they perceive themselves as nearing goal completion (Rafieian & Sharif, 2022). Li et al. (2022) suggested that when goal progress is relatively low, approach-oriented self-control behaviors better enhance perceived goal achievability and motivation, whereas avoidance-oriented self-control behaviors better increase goal commitment and promote pursuit at high progress levels.

Researchers have also identified an intriguing “process-outcome duality effect”: goal processes determine outcomes, while outcomes reciprocally influence future processes (Higgins et al., 2020). Thus, both process and outcome play pivotal roles in goal events. From a more holistic perspective—such as goal events comprising multiple sub-goals and stages—they can even be mutually causal (Huang et al., 2019). This duality effect has been validated across diverse research domains. In public administration research, welfare equity in income and education represents desired outcome goals, with procedural fairness being the crucial guarantee. Achieved outcomes can then promote future procedural fairness, creating positive feedback (Qian et al., 2014). Similarly, in organizational behavior, achieving organizational justice outcomes requires

three procedural elements: distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness. Realized outcome fairness also promotes sustained procedural fairness within organizations (Brockner et al., 2021). Therefore, both process and outcome constitute essential components that form an organic whole.

3.1.2 Competition Result Stress and Process Stress

Competition is a typical goal event: to achieve outcome goals (e.g., excelling academically), individuals must exert considerable effort (e.g., investing substantial study time), with process and outcome jointly constituting the goal whole. Based on goal theory's process-outcome duality, we propose that competition stress also exhibits a dual effect, encompassing two distinct types: result stress and process stress. Specifically, competition result stress refers to tension and discomfort from worrying about competitive success, while competition process stress reflects psychological pressure from competitive content and tasks. In auctions, for instance, only one buyer can win the desired item, with both process and outcome serving as significant stress sources. Some buyers may experience intense result stress because the auction outcome is paramount, while others may feel acute process stress from the tense, stimulating bidding process. Similarly, individuals frequently experience both pressures in intense social competition. Which pressure dominates can be situational: the same individual may exhibit different stress tendencies in different contexts. A novice auction participant might first face intense process stress from direct confrontation, but when determined to win next time, attention shifts to outcomes, making result stress more salient. Competition stress may also exhibit individual differences, as varying sensitivities to outcomes versus processes produce divergent stress perceptions (Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). Accordingly, we propose:

Proposition 1: Individuals' perceived competition stress comprises two dimensions: competition result stress and competition process stress.

Figure 2. Study 1 Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 Competition Result Stress and Fluid Compensation

Psychologist Higgins (1987) proposed self-discrepancy theory, which posits that self-concept comprises three components: the ideal self (characteristics one hopes to possess), the ought self (characteristics one believes one should possess), and the actual self (characteristics one believes one actually possesses). Ideal and ought selves constitute self-guides encompassing ideals, wishes, responsibilities, and obligations. Ideally, these three self-concepts align, but when perceived actual self falls below ideal or ought selves, self-discrepancy emerges (Mende et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023).

Self-discrepancy creates psychological discomfort, prompting individuals to overcome it. As part of self-regulation, people continuously monitor their distance from desired states; when significant gaps emerge, psychological emergency

mechanisms activate, driving compensation seeking (Mandel et al., 2017). According to psychological compensation theory, individuals strive to maintain stability in self-related psychological assets. When assets in one domain are lost, they seek gains elsewhere to restore psychological balance—this is fluid compensation (Mandel et al., 2017; Mandel et al., 2021). For example, when confined to small physical spaces, people exhibit stronger variety-seeking in purchasing to psychologically alleviate deprived freedom (Levav & Zhu, 2009). Dunn and Hoegg (2014) found that people enhance brand attachment to compensate for belongingness loss from safety threats. Similarly, Liu et al. (2014) discovered that mortality salience prompts preference for domestic products as in-group symbols to compensate for control loss. Wang et al. (2022) showed that adverse power struggle outcomes threaten autonomy needs, leading individuals to seek variety as fluid compensation. Gong et al. (2023) found that social crowding-induced chaos increases preference for minimalism, which helps restore order.

Consistent with these findings, we argue competition result stress also prompts fluid compensation. When people worry about social competition outcomes—lacking confidence in victory or sensing impending failure—if this domain faces a “loss,” winning in another domain can effectively alleviate outcome-related self-discrepancy. Thus, according to psychological compensation theory, competition result stress drives fluid compensation: cross-domain psychological compensation. In summary, we propose:

Proposition 2: Competition result stress triggers individuals’ fluid compensation strategies, creating the “Rat Race” effect.

3.2.2 The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem Threat

Why does competition result stress prompt fluid compensation? We argue self-esteem threat is the underlying mechanism. First, competition result stress threatens self-esteem. Branden (1969) defined self-esteem as the integration of self-confidence and self-respect, a complex structure comprising competence and worthiness components. Sociometer theory represents a crucial framework in self-esteem research (Leary et al., 1999), positing that self-esteem reflects brain mechanisms shaped by natural selection (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002). Thus, in social-cognitive systems, self-esteem is an internal reflection of self-evaluation (Zhang & Li, 2009). Just as pain signals physical harm, potential failure negatively impacts self-evaluation and self-esteem (Leary, 2005). Therefore, competition result stress reduces self-esteem levels.

Second, when experiencing self-esteem threat, individuals seek restoration pathways, such as cross-domain psychological compensation. In Martens et al. (2006), participants completed a math intelligence test and were told that women typically performed worse. Women participants then strengthened self-affirmation by positively describing valued traits, mitigating stereotype threat’s negative impact on self-esteem. Duclos et al. (2013) found that socially excluded individuals made risky financial decisions to improve financial

status and restore damaged self-esteem. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) argued that socially excluded individuals prefer experiential activities to strengthen social connection and alleviate negative psychological effects. Sun et al. (2021) found that self-esteem threat increases demand for social interdependence, promoting cooperative strategies. Jin et al. (2020) showed that self-threat prompts status-enhancing activities to compensate for missing important self-concepts and self-worth. Wang et al. (2024) argued that status threat-induced loss of control makes people prefer cross-domain self-improvement strategies.

Consistent with these findings, when social competition damages self-esteem, individuals seek self-esteem enhancement in other domains to compensate. Products that signal personal success—such as luxury goods displaying social status or online games showcasing competitive skill—become ideal compensation pathways because they repair self-esteem within their respective domains (Zheng & Peng, 2014). In summary, we propose:

Proposition 3: Self-esteem threat mediates the effect of competition result stress on fluid compensation. Specifically, competition result stress threatens self-esteem, thereby triggering fluid compensation strategies.

Notably, several alternative explanations must be ruled out, including need for uniqueness, envy, mood, and arousal. Wan et al. (2014) found that social stressors like social exclusion activate uniqueness needs, which also drive luxury and status purchases (Shan & Cui, 2020). Research shows social competition triggers envy (Meier & Johnson, 2022), which leads to conspicuous consumption (Taylor & Strutton, 2016). Additionally, competition result stress manipulations may affect mood and arousal (e.g., more negative mood, higher arousal), potentially driving fluid compensation.

3.2.3 The Moderating Role of Self-Affirmation

Self-affirmation refers to behaviors that, when facing challenging or threatening situations, reduce negative impacts by viewing the self as generally competent, excellent, and effective (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Extensive research confirms self-affirmation's psychological defense effects. As one form, affirming important values increases psychological resources to face threats (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). With these resources, individuals can view threats from broader perspectives, substantially reducing negative impacts (Sherman, 2013). Physiologically, self-affirmation helps maintain lower cortisol and cardiovascular responses under stress (Derks et al., 2011). In summary, self-affirmation changes self-cognition, producing positive adaptive outcomes and promoting positive cycles between self and social systems (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

If self-esteem threat is indeed the mechanism linking competition result stress to fluid compensation, then when competition result stress no longer threatens self-esteem, the compensation effect should weaken or disappear. According to self-affirmation's defense effects, even under immense competition result stress, self-affirmation builds psychological barriers. Literature shows self-affirmation

effectively reduces cognitive biases and stress responses from uncontrollable factors (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Affirming self-worth reduces threat information perception (Sherman & Cohen, 2002) and negative emotional reactions (Hu & Chen, 2017). Townsend and Sood (2012) found self-affirmation alleviates visual processing pressure on product information, making individuals focus more on functionally superior items rather than being swayed by appearance. Since stress is a major cause of unhealthy eating, Churchill et al. (2018) showed self-affirmation enhances self-efficacy and control, reducing unhealthy snacking under stress. Similarly, Pan et al. (2022) found self-affirmation mitigates control threats from upward comparison, reducing productive consumption. Moreover, self-affirmation boosts job-seeking success among the unemployed by enhancing self-confidence (Pfrombeck et al., 2023).

Consistent with these findings, under self-affirmation's protective effect, competition result stress does not significantly threaten self-esteem. Consequently, as self-esteem threat is diluted, the originally adopted fluid compensation strategy weakens (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). In summary, we propose:

Proposition 4: Self-affirmation moderates the effect of competition result stress on fluid compensation. Specifically, compared to control group individuals, self-affirmed individuals facing competition result stress exhibit less self-esteem threat and reduced fluid compensation.

Figure 3. Study 2 Theoretical Model

3.3.1 Competition Process Stress and Escapism Compensation

Like competition result stress, competition process also creates pressure. Critically, however, the specific pressures and subsequent self-discrepancies from process versus outcome differ substantially. First, **duration** differs: outcomes are instantaneous, while processes are prolonged. Second, **feedback clarity** differs: outcomes have objective evaluation criteria (e.g., pass/fail, promotion/demotion), whereas process cognition is complex, potentially containing both positive and negative phases (Crocker & Graham, 1995). Thus, even for similar process experiences, different individuals may have divergent feelings (Cornforth & Foster, 2013).

In Study 2, we proposed that competition result stress leads to fluid compensation. In contrast, this study argues that competition process stress triggers escapism compensation. This is because process stress creates different self-discrepancies than result stress. Competition outcomes are brief and feedback is rapid, allowing “win some, lose some” fluid compensation—using certain success in other domains (e.g., purchasing expensive luxury goods) to offset potential social competition failure (e.g., incomplete annual performance reviews). By contrast, competition processes are lengthy with complex, subjective experiences, making it difficult to guarantee that “wins” can offset “losses.”

Escapism refers to psychological compensation forms where people distract

themselves or avoid relevant thoughts to alleviate self-discrepancy. Typically, when self-discrepancy sources appear frequently or are unavoidable, people likely adopt escapism compensation (Mandel et al., 2017; Mandel et al., 2021). In a classic study, Woodruffe (1997) interviewed women who used eating to shift attention and escape when frequently experiencing negative emotions. Garg and Lerner (2013) found that helpless individuals consume unhealthy foods to temporarily escape. Loneliness also prompts consumption of high-involvement comfort foods like desserts and ice cream (Zheng & Peng, 2014). Beyond food, smartphones have become an emerging escapism tool due to convenience and powerful functions. Life stress prompts smartphone addiction (Melumad & Pham, 2020), and smartphone use is an important way to escape loneliness (Zhang et al., 2020). However, emerging technology is a double-edged sword: humanoid service robots may trigger identity threat perceptions through the uncanny valley effect (Du et al., 2022). Therefore, some research suggests individuals may purchase luxury goods for escapism compensation. In recent years, e-commerce livestreaming and short videos have become popular escapism pathways, where individuals escape reality stress through herd shopping and short-video addiction (Dong et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2019).

Consistent with these findings, when stress originates from complex, variable competition processes, coping strategies shift to more passive but thorough escapism compensation. Unlike result stress, where people hope to compensate for competitive failures with successes in other domains, process stress is not directly related to failure (i.e., massive process stress does not necessarily mean ultimate failure, and vice versa). Moreover, process stress' s prolonged duration, continuous psychological resource consumption, and escalating emotional exhaustion make people choose the “hear no evil, see no evil” escapism strategy (Sun et al., 2018). In summary, we propose:

Proposition 5: Competition process stress triggers individuals' escapism compensation strategies, creating the “Lying Flat” effect.

3.3.2 The Mediating Role of Well-Being Threat

If competition result stress relates to self-evaluation, making self-esteem threat the mechanism for fluid compensation, what psychological mechanism explains how competition process stress leads to escapism? Unlike result stress, competition processes are relatively long-lasting without fixed feedback standards, creating substantial uncertainty (Phillips et al., 2014). Research shows uncertainty is a major well-being destroyer. Ding and Savani (2020) found uncertainty makes people perceive society as more fragile, which in turn creates negative psychological states like harsh judgment and hypersensitivity. Wu et al. (2021) analyzed 2015 China Social Survey data, finding uncertainty negatively predicts well-being among young people (ages 18-45). The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened uncertainty' s impact: Bilal et al. (2022) found pandemic-induced uncertainty significantly reduced subjective well-being. Similarly, Satıcı et al. (2022)

found individuals with low uncertainty tolerance experienced greater pandemic fear and lower well-being. Thus, through heightened uncertainty, competition process stress threatens well-being.

Further, when well-being is threatened, approach-avoidance theory (Liu & Gao, 2012; Monni et al., 2020) suggests that facing negative factors activates avoidance motivation, making people try to distance themselves from well-being threats like intense competition processes. At this point, activities combining high involvement with pleasant relaxation can help people “escape” more thoroughly. For example, during hedonic activities, people shift and focus attention on these easy, enjoyable, cognitively engaging leisure activities, achieving escapism compensation. In summary, we propose:

Proposition 6: Well-being threat mediates the effect of competition process stress on escapism compensation. Specifically, competition process stress threatens well-being, thereby triggering escapism strategies.

We note several alternative explanations requiring control: cognitive load, construal level, mood, and arousal. First, stress increases cognitive load (Lattimore & Maxwell, 2004), and high cognitive load consumes resources, promoting hedonic purchasing (Du et al., 2019). Second, stress changes construal level (Liu et al., 2018), which is a key factor influencing purchasing behavior (Shani-Feinstein et al., 2022). Additionally, competition process stress manipulations may affect mood and arousal (e.g., more negative mood, higher arousal), potentially driving escapism compensation.

3.3.3 The Moderating Role of Social Support

Having established well-being threat’s mediating role, identifying methods to buffer this threat can reveal boundary conditions for competition process stress’s effect on escapism. We argue social support serves this function, with literature providing two supporting arguments. First, self-determination theory posits three innate basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These needs’ satisfaction largely determines well-being. Relatedness refers to the need for mutual respect and interdependence with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Social support is defined as material and spiritual support individuals receive from relatives, friends, and colleagues (Yao et al., 2018). Thus, receiving social support makes people genuinely feel warmth from their social network, fully satisfying relatedness needs (Maas et al., 2022) and helping maintain well-being.

Second, empirical research shows perceived social support can indirectly enhance well-being by alleviating negative psychological factors. Ballantine and Stephenson (2011) found social support provides information and emotional support for obese individuals, reducing anxiety and encouraging social interaction. Wang et al. (2012) noted that social support significantly reduces compulsive shopping, a well-being-destroying factor. Xu et al. (2015) found perceived social support alleviates the psychological pain of spending money, diluting its negative impact

on well-being. Hu et al. (2017) examined decision-making in social commerce environments, finding that both informational and emotional social support significantly promote purchase intention. Fan and Wu (2021) used social support theory to model relationships between online social support and chronic disease patients' continuous participation intentions, finding that informational and emotional support from communities significantly promote continuous participation, thereby aiding disease recovery and well-being enhancement long-term. Based on these findings, we argue social support can effectively "offset" well-being threat, significantly reducing escapism compensation triggered by competition process stress (see Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]).

In summary, we propose:

Proposition 7: Social support moderates the effect of competition process stress on escapism compensation. Specifically, compared to control group individuals, those receiving social support exhibit less escapism compensation when facing competition process stress.

Figure 4. Study 3 Theoretical Model

4. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

Intense social competition affects nearly every member of society. Interestingly, some choose "Rat Race" while others choose "Lying Flat" under pressure. No existing literature has deeply analyzed this popular social phenomenon. Therefore, based on psychological compensation theory, this study systematically examines how different competition stress types trigger divergent compensation consequences and their corresponding psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions.

First, regarding research questions, this study is the first to examine how different competition stress types affect psychology. While current research has explored how competition stress alters physical and mental states (health indicators, memory, emotions, control sense), it treats competition stress as unidimensional, neglecting its multidimensional attributes, and fails to address compensation strategies. These limitations create opportunities for theoretical contribution. By systematically examining psychological reactions and behavioral coping strategies when facing both competition stress types, this research enriches competition stress literature.

Second, theoretically, this study supplements psychological compensation theory by exploring how competition stress affects self-discrepancies and corresponding compensation strategies. Although existing compensation research has identified various antecedents, most approach from theoretical angles, neglecting popular social phenomena. Given that pervasive, intense competition stress has become a major social issue, this study investigates how it triggers perceived self-discrepancies and corresponding compensation strategies, thereby expanding our understanding of psychological compensation antecedents.

Third, regarding psychological mechanisms, this study examines how self-esteem and well-being explain competition stress's effects on compensation, effectively supplementing relevant literature. For self-esteem, existing literature primarily examines direct effects, while this study identifies self-esteem as the mechanism underlying the "Rat Race" effect—competition result stress threatens self-esteem, promoting fluid compensation—thus enriching self-esteem research. For well-being, although psychology has accumulated rich findings, its intersection with purchasing behavior has received limited attention. This study demonstrates how well-being threat explains the "Lying Flat" effect: competition process stress damages well-being, prompting individuals to seek psychological compensation through escapism. These findings add to well-being research.

Additionally, this research offers practical implications. For businesses, findings provide actionable suggestions for marketing campaign design (slogan design, advertising communication, target market identification). For example, brands can design slogans tailored to "Rat Race" or "Lying Flat" individuals. Slogans for "Rat Race" individuals might evoke competitive consciousness, while those for "Lying Flat" individuals could emphasize escaping "noise" and maintaining inner peace. Similarly, marketers can adopt differentiated messaging in advertising and social media marketing to maximize communication effectiveness for each compensation strategy. Findings also apply to target market identification. Categories inherently involving competition and comparison—such as social hierarchy-signaling luxury goods or competitive ranking games—should target "Rat Race" individuals. Hedonic activities and casual games, conversely, should view "Lying Flat" individuals as core customers.

Second, findings can enhance personal well-being. This study reveals competition stress's impact mechanisms on psychology and compensation strategies and their boundary conditions. In an accelerating, increasingly competitive society, stress management directly affects well-being. We find that self-affirmation and social support can alleviate self-esteem and well-being threats from competition stress, respectively. We thus advocate that when facing intense competition stress, individuals can seek psychological comfort by recalling past successes or turning to friends and family to reduce self-discrepancy discomfort. Likewise, when noticing others trapped in stress, we can help them recall confidence-building experiences and proactively offer care and support to help them recover.

Finally, findings can inform public policy. While individuals have their own reasons for choosing either "Rat Race" or "Lying Flat" strategies, and both serve targeted compensation functions, at the group level, both strategies may create new problems. Excessive "Rat Race" threatens stability, while widespread "Lying Flat" signals insufficient social vitality, hindering development. Accordingly, relevant authorities should strengthen guidance and public opinion campaigns, calling for objective views of social competition and guiding the public toward currently optimal coping strategies.

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