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COMPETITION AND EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS IN EARLY ADOLESCENT FRIENDSHIPS: THE ROLE OF DOMAIN IMPORTANCE AND COPING

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

by

Jessica E. McGuire

March 2013

The Dissertation of Jessica E. McGuire
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Abstract

Competition and Emotional Closeness in Early Adolescent Friendships:

The Role of Domain Importance and Coping

Jessica McGuire

The present study investigated competition, domain importance, and coping response as predictors of emotional closeness in early adolescent friendships. Sample comprised of 133 girls and 114 boys (M = 13 years, range = 11 to 15 years) in seventh and eighth grades. Participants reported on the importance of four domains to their self-concept (sports, academics, social attention, and attractiveness). Participants also reported on their experiences within their closest same-gender friendship, including level of friendship competition, related emotional distress, and coping response across the four domains. Also, friendship intimacy and support were assessed. The hypothesized model proposed that domain importance mediates the relation between level of friendship competition and emotional distress. In turn, emotional distress is related to emotional closeness via the specific coping responses. Path analyses were conducted for each domain. The model fit the data well for competition in all domains except attractiveness. Models fit similarly for girls and boys. Variations in path strength and significance across domains suggest that competition may function differently depending on domain.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a grant to Campbell Leaper from the Academic Senate of the University of California, Santa Cruz.

These pages not only represent my dissertation work, they also represent years of support from many people who helped me succeed. I first want to express sincere gratitude and appreciation to my advisor, Campbell Leaper. His mentoring, guidance, and extreme patience were invaluable and integral to my success over my graduate career. I also want to thank my other committee members, Margarita Azmitia and Faye Crosby, for their insightful feedback over the years and their belief in my research capabilities. I feel truly lucky to have had such a wonderfully supportive committee.

I also want to thank my husband, Peter Manning, for his endless support and unconditional love for me. Thank you honey for keeping me going at times that I felt like giving up and for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. You are the most amazing part of this whole journey! Also thanks to "our little family", Lester and Kayla, whose kisses kept me smiling through the tears.

To Vickie Nam and Rachael Robnett, thank you both for your friendship and never-ending encouragement. You are amazing friends, and words cannot adequately express how thankful I am for your caring and support through my personal and professional triumphs and tribulations.

Many thanks to the “Leaper Lab” over the years – Carly Friedman, Melanie Ayres, Diana Arias, Rachael Robnett, and Timi Farkas - for their caring, support, feedback on my work, and camaraderie.

Thank you to all of my family members - my Mom and Brent, my Dad and Roni, and my siblings Devon, Tim, Keith, Joe, and Caitlin - for their love, encouragement, and belief in me. I also want to especially thank my sister, Devon, for the many phone conversations over the years and for always being there for me when I needed it.

I would also like to thank Kerena Saltzman for her insight and faith in me and for helping to keep me honest, mindful, and accepting of myself and others.

I want to express my appreciation for all of the research assistants who worked on this project: Katrina Hoagland, Kristina Lee, Alexa Paynter, Lauren Seidel, and Chaconne Tatum-Diehl. Also, special thanks to Roni McGuire and Lois Sones for each of their help with school recruitment. Finally, I would like to thank all of the schools who participated in this study and all of the students who completed the survey. Without you, this work would not have been possible.

Competition and Emotional Closeness in Early Adolescent Friendships:

The Roles of Domain Importance and Coping

The present study examined competition, coping, and friendship qualities during early adolescence. Although friendships are voluntary relationships and inherently based on reciprocity and equality, many friendships are likely to have some level of competition (Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986). Competition is typically defined as a process between two individuals whose goal is to outperform one another (Green & Rechis, 2006; Schneider, Dixon, & Udvari, 2007). Thus, competitive processes which result in a "winner" and a "loser" may generate tensions between friends and present problems for the friendship. For example, Sullivan (1953) theorized that because competition threatens equity in a relationship and is inconsistent with mutual intimacy, it has the potential to adversely affect friendships. However, he also proposed that some amount of competition within friendships may be common and not detrimental, particularly within young male friendships.

Friendship Competition During Early Adolescence

Competition occurs in friendships at all ages. However, early adolescence is a time in which friendship competition can become a growing concern. Friendships become more important in the transition to adolescence as friendship intimacy increases and individuals begin to rely more on their friendships to meet their needs (Berndt, 2002). Additionally, social stress increases with the transition to middle school as popularity and social status become a growing concern (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Early

adolescents must balance increasing social demands while maintaining their close friendships. Therefore, managing and negotiating conflictual situations such as competition in friendships may take on a more frequent and prominent role in the lives of young adolescents.

Although competition likely occurs in early adolescent friendships in many forms, relatively little is understood about girls' and boys' experiences with competition in their closest friendships. The majority of research on adolescent friendships has examined competition in relation to negative friendship qualities and friendship termination. For example, a study on a diverse group of seventh graders showed that competition focused on out-doing the other in games and academics was related to friendship conflict and friendship dissolution for both girls and boys (Schneider, Woodburn, del Toro, & Udvari, 2005). Qualitative research also shows that gifted adolescent girls perceive direct competition and rivalry within friendships over social and academic success as negative and report competition as one potential cause of friendship dissolution (Rizza & Reis, 2001). However, some research demonstrates that the majority of friendships stay intact after experiencing interpersonal friendship stress (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Although friendship competition may be an upsetting interpersonal event, it may not always result in friendship termination. Young adolescents may still maintain close friendships that do have some level of competition. Thus, it is important to know how competition relates to positive friendship qualities.

Researchers often discuss the incompatibility between friendship competition and the emotional support and intimacy that friendships require to be close (e.g. Rubin, 1985; Sullivan, 1953); however, there is no empirical research regarding the relation between the two. Additionally, nothing is known about the underlying processes that might explain how competition within friendships relates to friendship qualities. Therefore, the present study examines how different contexts of friendship competition may be indirectly related to emotional closeness in early adolescents' best friendships via competitive domain importance and individual coping responses (see Figure 1).

Competitive Domains

Competition between friends can take place in a variety of domains that adolescents value. Research shows that adolescents vary in the importance they place on success in specific domains (Harter, 1988, 1990, 2003; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). The present study investigates friendship competition in four domains that are typically important during early adolescence: athletic competence, scholastic competence, physical appearance, and peer social acceptance. Because adolescents highly value some or all of these domains, problems may occur when one friend excels in a domain relative to the other friend. For example, research shows that when adolescents placed a high value on their own performance in a particular domain, they reported being upset and bothered more about their friends' hypothetical greater success in that domain (Benensen & Bennaroch, 1998). Thus, it appears that a friend's greater success can elicit strong emotional reactions. Moreover, many

adolescents tend to place a higher priority on popularity than on friendships (LaFontana & Cillesen, 2010). Competition in domains that relate to status may therefore be particularly relevant to friendships as adolescents navigate the tension between achieving social success and maintaining close friendships.

Although successes in particular domains are generally important to adolescents, individuals do vary in the degree to which each domain is personally important to them. Therefore, the individual importance of the competitive domain to one's sense of self may play a role in the relation between friendship competition and relationship quality. Specifically, the extent to which individuals base their self-esteem on goals for different domains could explain why competition may be problematic for friendships. It may also explain, in part, variations in the relation between competition and friendship quality. James (1892) theorized that individuals may base their self-esteem more on certain domains compared with others. James posited that people differ in which domains their sense of self-esteem is based and thus be threatened when presented with possibilities of failure. For example, some individuals derive self-esteem through academic achievement while others turn to sports as a source of self-esteem. This, in turn, relates to an individual's global sense of self-esteem. In addition, James (1892) theorized that a low sense of competence in specific domains will not have a negative impact unless an individual highly values successful performance in that domain.

Harter (1990) expanded on James' (1892) model by clearly articulating the two components of self-concept: competency and importance. The discrepancy

between the two components within different domains relates to an individual's overall self-worth. In addition, Harter (1990) asserted that some individuals are able to discount the importance of domains, while other individuals are unable to. Those with high global self-worth have the ability to discount those domains in which they have low competency. Yet those with low global self-worth do not have that ability and still attach importance to those domains in which they do not excel. Thus, the discounting process may account for different patterns of the two components.

Research does support James' (1892) and Harter's (1990) models. For example, when an individual's self-worth in important self-relevant domains is threatened, there can be negative consequences including depression, disappointment, and dejection (Crocker, 2002; Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003; Park & Crocker, 2008). Moreover, the discrepancy between perceived competence and importance in various domains relates to global self-esteem, such that the larger the discrepancy, the lower self-worth (Harter, 1990; Niiya, Crocker, & Bartmess, 2004; Park, Crocker, & Kiefer, 2007). Therefore, it appears that when individuals perform poorly in a domain that they place a high importance on, there are negative consequences.

Because adolescents often gauge their performance by engaging in comparisons with peers and friends (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Schutz, Paxton & Wertheim, 2002), competition with friends may present a significant challenge. Friendship competition involves the possibility of performing poorly by falling short in comparison to another. Therefore, competing with friends in

domains high in importance to one's self-worth can pose a perceived threat to an adolescent's self-esteem. In addition, competition in those domains might elicit feelings of pressure to perform as well as disappointment and depression when the outcome is unfavorable. For example, when early adolescents were outperformed in academics by their close friends, they reported lower self-evaluations (composite of competence, self-esteem, and attributional style) than those whose friends performed at similar levels, and research suggests that this relation may be stronger in areas that are self-relevant versus areas that are not (Tesser, 2003). Thus, friendship competition in domains highly relevant to an individual's sense of self might elicit especially strong emotional reactions, which in turn presents more difficulties for a friendship. Specifically, I hypothesize that friendship competition is related to associated emotional distress via domain importance (see Figure 1).

Coping with Competition

When friendship competition does elicit negative emotions, the way an individual copes with the negative emotions may then relate to the quality of the friendship (see Figure 1). That is, a negative emotional response to friendship competition does not directly relate to negative perceptions of friendship quality. Rather, how an individual handles his or her emotions may mediate the relation. Coping is "a set of cognitive and affective actions which arise in response to a particular concern" (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993, p. 255). Coping strategies can be conceived of as either approach or avoidance responses (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Approach coping includes activities oriented toward the stressor (e.g. directly

addressing the source of stress to find a solution) while avoidance coping includes activities oriented away from the stressor (e.g. seeking social-support from others [Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993]).

Adolescents report that their two most likely responses to interpersonal conflicts are directly addressing the problem with the person (approach coping) and seeking support from others (avoidance coping) (Gamble, 1994). In response to peer and friend stressors specifically, research also shows that direct confrontation and social-support seeking are the most frequently coping strategies used in comparison to other more internally-focused strategies such as wishful thinking and avoidance. For example, young adolescents report directly confronting the individual as the most frequent response to upsetting peer events such as peer rejection and peer arguments (e.g., Bowker, Bukowski, Hymel, & Sippola, 2000). Additionally, adolescent girls report directly addressing the person to find a solution and social-support seeking as their most frequent response to instances of friend indirect aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

Although adolescents report both direct confrontation and social-support seeking as the two likeliest responses to interpersonal stressors, the utilization of the two coping strategies in response to friendship stressors may have differing impacts on the friendship. For example, seeking social support from other friends may sometimes be detrimental to a close friendship. In particular, this can be interpreted as a form of indirect aggression such as gossip or trying to get someone to "take sides." In addition, peer social support-seeking has the potential to magnify the

problem, as more people get involved and word of tension within the friendship spreads. On the other hand, directly addressing the problem within the friendship has the possibility of fostering understanding between friends and alleviating any difficulties that have arisen. This is important to note, as effective conflict resolution between friends can be beneficial for both the relationship and the individual (Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Thus, although it may be a difficult conversation to have, discussing the competition and associated distress may help the friendship. The present study investigates the utilization of these two coping strategies in response to friendship competition. Specifically, I hypothesize that associated emotional distress will predict coping behaviors, which in turn will predict emotional closeness in the friendship. Peer social support-seeking will be a negative predictor, while confronting (i.e. having a discussion about the problem) will be a positive predictor (see Figure1).

Gender as a Moderator

Gender likely moderates the relation between competition and friendship quality. Competition impacts both boys' and girls' friendships, yet researchers have suggested that competition is a greater feature of boys' friendships than of girls' friendships (Berndt, 1985; Hartup, 1992). In addition, competition might take on a different meaning for girls versus boys. Girls tend to be concerned about dyadic relationships and focus on the egalitarian nature of friendships, while boys tend to be more concerned about dominance and hierarchy (Maccoby, 1990). Therefore, girls may be more likely than boys to avoid engaging in competitive behaviors because it challenges mutuality and equality within friendships. Indeed, research shows that

within early adolescent friendships, girls tend to actively avoid competition more than do boys (Schneider et al., 2005). Additionally, on average, girls report more negative feelings than do boys when outperforming their friends (Benensen & Schinazi, 2004). Girls, compared with boys, also are more likely to think that good friends will think more negatively of them in such situations.

Competition is more normative and common in boys' friendships than in girls' friendships (Hartup, 1992; Schneider et al., 2005). Boys also tend to emphasize agency in their close friendships more than do girls (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). This may lead boys to expect more competitive behaviors from their friends and be less upset when it occurs (Schneider et al., 2005). Thus, it is likely that similar levels of friendship competition will differentially relate to emotional closeness in girls' and boys' close friendships and that the underlying processes (distress response and coping strategy) that explain the relation between friendship competition and emotional closeness vary by gender.

There are two ways that gender may moderate the relation of friendship competition and friendship qualities. First, friendship competition may elicit a stronger emotional response for girls than for boys. Research suggests that girls are more sensitive to relationship conflicts than are boys. For example, girls are more likely than boys to report experiencing peer and friendship problems and to rate them as highly stressful when they do occur (Compas, Orosan, & Grant, 1993; Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Washburn-Ormachea, Hillman, & Sawilisky, 2004). In addition, in comparison to boys, girls report more sadness and fear in response to relationship

conflicts and are more likely to worry about losing a relationship if they express anger or unhappiness (Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Henrich, Blatt, Kuperminc, Zohar, & Leadbeater, 2001). Thus, competition in close friendships may be greater stressor for girls than for boys.

Second, choice of coping response may play a role in how and why gender moderates the relation between friendship competition and friendship qualities. Compared to girls, adolescent boys are less likely to use avoidance and more likely to directly address the problem in response to stressful experiences (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Laursen, 1995). In contrast, adolescent girls are more likely than boys to seek out and utilize social support in response to a stressful concern in their lives (e.g. Chapman & Mullis, 1999; Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohhaus, 2007; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000). Additionally, the gender difference in social support seeking is especially likely when the social support comes from friends (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991) and is in response to peer arguments (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Perhaps girls utilize social support seeking more often than do boys because they tend to be more concerned with relationship maintenance. Thus they avoid confronting relationship problems directly in fear of expressing negative emotions that could damage a relationship (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Girls' relationships tend to be based more on intimacy and communication (Rubin, 1985). Thus, girls' friendships may especially suffer from their tendency to utilize peer social-support seeking, as spending time disclosing with a third party can threaten the interpersonal harmony of the friendship. For example, discussing

problems with outsiders can lead to feelings of betrayal and breaches of trust. In contrast, boys' greater focus on agency may lead them to be more comfortable with competition as well as directly addressing competition when it is upsetting. Therefore, adolescent boys may use more direct strategies when managing friendship stress and this can lead to effective and timely conflict resolution.

Proposed Model

The relation between friendship competition and relationship quality in adolescence may be better understood by examining under what conditions the competition is upsetting. In addition, when the competition is upsetting, the coping process that an individual engages in may then be a factor in how the competition relates to qualities of the relationship. Therefore, I hypothesize a model in which domain-specific importance mediates the relation between domain-specific friendship competition and emotional reaction to the competition; in turn, the emotional reaction is related to friendship quality via the specific coping response an individual utilizes. In addition, I hypothesize that the model will hold across the four domains (sports, academics, social attention, and physical attractiveness). However, because the importance of the domain is considered a factor in my model, it is relevant to consider each domain separately. See Figure 1 for the hypothesized model.

Furthermore, I predict that gender will moderate these relations. Although I hypothesize that the model will hold for both girls and boys, I hypothesize that certain paths will be stronger for girls and certain paths will be stronger for boys. Based on the previous research, I predict that competition and domain importance will elicit

stronger emotional reactions for girls than for boys. In addition, I predict that peer social support-seeking will be a more important indicator of friendship quality for girls, whereas confrontive coping will be more important for boys.

Method

Participants

Participants were 247 early adolescents (n = 133 girls and n = 114 boys). Participants' mean age was 13 (SD = .68, range = 11 to 15 years). Self-identified ethnic backgrounds were White European American (48%), Latin American (29%), Asian American (5%), Middle Eastern (3%), and mixed or other ethnic groups (15%). A little over half (58%) of the participants came from dual-earner families. Parent education varied for both mothers (16% high school degree or less, 12% some college, 57% college degree or beyond, and 15% unknown) and fathers (20% high school degree or less, 9% some college, 53% college degree or beyond, and 18% unknown).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from seventh and eighth grade classrooms in 5 middle schools across Northern and Southern California. Written parental informed consent was obtained; consent form return rate was 25%. In addition, participants provided written assent prior to starting the survey. Participants were given a survey that included demographic questions, questions about their thoughts and feelings regarding themselves, and questions about their experiences in their closest same-

gender friendship. The survey took approximately 35 minutes to complete, and participants were provided with a written debriefing after completing the survey.

Measures

The following measures from the survey were used in the present study. Unless indicated otherwise, survey items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true* to 5 = *very true*).

Domain importance. The importance of four domains to the participants' self-concept was assessed with the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988). This included two items for each domain (sports [e.g., "I think that it is important to be good at sports"], academics [e.g., "I think that doing well in school is important"], social relationships [e.g., "I think that it is important to be popular"], and attractiveness [e.g., "I think that my physical appearance is important"].). The internal consistency was adequate for most domains (minimum $\alpha = .70$) and low for academics ($\alpha = .50$)

Positive friendship quality. Emotional closeness was assessed using 6 items from the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Three of these items assessed friendship intimacy (e.g., "I share my secrets and private feelings with my friend"), and three of these items assessed friendship support (e.g., "I turn to my friend for support with personal problems") ($\alpha = .91$).

General friendship competition. Level of general competition within the friendship was assessed with 3 items (e.g., "I feel that my friend is generally competitive with me"; $\alpha = .74$).

Domain-specific friendship competition. Friendship competition was assessed separately in four domains: sports, academics, social relationships, and attractiveness. For each domain, participants evaluated three facets related to competition: level of competition, emotional distress, and coping.

Level of friendship competition. Level of competition was assessed using three items for each domain (sports [e.g., "My friend works hard to beat me whenever we play a game"], academics [e.g., "My friend tries to do better than me in school"], social relationships [e.g., "My friend tries to get more attention than me when we are with our other friends"], and attractiveness [e.g., "My friend works to appear physically better-looking than me"].). The internal consistency was high for each domain (minimum $\alpha = .81$).

Emotional distress. Participants' negative emotional reaction to competition in each of the competition domains was assessed using two items ("How *bothered* would you be when your friend tries to get more attention in social situations than you?" and "How *annoyed* would you be when your friend tries to get more attention in social situations than you?") rated on a 5 point scale (1=*not at all bothered/annoyed* to 5=*very bothered/annoyed*). The internal consistency was high for each domain (minimum $\alpha = .80$).

Coping. Following the assessment of emotional distress for a particular competition domain, participants evaluated their likely coping responses based on the Revised Ways of Coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Coping responses included three items each for seeking social-support from a peer (e.g., "I would talk to another

friend to figure out how to handle it," minimum $\alpha = .88$) and confronting the friend to have a discussion about the problem (e.g., "I would talk to him/her about it," minimum $\alpha = .87$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

To test for any possible school differences in the variables of interest, ANOVAs were conducted for each variable. There were no significant differences by school in any of the variables of interest. Therefore all subsequent analyses were collapsed across schools.

To investigate any average gender differences as well as any average differences by domain in the variables of interest, repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted with domain of competition (sports, academics, social, and attractiveness) as a within-subjects variable and gender as a between groups variable.

Level of friendship competition. A repeated measures ANOVA with a Huynh-Feldt correction showed that there was a significant difference in level of friendship competition by domain, $F(2.61, 640.62) = 49.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction and showed that participants reported the most competition in sports activities and the least competition over attractiveness (see Table 1).

In addition, there was a significant gender difference in overall level of competition, $F(1, 245) = 11.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Boys ($M = 1.94$, $SD = .74$) reported more friendship competition than did girls ($M = 1.65$, $SD = .79$). However,

this was qualified by a significant gender by domain interaction, $F(2.61, 640.62) = 16.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Boys reported greater levels of friendship competition than did girls in academics and sports, yet boys and girls reported similar levels of friendship competition over social relationships and attractiveness. See Table 1 for complete results regarding gender comparisons for competition level by domain.

Importance of domain. A repeated measures ANOVA with a Huynh-Feldt correction showed that there was a significant difference in rated importance by domain, $F(2.97, 728.79) = 160.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .40$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction and showed that out of the four domains, participants rated academics highest in importance and excelling socially lowest. There were no gender differences in domain importance. See Table 2 for complete results.

Emotional distress. A repeated measures ANOVA with a Huynh-Feldt correction showed that there was a significant difference in emotional distress by competitive domain, $F(3, 675) = 26.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction and showed that participants reported more emotional distress in response to friendship competition over social attention than in response to friendship competition in the three other domains (see Table 3).

In addition, there was a significant overall gender difference in emotional distress in response to friendship competition, $F(1, 225) = 14.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.

Girls (M = 2.33, SD = .96) reported more emotional distress than did boys (M = 1.86, SD = .85). However, this was qualified by a significant gender by domain interaction, $F(3, 675) = 3.21$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Girls reported more emotional distress than did boys in response to competition over academics, social attention, and attractiveness. However, boys and girls reported similar levels of distress in response to sports competition. See Table 3 for gender comparisons of emotional distress by domain.

Coping: Social-support seeking. A repeated measures ANOVA with a Huynh-Feldt correction showed that there was a significant difference in social-support seeking by competitive domain, $F(2.85, 667.95) = 20.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction and showed that participants utilized social-supporting seeking most in response to competition for social attention and least in response to sports competition (see Table 4). In addition, there was an overall gender difference in social support-seeking $F(1, 236) = 24.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Girls (M = 2.52, SD = 1.14) reported more social-seeking than did boys (M = 1.85, SD = .89). See Table 4 for gender comparisons of social-support seeking by domain.

Coping: Confronting. A repeated measures ANOVA with a Huynh-Feldt correction showed that there was a significant difference in confronting by competitive domain, $F(2.92, 686.63) = 20.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction and showed that participants utilized confronting most in response to competition over academics and

social attention and least in response to competition over sports performance and attractiveness (see Table 5). In addition, there was a significant gender difference in confronting, $F(1, 235) = 18.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Girls ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.19$) reported more confronting in response to friendship competition than did boys ($M = 1.95$, $SD = .91$). See Table 5 for gender comparisons of confronting by domain.

Emotional closeness. An ANOVA testing for gender differences in emotional closeness in best friendships showed a significant gender difference in emotional closeness $F(1, 245) = 63.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$. Girls ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .92$) reported higher levels of emotional closeness than did boys ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .97$).

Pathways to Positive Friendship Quality: Path Analytic Model

The hypothesized relation between friendship competition and positive friendship quality was tested via a model in which domain-specific importance mediates the relation between domain-specific friendship competition and emotional reaction to the competition; in turn, emotional reaction is related to emotional closeness via coping responses utilized (see Figure 1). The model was estimated for friendship competition in each of the four domains (sports, academics, social attention, and attractiveness) using the maxim likelihood procedure in AMOS, controlling for general competitiveness within the friendship.

Results indicated that the hypothesized model provided a good fit to the data for three of the four domains: sports competition, χ^2 (10, N=247) = 14.44, $p = .15$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .04 (90% CI: .00, .09); academic competition, χ^2 (10, N=247) =

9.4, p = .49; CFI=1.0; RMSEA = .00 (90% CI: .00, .06); and competition for social attention, χ^2 (10, N=247) = 10.49, p = .34; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .01 (90% CI: .00, .07). Standardized path coefficients are presented for each domain in Figures 2 through 4. The model provided a poor fit to the data for competition over attractiveness, χ^2 (10, N=247) = 27.2, p = .01; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .09 (90% CI: .05, .12).

Gender differences in hypothesized model. To test for possible gender differences in the pathways, a multigroup path analysis was conducted for each domain. For each domain, a constrained model in which all paths were constrained to be equal across women and men was tested first. Next, an unconstrained model was tested in which all paths were allowed to vary between genders. A chi-square difference test was subsequently conducted. For all domains (sports, academics, and social attention), the chi-square difference test showed that the unconstrained model did not significantly fit the data better than the constrained model. Therefore, there are no gender differences in the relation among the variables for these domains.

Discussion

The present study investigated the relation between domain-specific friendship competition and emotional closeness. It was predicted that domain importance would mediate the relation between level of competition and emotional distress, which in turn would indirectly relate to emotional closeness via coping responses (confronting and peer social-support seeking). Results support the hypothesized model for three of the four domains (sports, academics, and social

attention), though patterns of path strength and significance differed by domain. Results do not support the hypothesized model for attractiveness.

Competition, Domain Importance, and Emotional Reaction

There were some differences across the three domains in the relation among friendship competition, domain importance, and emotional reaction. For sports competition, as predicted, domain importance fully mediated the relation between competition and emotional reaction. Sports competition predicted how important sports performance was to an individual's self-concept, which in turn positively predicted emotional distress. For academic competition, there was a significant relation between domain importance and emotional distress only. Level of importance placed on academic performance positively predicted emotional distress in response to academic competition. These results support James' (1892) Harter's (1990) models and are consistent with prior research that shows individuals tend to have negative reactions when their self-worth in self-relevant domains is threatened (e.g. Crocker, 2002; Crocker et al., 2003; Park & Crocker, 2008). Interestingly, for academic competition, level of competition did not predict emotional distress, either directly or indirectly. Academic performance was, by a large difference, rated by participants as the most important domain in which to excel. It is possible then, that academic competition is a highly salient form of competition to early adolescents. Therefore when it does occur, especially if highly valued, it may be upsetting regardless of the level of academic competitiveness within the friendship overall.

For social competition, level of competition and domain importance did not predict emotional distress. Individuals reported the most distress over social competition, but also rated it as the least important domain of the four. Perhaps there is something qualitatively different about competition over social attention in comparison to sports and academics. Sports and academics are inherently skill- and performance-based domains in which the outcome typically designates a clear "winner." In contrast, social competition tends to be less direct and to have a more ambiguous and subjective outcome. For example, the behaviors often associated with social competition tend to be indirectly aggressive and covert, such as social exclusion or gossiping (Crick, Nelson, Morales, Cullerton-Sen, Casas, & Hickman, 2001). Thus, it is possible that adolescents are upset by social competition because of the behaviors associated with it rather than the importance placed on garnering social attention for oneself. Therefore, adolescents may be upset by friendship competition in different domains for different reasons.

Coping and Emotional Closeness

The hypothesized model predicted that emotional distress in response to friendship competition would be related to emotional closeness within the friendship via two coping responses: peer social support seeking and confronting. In addition, it was hypothesized that peer social support seeking would be negatively related to emotional closeness while confronting would positively predict emotional closeness. The model was supported overall. However, patterns differed by domain. Peer social support seeking also played a different role than hypothesized.

For sports competition, emotional distress was indirectly related to emotional closeness via peer social support-seeking only. Additionally, contrary to expectations, peer social-support seeking positively predicted emotional closeness such that utilizing other peers for support regarding a best friendship problem over sports competitiveness was related to higher levels of emotional closeness in that best friendship. Research on early adolescent friendship competition shows that adolescents report a general expectation of competition "to-win" with their friends in sports and other games; however, they also tend to expect that the competition is "just for fun" and should be left behind when the game is over (Schneider et al, 2005). Thus, when an adolescent is upset over sports competition with his or her friend and confronts the friend about it, there is a possibility of being seen as a "sore loser" or over-reacting. Confronting one's friend over a sports competition, therefore, may make the situation worse. In contrast, discussing one's feelings with a peer provides a way to express feelings without potentially damaging the best friendship. Therefore, peer social-support seeking may be the most adaptive response in this situation and may benefit the friendship in the end.

Some different patterns were seen in the results for competition regarding academics and social attention. Emotional distress about competition in these domains was indirectly related to emotional closeness via both peer social support-seeking and confronting. However, confronting was a stronger predictor of emotional closeness than was social support-seeking, particularly when in response to distress over social competition. It is possible that although peer social support-seeking in

response to a best friendship problem allows the expression of emotional distress in a way that will help preserve the friendship, confronting one's friend may be a more important predictor of emotional closeness in domains where it may be more acceptable to become upset by competitiveness. Confronting one's friend not only allows for the expression of emotion, it also allows for constructive discussion of the issue, apologies, clearing up of any misunderstandings, and negotiation of future, potentially competitive, interactions. Thus, when emotional distress is more likely to be perceived as warranted, confronting may be the more beneficial strategy for managing emotions associated with competition.

Taken together, results show that friendship competition and the associated emotional distress can be beneficial for friendships if the distress is coped with effectively. This is in line with research that suggests that adolescents believe that some conflict can improve their friendship (Laursen, 1993). It is also in line with research suggesting that the process of conflict resolution can actually strengthen close friendships (Van Dorn, Branje, Hox, Meeus, 2009). Friendship problems have the potential to make adolescents aware of the vulnerability of their close friendships as well as help them become aware of how important their close friendships are. Thus, adolescents are motivated to cope with friendship problems in the best way possible, and coping effectively can help to maintain and even improve a friendship. This is consistent with research that shows social support-seeking over friend indirect aggression positively predicts friendship maintenance (Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

Although the hypothesized model did fit for sports, academics, and social competition, (with some notable differences) the model did not fit for competition over physical attractiveness. Adolescents reported competition over attractiveness occurred least often out of the four domains. Therefore, this kind of competition may be the least salient and least likely to have a lasting impact on the friendship during early adolescence. Research shows that only 38% of girls in seventh grade engage in body comparison with close friends, however that number increases to 72% by grade 10 (Schutz et. al, 2002). Thus it is possible that competition over physical attractiveness does not impact friendships in early adolescence but may become an issue later on.

Gender as a Moderator

Preliminary analyses indicated some mean level gender differences in the variables of interest that are important to note. There was a gender difference in friendship competition with boys reporting more competition overall than did girls. However, results show that this difference varied by domain. Boys were more competitive than were girls over sports and academics. Girls and boys were equally competitive with their friends over social attention and physical attractiveness. This is consistent with prior research showing that boys are more competitive in their friendships over academics, sports, and other games or contests in which there is a clear "winner" than are girls (Schneider et al., 2005). Research has suggested that girls are competitive over social attention and physical attractiveness, particularly with their friends (e.g., Eder, 1985; Merten, 2004; Schutz et al., 2002). However, to

my knowledge, this is the first study to directly examine competitiveness across the different domains within both girls' and boys' close friendships. The findings suggest that girls can be just as competitive as boys depending on the context of the competitive behavior. Results also highlight the importance of studying both boys and girls when examining all forms of competition. Prior theory and research discussing social competition has largely focused on girls only and suggested that girls are more socially competitive than are boys (e.g. Underwood, 2003). Yet, the present results suggest otherwise.

It appears that boys are more competitive in their friendships than are girls in domains in which the competition is more direct and there is a clear winner (i.e. sports and academics). However, boys and girls are equally competitive with their friends in domains in which the competition is less direct and more ambiguous (i.e. social attention and attractiveness). These are domains in which competition is often masked with indirectly aggressive behaviors such as gossip (Crick et al., 2001; Merten, 2004). Given that girls tend to be uncomfortable with direct competition (Benensen, Roy, Waite, Goldbaum, Linders, & Simpson, 2002) and are more likely than boys to consider social relationships while competing (Hughes, 1988), girls may be more likely than boys avoid friendship competition in domains in which they *appear* competitive. In contrast, girls may be more likely to engage in competition in domains in which the competitive behaviors are more covert and can be concealed.

Consistent with prior research (e.g. Rose & Rudolph, 2006), there was also a gender difference in emotional distress associated with friendship competition. Girls

reported more emotional distress than did boys, particularly for competition over academics, social attention, and physical attractiveness. There was no gender difference in emotional distress over sports. Perhaps because there is an expectation of competitive behaviors when engaged in sports activities and competitions, girls may be less likely to become upset in response in comparison to other domains. In support of this, both girls and boys reported the highest levels of sports competition in comparison to all other domains as well as the lowest levels of emotional distress in response. In contrast, the domains of academics, social attention, and attractiveness are not inherently competitive domains. When competition occurs in those domains, it may be more upsetting, particularly for girls, given their tendency to place a higher value on intimate dyadic relationships and social interactions within the peer group in comparison to boys (Closson, 2009; Strough & Berg, 2000).

Of final note, the average level of friendship competition reported by both girls and boys was relatively low. This supports Berndt's (1982) proposal that as they enter early adolescence, girls and boys begin to develop a more mature understanding of reciprocity and equality in friendships; they also begin to understand that competition can have a negative impact on their close friendships. However, it is possible that participants were reluctant to report high levels of competition in their friendships for a number of reasons. First, many competitive behaviors can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Early adolescents may *think* that their friend is being competitive with them but may not be definitively sure. Hence, they may not want to report it because of perceived ambiguity. Second, early adolescents may be unwilling

to report high competitiveness in their close friendships due to concerns related to social desirability. For example, research on sports competitiveness in early adolescence suggests that social desirability is related to reported competitive orientation, especially for girls (Grossbard, Cumming, Standage, Smith, & Smoll, 2007). Competition tends to have a negative connotation, particularly within close friendships. Thus, early adolescents may report lower levels of competition within their friendships than may actually exist. Additionally, girls may under-report friendship competition more than boys do.

Although there were some average gender differences in the variables of interest, there were no gender differences in the pathways of the hypothesized model for any of the domains. Thus, it appears that competition is related to emotional closeness in similar ways for girls and boys. Other studies have also found there might be average gender differences in certain behaviors, but those behaviors might lead to outcomes in similar ways. For example, Camarena, Sarigiani, and Petersen (1990) found that self disclosure was more likely in girls' friendships than in boys' friendships. However, self disclosure was related to feelings of emotional closeness towards friends in similar ways for boys and for girls.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

The present study provides some novel contributions to the body of research on friendships in early adolescence. First, it adds to the limited research on friendship competition. Friendship competition is an important process to better understand, given the increasing importance of social status and popularity in early adolescence,

as well as the increased tendency to gauge one's own competency through comparisons with friends and peers. Additionally, the present study suggests that competition may not be as detrimental to friendships as previously thought, particularly if the associated emotions are managed well.

Second, the present study examines competition across four different domains that tend to be important in early adolescence. Research on friendship competition typically focuses on overall competition in one or two domains (e.g. Schneider et. al, 2007). The present results suggest that there are qualitative differences across domains, including average level differences as well as differences in how the competition relates to emotional distress and qualities of the friendship. Thus, what applies for competition in one domain may not necessarily apply to competition in other domains. This is important to note and warrants further consideration in future research.

Finally, structural models were used to examine how friendship competition relates to emotional closeness within the friendship, taking into account multiple interrelated factors. Prior research has examined early adolescent friendship competition in relation to friendship qualities, with little consideration for some of the underlying processes that may explain this relation (e.g. Schneider et. al, 2005). However, the present results suggest that friendship competition may be a more complicated process than previously conceptualized.

While the present study provides some important insight into friendship competition, there are some limitations to note. First, measures were all self-report

and retrospective. Future research can utilize a mix of survey and observational methods regarding competition, particularly social competition given its less direct and more ambiguous nature, to get a better understanding of what friendship competition looks like and how individuals feel about it at the time it occurs. Lab studies can be designed to observe pairs of close friends in situations that can elicit competitiveness in different domains. For example, friends can be given a joint task that increases the relative salience of the peer status of the participants, and verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as indirect aggression can be observed (e.g. McGuire, Parker, & Kruse, 2010). Additionally, a daily dairy methodology can be used to get adolescents' immediate thoughts, feelings, and responses to incidences of friendship competition when it occurs in their lives (e.g. Van Doorn et. al, 2009).

A second methodological limitation is the broad nature of the peer social-support seeking measure. Peer social support-seeking included items that assessed both emotional support and instrumental support. It is possible that differentiating between the two types of social support will yield a more nuanced understanding of why social support-seeking is an adaptive coping strategy for friendship competition, particularly for competition related to sports and games. Given that expressing distress over sports competition within a friendship can be seen as being a "sore loser," it is possible that it is emotional support only from peers that is beneficial, as simply venting one's feelings may be what is needed. Additionally, research shows that adolescents have a variety of social goals when utilizing other peers for support in response to peer stressors. For example, some individuals utilize peer social

support for constructive purposes such as to solve the problem (a social development goal), but other individuals are more concerned with how they appear and utilize peer social support to enhance or protect their reputation and image (a social demonstration goal) (Shin & Ryan, 2012). Future research may want to take social goal into account when examining peer social support seeking in response to incidences of friendship competition. Consistent with the present research, peer social support seeking with a development goal may be positively related to friendship quality. Yet peer social-support seeking with a reputation-related goal may be negatively related to friendship quality, as it implies that individuals may be more concerned with how others view them rather than how the competition affects their friendship.

Third, the confronting items did not take into account the manner in which a friend is approached. Addressing the problem with one's friend can be done in a variety of ways. Close friends are typically highly valued. Therefore, young adolescents would likely approach a close friend with the intent of resolving the problem and improving any tensions that exist. However, some adolescents may approach their friend in a more hostile manner and express their feelings in a negative way. Prior research on coping with interpersonal stressors via confronting does not delineate the two (e.g. Lee-Bagley, Preece, & DeLongis, 2005); confronting in a positive, relationship-focused manner may positively relate to friendship quality while confronting in a more hostile way may negatively relate to friendship quality.

A fourth limitation is that all measures were from one member of the friendship pair. Therefore, analyses were done for only one member of the friendship dyad. When examining interpersonal processes, the nature of the dyad is especially important (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Each person may have different perceptions and experiences of the same friendship event. For example, one partner may be highly upset by competition, confront the friend, and report feeling closer to that friend afterwards. Yet the other partner may see the competition as normative and report lower emotional closeness after the confrontation. Thus, future research should take a dyadic approach and gather information from both friends.

One final caveat is that conclusions about causality cannot be made. Therefore, longitudinal associations should be examined in the future, using either a shorter or longer time frame (e.g. Van Doorn et. al, 2009). It is possible that coping, particularly confronting, is more effective and beneficial for the friendship when it is done relatively soon after the incidence of competition. After time has lapsed and allowed the possibility for rumination and increased distress, coping may be less effective. Additionally, coping behaviors in response to competition may have a greater impact on perceptions of friendship quality shortly afterwards, but over longer periods of time may be less important as other friendship events occur.

In addition to addressing the limitations discussed above, future research may want to examine adolescents' reasoning across domains for why friendship competition is upsetting. The present findings point to the possibility that competition is upsetting for different reasons based on what domain the competition is occurring.

Qualitative interviews can yield some insight into this (e.g. Schneider et. al, 2005). Future research should also investigate what role relative competency in a particular domain plays in emotional distress in response to competition. It is possible that competition may be more intense and upsetting within pairs of friends that are closely matched in performance, but it is also possible that competition is more upsetting when an individual is on the losing end consistently.

Summary

Although researchers have theorized that competition is inconsistent with the emotional support that close friendships require (e.g. Rubin, 1985), the present study suggests otherwise. Competition may be beneficial for emotional closeness within best friendships if coped with effectively. The present study also highlights the importance of taking domain of competition into account when examining competition within close friendships, as some notable differences based on domain emerged, pointing to qualitative differences across domains. Furthermore, the model was similar for girls and boys. Thus, the present study supports Sullivan's (1953) proposal that some level of competition may be inevitable and not harmful at all.

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Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations of Levels of Friendship Competition by Domain*

Domain	Overall	Girls	Boys	*t*	*d*
		(n = 133)	(*n* = 114)		
Sports	$2.23(1.09)_a$	1.84 (1.03)	2.61 (1.00)	-5.9***	.75
Academics	$1.75\ (.91)_b$	1.58 (.89)	1.92 (.95)	-2.95**	.38
Social	$1.77\ (.97)_b$	1.61 (.91)	1.74 (.90)	-1.10	.14
Attractiveness	$1.59\ (.87)_c$	1.57 (.92)	1.61 (.82)	-.36	.05

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Note. Means within the same column with different subscripts indicate significant differences by domain.

Table 2. *Means and Standard Deviations of Domain Importance*

Domain	**Overall**	**Girls**	**Boys**	***t***	***d***
		(n = 133)	(*n* = 114)		
Sports	$3.37(1.20)_a$	3.26 (1.16)	3.47 (1.24)	-1.40	.18
Academics	$4.53\ (.65)_b$	4.56 (.56)	4.49 (.74)	.82	.10
Social	$2.94\ (1.08)_c$	2.83 (1.06)	3.06 (1.09)	-1.67	.14
Attractiveness	$3.38\ (1.00)_a$	3.43 (.92)	3.32 (1.00)	.81	.21

Note. Means within the same column with different subscripts indicate significant differences by domain.

Table 3. *Means and Standard Deviations of Emotional Distress by Domain*

Domain	Overall	Girls	Boys	*t*	*d*
		(n = 133)	(*n* = 114)		
Sports	1.90 $(1.15)_a$	2.02 (1.20)	1.78 (1.07)	1.70	.22
Academics	1.95 $(1.03)_a$	2.21 (1.09)	1.69 (.87)	3.98***	.51
Social	2.45 $(1.13)_b$	2.67 (1.13)	2.22 (1.09)	2.92**	.37
Attractiveness	2.07 $(1.21)_a$	2.40 (1.28)	1.75 (1.04)	4.30***	.56

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Note. Means within the same column with different subscripts indicate significant differences by domain.

Table 4. *Means and Standard Deviations of Social-Support Seeking by Domain*

Domain	**Overall**	**Girls**	**Boys**	***t***	***d***
		(n = 133)	(*n* = 114)		
Sports	1.95 $(1.25)_a$	2.26 (1.25)	1.64 (.93)	4.56***	.59
Academics	2.26 $(1.21)_b$	2.58 (1.26)	1.95 (1.05)	4.30***	.55
Social	2.42 $(1.34)_c$	2.76 (1.39)	2.08 (1.16)	4.29***	.55
Attractiveness	2.12 $(1.25)_d$	2.46 (1.28)	1.73 (1.04)	4.26***	.55

*** $p < .001$

Note. Means within the same column with different subscripts indicate significant differences by domain.

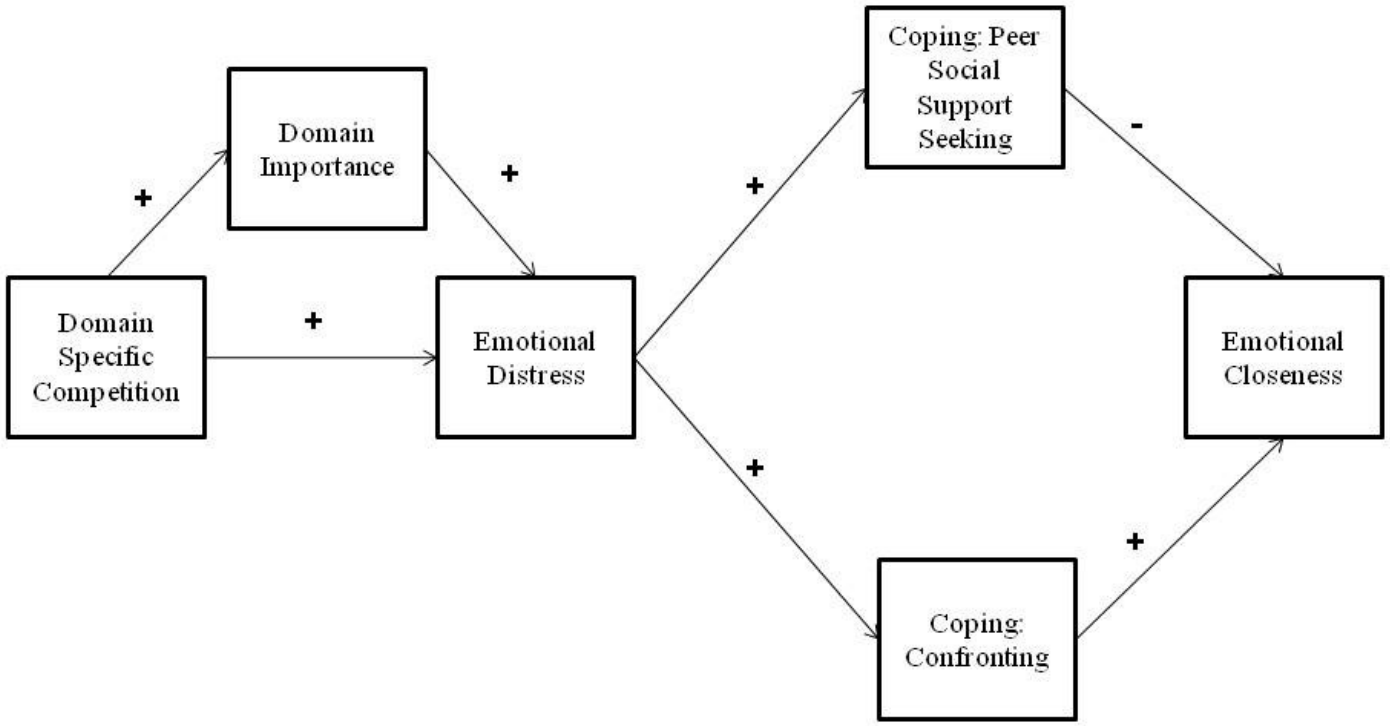
Table 5. *Means and Standard Deviations of Confronting by Domain*

Domain	**Overall**	**Girls**	**Boys**	***t***	***d***
		(n = 133)	(*n* = 114)		
Sports	2.00 $(1.20)_a$	2.19 (1.29)	1.81 (1.05)	2.54*	.33
Academics	2.46 $(1.26)_b$	2.81(1.34)	2.11 (1.02)	4.90***	.63
Social	2.37$(1.22)_b$	2.67 (1.31)	2.08 (1.02)	4.11***	.53
Attractiveness	2.14 $(1.29)_a$	2.48 (1.35)	1.80 (1.09)	4.29***	.55

*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$

Note. Means within the same column with different subscripts indicate significant differences by domain.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model



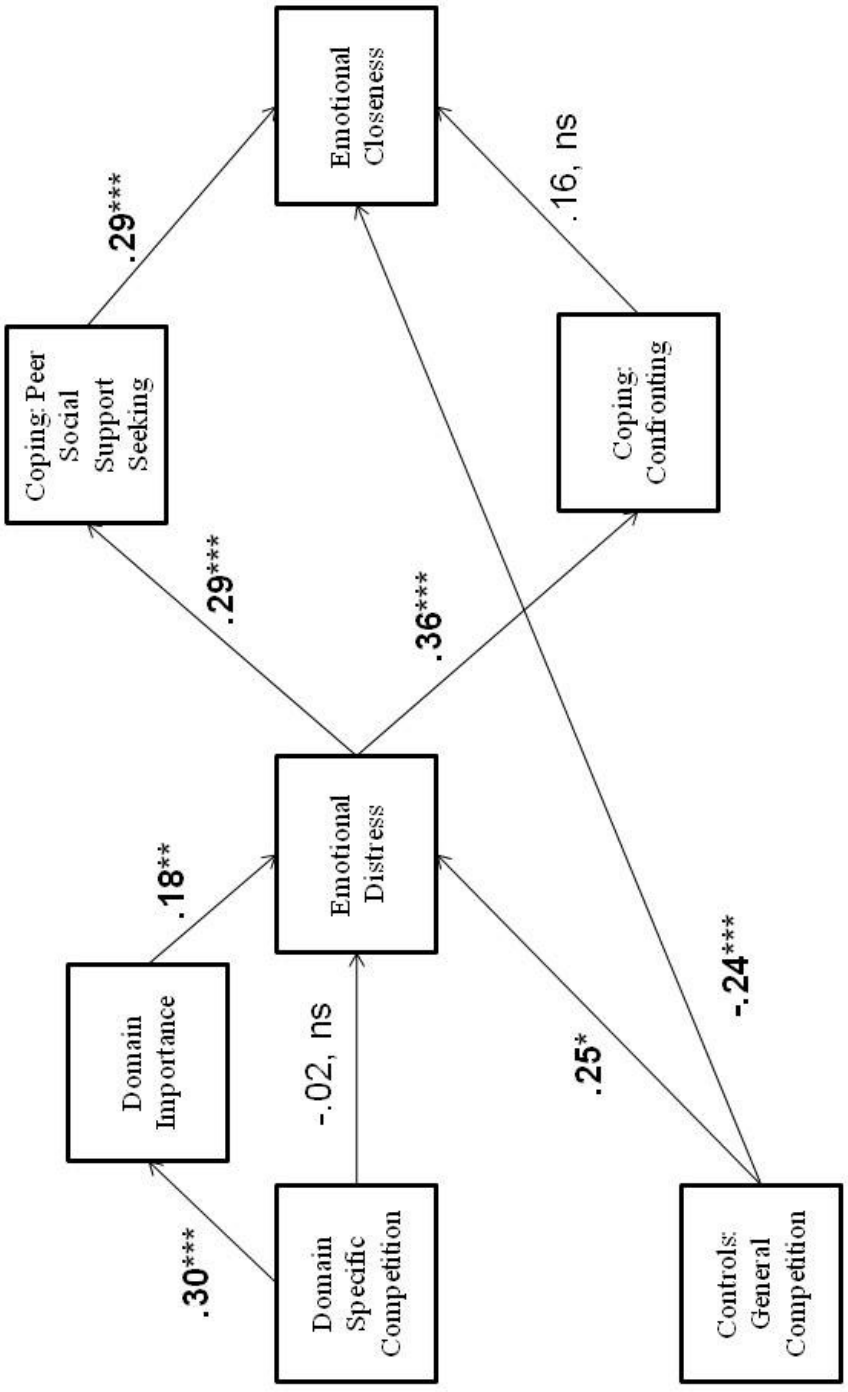
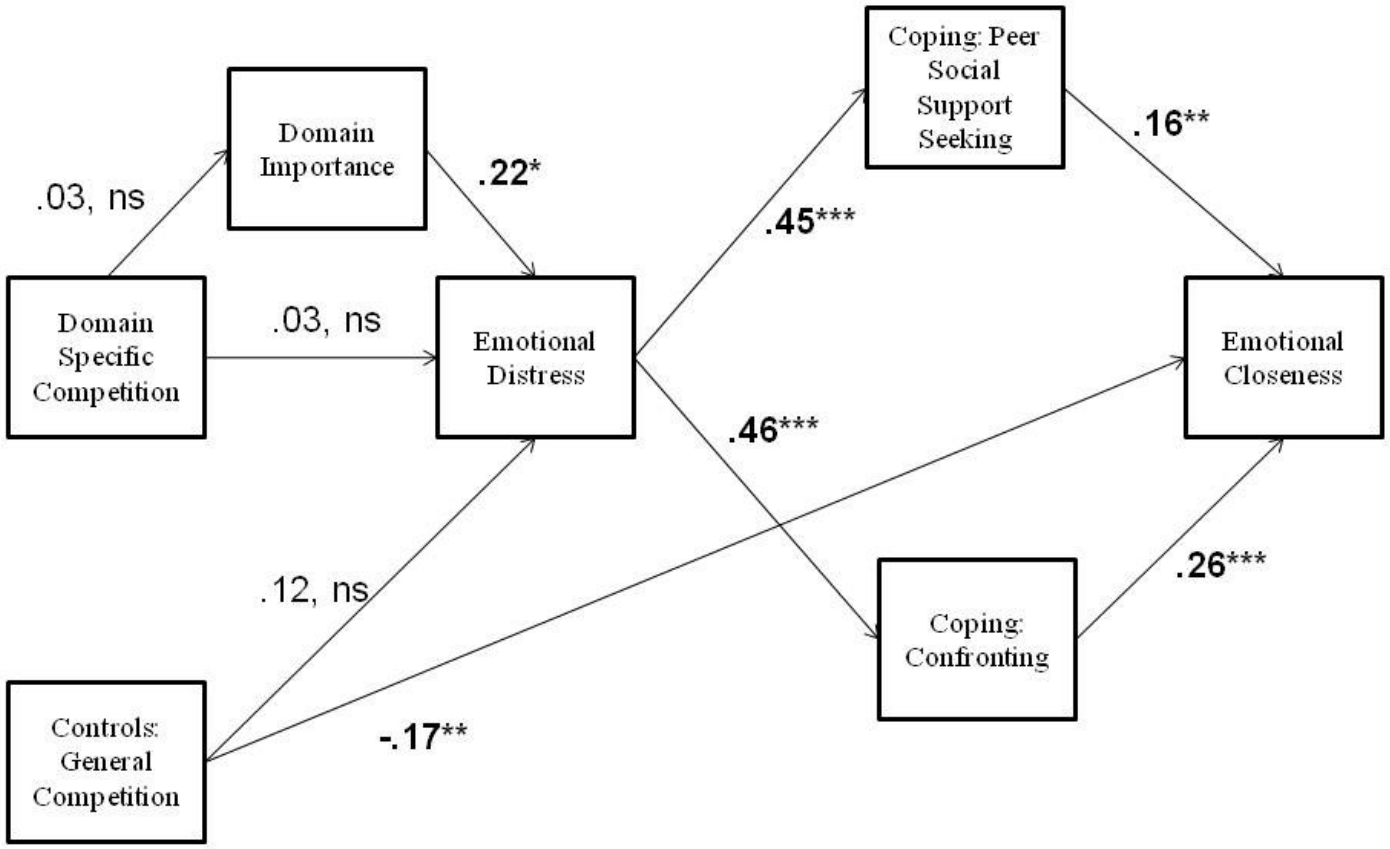


Figure 2. Sports Competition

Figure 3. Academic Competition



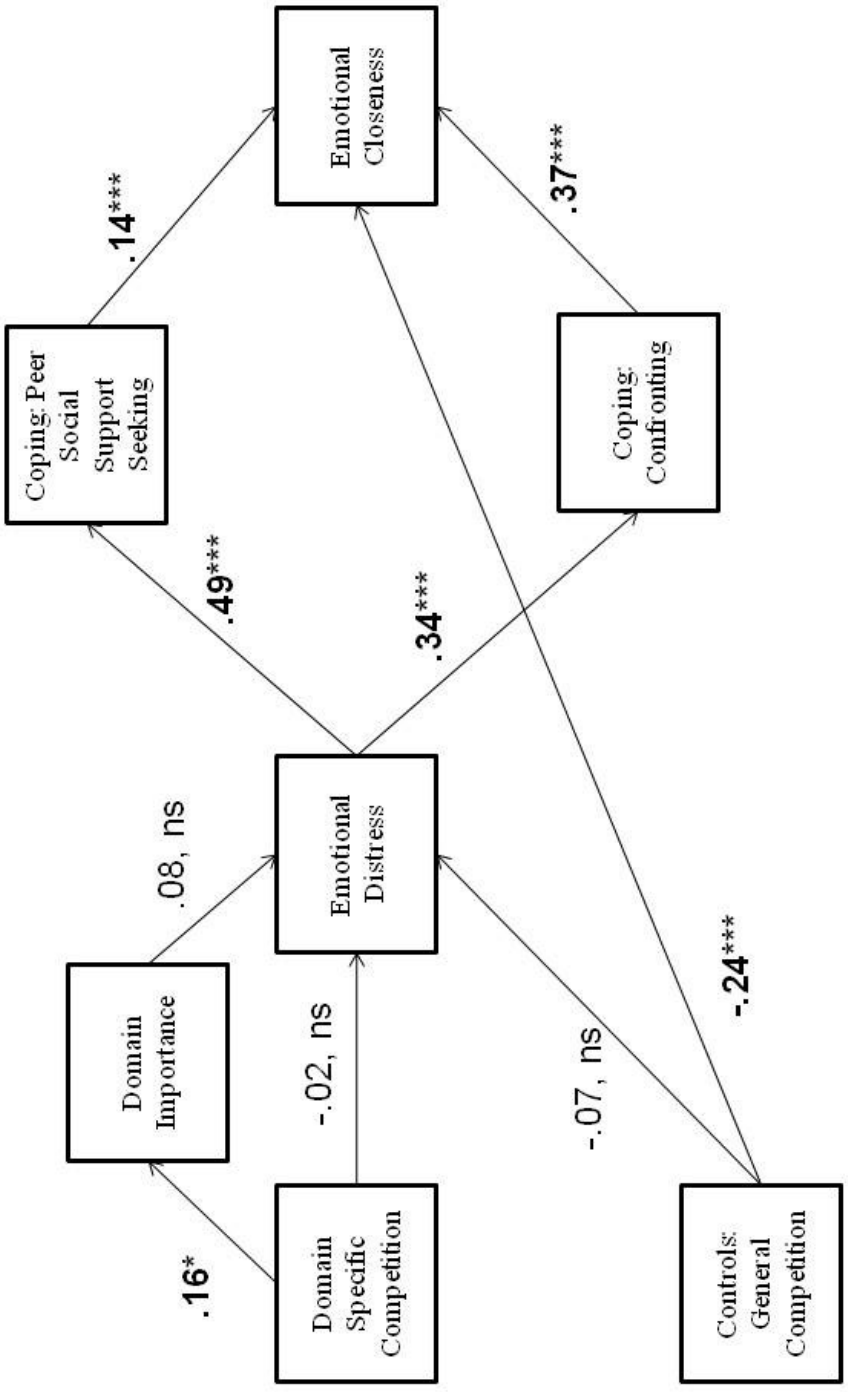


Figure 4. Social Competition