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Stress, Emotional Compensation, and Fandom Consumption: A Mixed-Methods Study of Young Female Fans

Yi Pan

College of Humanities and Foreign Language, Zhejiang Shuren University, Hangzhou, China
Pryro_319@outlook.com

Abstract. The article focuses on contemporary young women's stress and fan consumption. It adopts a mixed methods approach to explore the mediating role of emotional compensation needs. The quantitative analysis included 258 young female fans from Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Weibo, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with three purposefully selected long-term fans. These findings reveal no significant direct association between perceived stress and fandom spending. Although perceived stress significantly predicted stronger emotional compensation needs across all measured dimensions, these activated needs did not translate into increased spending in the quantitative model. Yet the quantitative model failed to capture a pattern of deliberate consumption reduction. As one interviewee put it, she didn't want "the money I worked so hard for to disappear in just three hours" — a sentiment that was not isolated. For many, cutting back felt like pushing back against chaos. Therefore, some fans deliberately reduced consumption under high stress to reassert control and redirect resources toward themselves. This decoupling of emotional needs from actual spending—needs activated, behavior blocked—is the central tension this study captures.

Keywords: perceived stress, fandom consumption, emotional compensation, young female fans, mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

Research on fan consumption has long recognized that fans' purchasing behavior is not solely material in nature. Drawing on para-social interaction theory, subsequent work by Chinese scholars introduced the concept of vicarious emotional fulfillment to explain how fans channel personal emotions into consumption and derive psychological compensation from it [1, 2]. This theoretical derivation is based on an implicit premise: once fans' emotional needs arising in daily life, especially those induced by stress, are activated, they will be translated into consumption behaviors in a relatively direct manner.

Khatami and Yundianto found that para-social bonds significantly predict purchase intention and impulsive buying, with fear of missing out operating as a mediating mechanism [3]. As these findings suggest, fan–idol emotional bonds drive consumption. When fans who self-report strong emotional attachment nonetheless reduce their consumption, the existing parasocial paradigm offers little explanatory guidance.

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Studies have shown that stress usually promotes impulsive consumption by weakening self-control, but this line of reasoning rests on an implicit premise. Consumption itself requires no additional drain on the cognitive resources already depleted by stress. In the context of fan consumption, this premise may not hold, given the high expenditure involved and the direct psychological comparison with the effort required to earn that money. When pressure strengthens the perception of the subjective value of money, fan consumption may change from an emotional compensation channel to an expenditure that needs to be suppressed. Therefore, the direction of the impact of pressure on fan consumption is far from self-evident. Two competing predictions coexist. The traditional compensation path predicts an increase in consumption, and the value reassessment path predicts a decrease in consumption.

Preliminary fieldwork found that some working professionals cut fan spending as work stress increased. As one participant put it, she did not want "the money I worked so hard for to disappear in just three hours." Yet her calculus departs sharply from the standard model, which treats consumption as a frictionless release. She weighed the emotional return of spending against the subjective cost of earning the money, a cost amplified by the very stress she sought to relieve. This is not anomalous noise; it exposes a blind spot. The existing model accounts for how stress weakens restraint at the point of purchase, but overlooks how stress may simultaneously raise the perceived cost of money at the point of earning. Understanding fandom consumption under stress, therefore, requires explaining not whether stress increases or decreases spending on average, but under what conditions each of these competing pathways prevails.

Under what conditions does perceived stress amplify fandom consumption through the compensation pathway, and under what conditions does it instead suppress consumption by triggering a reappraisal of spending's subjective value?

2. Literature review

2.1. The relationship between stress and consumer behavior

In fan communities, perceived stress is positively associated with idol-related consumption: young people with high daily stress tip more on live-streams than those with low stress [4]. In the fan context, followers establish one-sided emotional bonds through consumption as emotional compensation for deficiencies in real-life interpersonal experiences. Furthermore, experimental evidence reveals that time pressure substantially impairs consumers' systematic processing of product information, leading them to rely more on the affect heuristic in purchase decision-making [5]. Another stress pathway operates through anticipated regret: Patrick et al. show that inaction regret profoundly influences consumer behavior [6]. People devalue a permanently lost opportunity but show stronger purchase intention if they expect similar chances to reappear. Perceived stress can both activate emotional compensation needs to drive fan consumption, but it can also reinforce re-evaluation of monetary value and sense of control, which in turn inhibit it.

2.2. The emotional logic of fandom consumption

Emotional attachment to idols drives fan consumption. The idol industry converts fans' admiration and longing into specific acts, such as attending autograph events and fan meetings. Studies of live streaming further reveal that tipping behavior stems from an identity compensation mechanism, which resonates with the theory of emotional compensation transfer advanced by Lyu and Bi [2, 7]. Fans transfer their dissatisfaction with the real self and their longing for ideal intimate relationships

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onto idols. In return, they gain a sense of satisfaction, even a form of comfort, by consuming for them.

This process maps closely onto the para-social interaction described by Horton and Wohl, in which individuals come to feel they have an intimate, face-to-face relationship with media figures, and it is through ongoing spending that this sense of connection is kept alive [1].

2.3. The deep roots of compensation needs

How can a relationship be entirely one-sided, yet feel profoundly real to the person who holds it? This is the puzzle that Horton and Wohl set out to explain with their concept of parasocial interaction, a non-reciprocal emotional bond whose defining feature is not delusion, but controllability [1].

Scholars have argued that people are drawn to parasocial intimacy largely because it compensates for unmet needs in real life. Among the most salient are the needs for a sense of control, a stable identity, and emotional equilibrium.

Rain and Mar offer direct empirical support for this compensatory account, even though their study focused on fictional characters rather than real-life idols [8]. Their findings indicate that individuals who experience attachment avoidance or anxiety in real-life interpersonal relationships tend to turn to fully controllable virtual bonds. Through these bonds, they obtain surrogate intimacy, a reinforced sense of identity, and emotional regulation resources, which are three compensatory functions that map closely onto the needs identified by [8]. The leap from fictional characters to real-life idols is not without complications, yet the core compensatory mechanisms remain strikingly similar. For fans who cannot satisfy such psychological needs in real life, idols serve as a low-risk emotional anchor. Crucially, this emotional bond remains fully within the fan's own control.

Wu has documented a related phenomenon among Chinese "girlfriend fans," whose affection for idols fuses self-sacrifice with consumption [9]. In these communities, financial devotion and in-person encounters are taken as direct proof of affection, and consumption becomes a way to enact and sustain para-social intimacy.

Overall, much of the appeal of these para-social relationships appears rooted in real-life deprivation: a lack of control, unstable identity, and insufficient emotional replenishment. As unattainable yet fully "controllable" emotional figures, idols perfectly fill these voids in a low-risk manner. Some seek surrogate intimacy through imagined emotional attachment, others rebuild a sense of worth by spending money and faithfully following the idol's every move. In both cases, the para-social bond offers a locus of control that compensates for personal and relational difficulties that feel impossible to manage.

2.4. Heterogeneity and reflection in consumer behavior

Consumers exert agency, sometimes in unexpected ways. Under social pressure from their reference groups, some consumers assert their independence through acts of non-conformity, a pattern often driven by a need for self-consistency [10]. At a neural level, anti-conformity has been shown to trigger cognitive dissonance, whereas going along with the crowd does not [11]. This capacity to recognize and resist consumption traps raises a further question and points to the "reverse cases" at the heart of this study: what about those who respond to heightened stress not by buying more, but by retreating from consumption altogether?

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2.5. Research gap and contribution of this study

Existing research tells us two stories separately: fandom is emotionally driven, and stress shapes spending. What it rarely does is connect the two. Para-social relationship research has convincingly shown that fandom consumption is rooted in emotional attachment [1, 3]. Meanwhile, stress research has mapped out a range of consumption responses, from impulsive spending to deliberate restraint [4, 6]. Yet these two lines of inquiry have rarely intersected. We know little about whether and how stress channels into fan spending through the need for emotional compensation, and even less about why some fans, under the same pressure, choose to withdraw. To address these gaps, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Its quantitative component is designed to trace the dominant stress-compensation-spending pathway, while its qualitative component follows the "reverse cases", those who cut back on consumption when stress peaks, to understand what breaks the expected chain.

3. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

3.1. Core theoretical logic

This study constructs an integrated research framework based on the following core logical chain: Perceived Stress → Emotional Compensation Needs → Fandom Consumption Behavior.

3.2. Dimensions of emotional compensation needs

Table 1 summarizes the three dimensions of emotional compensation and their definitions.

Table 1. Three dimensions of emotional compensatio

Dimension	Definition
Emotional Repair	Obtaining immediate emotional comfort through consumption to alleviate negative emotions caused by real-life stress
Sense of Control	Experiencing autonomy and decision-making power through consumption to compensate for feelings of losing control in real life
Identity Recognition	Confirming community belonging through consumption to gain group identity and self-worth

3.3. Preliminary observations

Preliminary data show that higher perceived stress predicts more fandom spending, but also reveal a counter-current. Some working professionals, as work stress mounts, begin to question their own spending. One put it bluntly: "I don't want my hard-earned money to disappear in just three hours at a concert." Another confessed, "I don't want to be trapped by consumerism." Such remarks resonate with what the literature has described as anti-conformity consumer behavior and gestural anti-consumption [10, 12]. What makes them telling is what they imply about the stress–consumption link: it is not a single arrow pointing upward.

3.4. Research hypotheses

Derived core hypotheses are presented in Table 2.

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Table 2. Derived core hypothesis

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Perceived stress does not directly linearly predict consumption expenditure.
H2a	Emotional repair needs mediate the relationship between perceived stress and fandom consumption
H2b	Sense of control needs mediate the relationship between perceived stress and fandom consumption
H2c	Identity recognition needs mediate the relationship between perceived stress and fandom consumption
H3	The stress-compensation pathways differ significantly between working professionals and students
H4	Some individuals under high perceived stress exhibit anti-conformity consumption behavior, actively reducing fandom consumption

4. Research methodology

4.1. Research subjects

This study focuses on young women with fandom consumption experience, covering two types of high-stress groups:

Student group(aged 16–25): facing academic pressure

Working professional group(aged 22–35): facing job-related pressure

Special attention is given to two subgroups:

High-consumption group: those with high stress and high spending

Transformation group: those with high stress who begin to reflect on consumption and shift to other stress-relief methods

4.2. Research design: Mixed-methods approach

This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design, conducted in two stages(see Table 3).

Stage 1: Quantitative Research

Table 3. Measurement tools in the questionnaire

Tool	Description
PSS-4 Perceived Stress Scale	Measures stress perception
Self-developed 9-item Emotional Compensation Scale	Measures emotional repair, sense of control, and identity recognition
Consumer behavior items	Monthly consumption amount, types, and triggers
Demographic variables	Age, occupation, income

Data analysis (using SPSS) will include:

(1) Descriptive statistics

(2) One-way ANOVA

(3) Correlation analysis

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(4) Hierarchical regression analysis
(5) Mediation effect testing
Stage 2: Qualitative Research
Focusing on the group that reduces consumption under high stress:
(1) Open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire will collect their narratives
(2) Online in-depth interviews will be conducted with typical respondents
(3) Thematic analysis will be used to extract core themes

4.2.1. Reliability analysis

The 4-item Perceived Stress Scale showed good reliability (α = 0.88). The three subscales of the Emotional Compensation Scale all demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Emotional Repair: α = 0.78; Sense of Control: α = 0.79; Identity Recognition: α = 0.78). Corrected item-total correlations ranged from 0.53 to 0.74 across the three subscales. The above information is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Reliability analysis results

Scale / Subscale	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Perceived Stress	4	0.880
Emotional Repair	3	0.784
Sense of Control	3	0.787
Identity Recognition	3	0.780

4.2.2. Validity analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 9 items of the Emotional Compensation Scale. KMO = 0.925, and Bartlett's test ($p < 0.001$) confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Only one factor had an eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 58.36% of variance, with all item loadings between 0.70 and 0.90 and communalities ranging from 0.48 to 0.80.

4.3. Research ethics

The opening page of the questionnaire explains the study's purpose, guarantees anonymity, and confirms that all data will be used solely for academic research, thereby securing informed consent.

5. Findings / results

5.1. Quantitative results

Based on 258 valid responses from Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Weibo, the sample comprised students (30.62%), working professionals (49.22%), and others (20.16%). The largest age groups were 23–28 years (37.21%) and 18–22 years (31.4%), with the majority having been fans for 1–3 years (36.43%) or 3–5 years (35.66%). Among students, monthly disposable income was concentrated in the 1000–3000 RMB range (1000–2000: 38.10%; 2000–3000: 35.71%).

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5.2. Testing of hypotheses

5.2.1. Correlation analysis: Perceived stress and fandom spending (H1)

Contrary to expectations, perceived stress was not significantly correlated with monthly fandom spending across all four dimensions. As shown in Table 5, all coefficients clustered near zero (range: −0.03 to 0.01, all p-values> 0.05), indicating no meaningful linear associations.

Table 5. Correlations between perceived stress and fandom spending

Variable	Correlation with Spending	p-value
I feel unable to control important things in my life	-0.01	> 0.05
I am confident in my ability to handle personal problems	-0.01	> 0.05
Things are not going the way I expected	0.01	> 0.05
I feel there are too many difficulties that I cannot overcome	-0.03	> 0.05

Note: N = 258. All correlations are non-significant.

Finding: H1 is supported. Perceived stress was not significantly associated with fandom spending.

5.2.2. Regression analysis: Stress predicting fandom spending (H1)

The four stress dimensions were entered together as predictors of monthly fandom spending, and are presented in Table 6.

Result: The regression model was not significant ($F(4, 253) = 0.148$, $p = 0.964$), with an R^2 of 0.002. None of the individual stress dimensions significantly predicted spending (all $p > 0.05$).

Table 6. Stress-fandom spending regression

Statistic	Value
R^2	0.002
Adjusted R^2	-0.013
F(4, 253)	0.148
p-value	0.964

Finding: H1 is supported. Perceived stress does not linearly predict fandom consumption expenditure.

5.2.3. Descriptive patterns: Stress as a reported trigger

Descriptively, stress-related situations emerged as the most common spending trigger, even though no direct statistical relationship was established (see Table 7).

Table 7. Stress-related consumption triggers

=trigger	percentage
When feeling frustrated with work/study	67.44%
When under press and needing to relax	65.12%

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This suggests that while stress does not linearly predict spending amounts, respondents believe stress drives their consumption behavior.

5.2.4. Mediation analysis of emotional compensation needs

A key question was whether emotional compensation needs (emotional repair, sense of control, and identity recognition) serve as pathways linking perceived stress to fandom spending. To find out, we ran a parallel mediation model with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples, percentile method) to check the indirect effects.

The total effect was negligible and non-significant ($c = -0.02$, $p = 0.855$; 95% CI [−0.26, 0.22]), consistent with H1. Stress significantly predicted all three mediators. It was a meaningful predictor for emotional repair ($a_1 = 0.20$, $p = 0.001$) and sense of control ($a_3 = 0.18$, $p = 0.002$), and was most strongly associated with identity recognition ($a_2 = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, more stress was consistently tied to greater emotional compensation needs.

Overall, no direct link emerged between perceived stress and fandom spending, and the three compensation needs failed to act as meaningful intermediaries. Both emotional repair and identity recognition yielded B-paths close to zero ($b = 0.30$, $p > 0.25$). Sense of control showed a negative trend without reaching statistical significance ($b_3 = -0.50$, $p = 0.079$).

The full path coefficients are presented in Table 8, and the bootstrap indirect effects are shown in Table 9. As shown in both tables, none of the indirect effects differed from zero: all bootstrap 95% CIs contained zero, and the total indirect effect was non-significant (0.05, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.15]). Hence, we found no support for Hypotheses 2a through 2c. Although perceived stress can heighten emotional compensation needs, that heightened state does not appear to convert into monetary outlays.

Table 8. Path coefficients of the mediation model

Path	B	SE	t	p
Stress → Emotional Repair (a_1)	0.202	0.057	3.522	0.001
Stress → Identity Recognition (a_2)	0.273	0.056	4.857	< 0.001
Stress → Sense of Control (a_3)	0.181	0.058	3.098	0.002
Emotional Repair → Spending (b_1)	0.296	0.304	0.976	0.330
Identity Recognition → Spending (b_2)	0.302	0.268	1.124	0.262
Sense of Control → Spending (b_3)	-0.501	0.284	-1.765	0.079
Stress → Spending (c')	-0.074	0.126	-0.584	0.560

Note. Total effect c = -0.022, p = 0.855.

Table 9. Bootstrap indirect effects

Mediation Path	Effect	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI	Conclusion
Stress → Emotional Repair → Spending	0.060	0.074	[-0.076, 0.223]	Not significant
Stress → Identity Recognition → Spending	0.082	0.085	[-0.076, 0.269]	Not significant
Stress → Sense of Control → Spending	-0.091	0.064	[-0.239, 0.013]	Not significant
Total Indirect Effect	0.052	0.046	[-0.026, 0.152]	Not significant

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Perceived stress raised all three compensatory needs, yet that rise didn't translate into what people actually spent. The control path went negative and nearly became significant ($b = -0.50$, $p = 0.079$). That suggests wanting control might actually reduce spending, not increase it. Multiple interviewees echoed this logic, describing how they sought to "regain control over life by cutting down consumption."

5.3. Qualitative results: Three perspectives on fandom consumption and stress coping

5.3.1. Student perspective: Consumption as compensation and belonging

Respondent A, a 21-year-old university student who has been a fan for three years, described how academic stress drives her spending:

"During finals or when I'm overwhelmed with papers, I buy merchandise or support album sales. I feel exhausted and need something to make me happy."

She explained the immediate psychological relief: "The moment I spend money, it feels amazing. It's like hitting pause on all my worries."

For her, concerts offer more than entertainment: "Being in a venue with thousands of people who love the same person, the feeling is rare in daily life. Everyone is shouting, crying, and laughing together. You realize you're not alone. The money doesn't buy three hours of performance. It buys belonging. It's worth it."

5.3.2. Working professional perspective one: Spending for connection

Respondent B, a 28-year-old working professional who has been a fan for six years, emphasized the importance of community:

"Honestly, the most precious thing isn't seeing the idol. It's spending time with other fans who share this experience. Shared travel, mutual help in foreign venues, and common affection for the idol enabled fans to build cross-cultural bonds and maintain ongoing connections."

She described the emotional support from her fan group: "We have a small chat group. We talk about work, life, and our idol. When work is stressful, a quick message brings encouragement. These relationships are real."

Regarding stress and spending, she adopts an "investment" mindset: "When work gets tough, I feel I need to put in some extra hours and earn more to go to a concert. That anticipation alone helps me get through hard days. Concert memories are created together. The person on stage performs, and the crowd cries. You know those around you share similar struggles. For that experience, any amount is worth it."

5.3.3. Working professional perspective two: Reflection and restraint

Respondent C, a 29-year-old working professional who has been a fan for five years, has shifted from spending to restraint:

"I still want to spend, seeing new merchandise, and wanting to go to concerts. The impulse is still there, but now I hesitate."

Her hesitation stems from external pressures: "Family asks about marriage. Friends are buying homes and saving money. I start asking myself — is this worth it?"

She described her internal debate: "A three-hour concert brings real happiness, but it's fleeting. After it ends, the stress lingers, and life goes back to routine. Then I wonder if I could use that

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money for something more meaningful? Maybe I could put it into savings, take a course, or learn something new?"

Her shift is not about losing interest in her idol: "I still like them. But I realize liking someone doesn't have to mean proving it by spending. Maybe that money should go toward myself instead."

5.4. Evidence for "reverse consumption" under high stress (H4)

Several respondents stated that they cut down on fandom-related spending when stress builds up, and instead shift their attention and expenses to themselves. As one put it, "spending within my means, putting myself first." Another had shifted away from merchandise, "saving up for offline events" instead.

Such accounts fit what the literature describes as reflective anti-consumption: a deliberate pause in which consumers question their own spending habits [12]. The shift from merchandise to saving for offline events, however, leans closer to gestural anti-consumption, in which consumption is not abandoned so much as redefined on the consumer's own terms [13].

6. Discussion

6.1. The central puzzle: Perceived vs. actual behavior

The most notable finding is not a direct stress–spending link, but a gap between what respondents said and did: over two-thirds claimed stress motivated spending, yet no statistical relationship emerged.

Stress functions less as a spending trigger than as a post-hoc narrative to make sense of past consumption. "I spent because I was stressed" may faithfully capture how fans experience their own behavior. But as a predictor of how much they spend, the explanation does little work.

6.2. Stress activates needs, but why do they not translate into consumption

The mediation analysis yielded an unexpected pattern. Perceived stress significantly heightened all three compensatory needs: emotional repair, identity recognition, and sense of control. Yet none of these activated needs translated into greater spending. In one sense, a null mediation is more telling here than a supported one would have been.

6.2.1. Need activation: Stress does trigger compensatory motivation

Across all three dimensions: emotional repair ($\beta = 0.22$), identity recognition ($\beta = 0.29$), and sense of control ($\beta = 0.19$), perceived stress emerged as a positive predictor. This is consistent with what the survey already hinted at: over 65% of respondents identified "needing to relax under high pressure" as a consumption trigger, and with what Participant A described more vividly: "during finals, buying merchandise helps me feel happy."

In summary, the data point to a pattern that is hard to ignore: among these young female fans, the impulse to spend under stress is widely felt and easily articulated.Even if, as the spending data showed, it does not reliably dictate how much they actually spend.

6.2.2. Behavior blockade: The "last mile" from desire to purchase

Why did these needs not lead to spending?

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First, consider money. Most student respondents reported monthly disposable incomes between 1,000 and 3,000 RMB. Even when spending impulses are activated, tight budgets impose a strict limit on actual expenditure. Second, the direction of the B-paths reveals a more nuanced pattern. Emotional repair and identity recognition showed positive but non-significant coefficients (b = 0.30 each), whereas the sense of control → spending path was negative and marginally significant (b = −0.50, p = 0.079). Spending can serve as an attempt to reclaim control, but withholding spending may assert the same need even more strongly. Control needs thus appear ambivalent, simultaneously encouraging and discouraging spending, a tension that results in the observed null effect. Lastly, our measure captured only monetary spending. Yet stress may channel fandom energy into free activities, such as streaming, posting, and community engagement. This possibility awaits empirical testing in studies that track both monetary and non-monetary forms of fan engagement.

6.2.3. Theoretical implications: From a mediation model to a dual-pathway model

When integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, a dual-pathway mechanism emerges. Specifically, stress activates two opposing pathways: one promotes fandom consumption via emotional repair and identity needs, the other inhibits it via self-control reflections and budget constraints. Counterbalancing of the two pathways neutralizes the aggregate effect, explaining the non-significant results. This dual-pathway interpretation integrates Hypotheses 2 and 4, showing that null findings reflect a balance of opposing forces, not a lack of underlying mechanisms. Testing this dual-pathway model requires tracking how the two pathways fluctuate over time and across situations, a question better addressed by longitudinal and experimental designs.

6.3. The "reverse case": When stress leads to restraint (H4)

Respondent C exemplifies reflective restraint rather than stress-induced spending, providing direct support for H4 and aligning with existing stress-coping literature.

As Hoang et al. [12] define it, these individuals exhibit gestural anti-consumption—aware of fan consumption's emotional pull and structural drivers, they deliberately redirect resources toward self-investment and self-improvement without abandoning their fan identity. Respondent C's shift is driven by social pressure from friends and family, and a cost-benefit realization that a concert's fleeting happiness may not be worth the money. This self-assessed cost-benefit tradeoff is highly consistent with the reflection strategy proposed by Dholakia et al. [13] When individuals reexamine their current possessions and future life goals, their consumption intention tends to decline significantly.

These narratives show that the stress–consumption link is conditional, shaped by life stage, social context, and self-awareness. Stress may trigger reflection over spending, especially when social comparison intensifies, or consumption is seen as a "trap."

6.4. Student-worker differences (H3)

The descriptive patterns provide preliminary support for H3, student and working professional pathways differ significantly(see Table 10).

Table 10. Fan consumption patterns by employment status

Dimension	Students	Working Professionals
Primary trigger	Limited events/special occasions (73.81% of students)	Stress relief, salary-based spending

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Table 10. Continued

Spending concentration	Distributed across brackets, 21.62% in 2000+ RMB	50% in 2000+ RMB
Post-consumption feeling	Happiness + guilt dominant	Very satisfied + happiness + guilt

Within the working professional group, high-level spending and stress-driven consumption behaviors are more prominent. As Hoang et al. noted, economic independence not only means having the capacity to consume but also prompts individuals to reflect on whether such consumption is necessary [12].

6.5. Theoretical implications

Perceived stress both drives and inhibits fan consumption via opposing forces that cancel out, resulting in need activation with behavioral blockade. Fans spend to maintain parasocial bonds and gain emotional comfort. Furthermore, the sense of belonging represents a long-neglected mechanism of action [3]. Consumption in fan communities enables both emotional regulation and social integration, offering group identity. This group perspective adds nuance to Lyu and Bi's individual-level framework [2].To explain why some stressed individuals reduce fan spending for self-growth, this study draws on performative anti-consumption and reflective strategy theories [12, 13].

6.6. Practical implications

Female fans are often labeled irrational spenders, yet this study shows their consumption serves a clear psychological function, such as stress relief, belonging, and self-identity affirmation. Fandom spending acts as an emotional first-aid kit, and more often, a rational choice after self-reflection and trade-offs. Fandom consumption should be seen as a reasonable coping strategy, not a pathology. Whether it is healthy depends on context and intensity, like any emotion regulation approach.

6.7. Limitations

Online-only recruitment limits the sample's representativeness of the broader young female fan population. Second, self-report biases prevent distinguishing underreporting of irrational spending from overstatement to project fan loyalty. Lastly, findings from young female Chinese fans may not generalize; cross-cultural and gender-diverse research is essential to validate the model.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Summary of key findings

The summary is developed from the following two questions.

First, does perceived stress influence young female fans' consumption behavior through emotional compensation needs? Second, why do some highly stressed fans exhibit the abnormal behavior of "reverse consumption reduction"?

These results show that there is no significant linear correlation between the two variables ($R2=0.002$, $p=0.964$). Nevertheless, most respondents subjectively believed that stress drives their consumption. The reduction under greater stress reflects realistic constraints weakening stress's motivational effect, a pattern validated by Participant C and supporting H4.

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Bring together, this study identifies two key mechanisms. Parasocial theory posits that emotional deficits drive stressed fans to consume. In contrast, realistic constraints redirect individuals from immediate consumption to long-term goals.

7.2. Final reflection

This study's value lies not in proving a simple causal link, but in revealing a meaningful inconsistency between people's explanations of their behavior and what the data show. Stress does not linearly drive spending, yet it shapes the stories people tell about why they spend. This inconsistency is not a flaw but the core finding. Fandom consumption can be either an emotional outlet or a resisted trap. Respondent C shows that individuals may shift between these positions. Both choices merit understanding, not judgment.

7.3. Hypothesis testing summary

Table 11 reports the hypothesis test results. Taken together, the results tell a simple story: the needs were there, but the spending wasn't. The qualitative data even showed reverse consumption — people cutting back. That's the core tension: needs activated, behavior blocked.

Table 11. Hypothesis testing summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Explanation
H1	Perceived stress is not linearly associated with fandom spending	Supported	c = -0.022, p = 0.855
H2a	Emotional repair mediates the stress–spending relationship	Not supported	Indirect effect non-significant; 95% CI includes zero
H2b	Sense of control mediates the stress–spending relationship	Not supported	Indirect effect non-significant; 95% CI includes zero
H2c	Identity recognition mediates the stress–spending relationship	Not supported	Indirect effect non-significant; 95% CI includes zero
H3	Student–worker differences exist in stress–compensation pathways	Partially supported	See descriptive statistics (Section 5.3)
H4	"Reverse consumption" exists under high stress	Qualitatively supported	Participant C and open-ended responses provide evidence

7.4. Future research directions

Future research can further explore longitudinal tracking, cross-cultural comparison, intervention design, participant expansion, and neural mechanisms, so as to unpack the complex relationship between fandom consumption and stress coping.

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