Past Your Bedtime? How Much Sleep Are First Generation Students Getting Compared to Their Peers?

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ABSTRACT

Do first-generation college students sleep less than their peers? College students whose parents did not earn a bachelor’s degree have less support from family members and therefore are at a disadvantage. Getting less sleep may cause poor physical and mental health which can lead to poor academic performance, so it is important that they have the proper resources necessary to succeed. I propose that first generation college students report getting fewer hours of sleep and would prefer to get more sleep at night compared to their colleagues. To analyze the relationships, I looked at a sample of 564 college students who participated in the 2006 NCAA Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College (GOAL) survey conducted at Skidmore College. I found that first-generation college students do in fact sleep fewer hours than non-first-generation students and that first-generation students are more likely to be non-white. Results also showed that juniors and seniors prefer to sleep more hours than underclass students and that as hours slept for a student decreases, preferred sleeping time increases. The results confirm that first generation students get less sleep than their peers but does not support that they prefer more time sleeping time. These findings suggest that colleges and universities should implement more programs that cater to the needs of first-generation students, as they do not have the privilege of leaning on their family for academic support or managing their social life at a higher education institution in general.
Past Your Bedtime?

How Much Sleep Are First Generation Students Getting Compared to Their Peers?

Higher education in the United States is becoming a goal for more individuals because there is a higher demand for it in the workforce. However, getting a degree is not attainable for everyone, especially when it comes to minority and first-generation college students. Many students that come from disenfranchised socio-economic backgrounds are not provided the proper information, funds, or guidance to apply to college. These communities are usually underfunded, and this is a product of the systematic inequality that our society is built on. First generation college students are those who face different challenges as they do not have the same network or resources as students who have had family members or parents obtain a college degree. Their backgrounds will impact their college experience immensely, from class participation, to their feeling like they belong on campus. I would like to explore student success by analyzing how much sleep first-generation students are getting compared to others. I believe that the amount of sleep students get can convey a lot about their college experience and how much they can accomplish in their academic lives.

Fulfilling the “American Dream” is something most Americans aim for, but due to the American societies’ uneven distribution of resources it is a dream that looks different for everyone. Minorities and individuals that come from under resourced communities continue to have difficulty trying to play catch up because of the systems that continue to oppress them. My research will hopefully continue the conversation about the inequalities the minority in this country face and how this impacts their lives as college students.
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Many first-generation students do not have the guidance and support that other students have since they are paving the road themselves and this not only affects their undergraduate career but their professional life after they obtain their degrees. Being a successful student in higher education requires skills that depend on the student’s school and home environment. Students with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to know how to, for example, manage their time better, have a better understanding of the topics they are studying, are able to rely on their parents or family members for support, and just have a better understanding of what it means to go and participate in college. Being able to have a good night’s sleep many times suggests that you have the skills and knowledge necessary to complete tasks and assignments in a timely manner before going to bed. Therefore, I hypothesize that first-generation college students sleep fewer hours in a typical weekday. I also hypothesize that first-generation college students prefer to spend more time sleeping than they currently are.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu argued that society’s dominant classes do not only retain their status by economics alone, but through different forms of capital. He wrote, “Capital is accumulated labor…Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible” (Bourdieu 1986:83). He explained economic capital to be “immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bourdieu 1986:84).
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Social Capital Theory

A person’s social capital essentially is “made up of social obligations (“connections”), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility” (Bourdieu 1986:84). Further literature delves deeper into how social capital is developed in one’s family; “social capital theory also addresses the relationship between nonmaterial resources and mobility…scholars make use of the terms family-based social capital, and family social capital as a subset of social capital, following Coleman (1990), who placed social capital in the context of the family: ‘Social capital is the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organizations and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or a young person’” (Gofen 2009:106). Furthermore, scholars who follow this notion view the family as one of the contexts for generating and accumulating social capital (Wildhagen 2015).

Cultural Capital Theory

Pierre Bourdieu (1986:84) defines “cultural capital to be…institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications.” Wildhagen (2015:288) continues to explain cultural capital in his article stating that cultural capital “focuses on the power to classify certain cultural practices and world views as legitimate as key to understanding how social class inequality works. For example, schools are primary arbiters of class inequality because they evaluate students according to purportedly neutral standards that are actually reflective of middle-class cultural practices and world views.” Cultural knowledge that serves as the currency to navigate a culture and alters our experiences and the opportunities available to us. This theory focuses on the embodied, objectified and institutionalized states of capital and is significantly important in assisting us in understanding inequality in education and other social structures. Bourdieu
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(1986:84) continues and says that it is “possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions.”

Students whose parents went to college have their experience as social capital. These students have their parents as a resource and have access to their professional networks. Parents with a degree are able to help their child navigate college’s social and academic life because they have that capital and knowledge themselves. Having had a college education, these parents also have access to professional careers and higher paying jobs, meaning that they also hold the economic capital to provide their child with academic support such as SAT prep classes, private tutors, private school tuition, the materials needed to do well in school, among many other things.

What identifies first generation students is that no one in their families has gone to and finished college or university. First generation students are entering a new environment on a college campus, facing new social spaces and interactions such as those with their roommates and their professors, and advisors. Therefore, I hypothesize that first-generation college students sleep fewer hours and rather sleep more hours than other students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study analyzes how first-generation students’ sleeping patterns differ from students whose parents have a college education in order to analyze how one’s social and cultural capital affects a student’s performance. I hypothesize that first-generation students having less social and cultural capital sleep fewer hours on a typical weekday and I also hypothesize that would
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prefer a longer night’s sleep. There are numerous studies that explore the first-generation experience and many others that look at sleeping patterns and how sleep affects one’s mental health and day to day performance. However, very few studies explore both sleep and first-generation students. Therefore, the literature is reviewed in the following two themes.

Student Experience and Academic Performance

The community of first-generation students has changed plenty in the last few years. Four decades ago the first-generation population was “predominantly white, working class, baby-boomers whose parents were often first and second generation European immigrants” (Merritt 2008:45). Now the population of first-generation students is made up of not only white students but also by people of color, as the percentage of people of color in universities increases. In the last 10 years, the number of Latinx students that attend college has increased by 22 percent (Corona et al. 2016). In addition, interest in the first-generation student experience has increased due to the decrease in the percentage of college students who identify as first generation from 39 percent in 1971 to 16 percent in 2005 (Wildhagen 2015). Along with the students, the environment and society students find themselves has also changed making the first generation experience a different one.

There are many factors that attribute to the first-generation experience that impact their performance, and there are various studies that have explored what students who are the first in their families to go to college struggle through (Garza and Fullerton 2018; Hurd et al. 2018; Keller and Tillman 2008; Merritt 2008; Rondini 2016). One of the biggest hurdles these students face is the lack of support and resources they need to help them with their day to day as students in a higher education setting. A past study adds, “Finally, participants indicated the need to understand the college system, college standards, and the culture of the college, and that lacking
this knowledge put them at a disadvantage. As supportive as families were, they were not able to offer direction or advice because they themselves had not attended college” (Merritt 2008:49).

First generation students feel more out of place because of their overwhelming need for guidance with time management skills to balance their academic and social life and reading and writing skills to excel academically (Merritt 2008; Rondini 2016). Their identity as first generation becomes a burden because they don’t have the networks of aid and resources that other students have at their fingertips; “it is expected that underrepresented college students attending elite predominantly white institutions experience greater vulnerability to physical distress as a direct consequence of chronic exposure to stressors specific to their marginalized status” (Hurd et.al. 2018:1101). Therefore, “To comprehensively understand why first-generation students lag behind their peers in higher education, assessments of student persistence should consider environmental factors unique to this group that exist outside of the academic environment but are nonetheless cornerstone to it” (Garza and Fullerton 2018:165).

First generation students can experience more pressure due to the lack of guidance and the need to succeed to support their families as having a college degree is becoming vital when seeking professional and high paying employment opportunities necessary to “live a life” (Beasley 2017; Merritt 2008; Garza and Fullerton 2018). Going to college was not a choice for first generation students, it was necessary in attempt to push their families to a higher economic standing. First generation students must think about and get through obstacles that non first generation students will never face.

Sleep Health
The college experience is one unlike high school; students must learn to manage their
time and independence, especially with a different course load, environment and schedule
(Barone 2014; Doane et al. 2015; Galambos et al. 2011). At the beginning of one’s college career
it is difficult to manage all the changes and many students do poorly. As a result, they end up
cutting down on the one of the only things that they can control, the number of hours they sleep
at night (Coveney 2014); “If students cannot adjust credit hours due to bureaucratic limitations,
and cannot adjust working hours because they can only reduce their living expenses so far, they
adjust the other thing that takes requires substantial time—their sleep” (Barone 2014:160) It is
more likely for lower class students to have poorer sleeping habits than upper class students
(Barone 2014; Doane et al. 2015; Galambos et al. 2011) because they are still adjusting to their
new academic demands as well as the changes to their families, friend groups and living
arrangements (Galambos et al. 2010).

Results show that lack of sleep or poor sleep habits contributes to poor academic
performance and a lower grade point average as well as poor mental health (Baert et al. 2015;
Barone 2014; Coveney 2014; Doane et al. 2015; Famodu et al. 2018; Galambos et al. 2011;
Short et al. 2013; Sladek and Doane 2015; Tavernier and Willoughby 2015). Studies show that
lack of sleep results in poor working memory performance, depression (Short et al. 2013),
obesity, can even develop cancer in the long run, and is associated with impaired cognitive
performance (Coveney 2014). Students cannot succeed running low on sleep, it is not possible
and in fact is more harmful to their health not just their grades.

Past literature on the first-generation student experience show that these young adults do
not have the tools that other students do in order to succeed academically and professionally in
college and beyond. First generation students are more likely to pertain to the low working class
and therefore get through college differently and with a different drive than middle- and upper-class students. These students face different adversities that can essentially lead to loss of sleep and studies show that an unhealthy sleeping pattern leads to a lower grade point average and various health risks.

METHODS

For my research I used the survey data from the National Collegiate Association’s (NCAA) Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students in College (GOAL) 2006 study. The NCAA asked students through the GOAL survey about their academic experience, their social life, health, athletic responsibilities, time commitments and their personal demographics. There were two different editions of the survey handed out, one had questions specific to athletes and their experience as student athletes, and another with those questions replaced with ones about alcohol, drugs and gambling that non-athlete answered. The goal of this survey was to access student experience and compare the experiences of student athletes and non-student athletes. The survey was administered online and through hard copies to the 2,392 students enrolled in Skidmore College that year, and with a response rate of 23 percent, 564 students responded to the survey, 269 were athletes and 295 were not. For an accurate analysis, I deleted missing data through listwise missing data deletion. All data that did not apply, had no answer, and “don’t know” responses were removed. The data I analyzed for my research had a sample size of 432 students (N=432). For more information about the survey, see the NCAA’s website, available at www.ncaa.org.

In order to measure the dependent variables that both focus on the respondent’s sleep health, I analyzed responses from two questions about sleep. The first dependent variable, typical weekday sleep, is based on responses from the question asks the students “While school was in
session during the past semester picture the weekday (Monday-Friday) that most felt like your ‘typical’ day on campus. On that day, how many hours did you spend on each of the following activities?” and then prompts them to fill in the hours they slept from 1=0 hours, up to 9=8+ hours. This variable was recoded from the original so that the number of hours matched the value the answer choice was given. Therefore 0=0 hours, 1=1 hour, 2=2 hours, 3=3 hours, 4=4 hours, 5=5 hours, 6=6 hours, 7=7 hours, 8=8+ hours.

The second dependent variable, preferred sleeping time, was based on responses from the question, “If you could, would you prefer to spend more or less time in each of these areas while in college?” to which students chose between five answer choices. This variable was recoded so that the lowest values corresponded to preferring to sleep much less time and the highest value preferring to sleep much more time. The values were 1=Much less time, 2=A little less time, 3=OK with current time, 4=A little more time, and 5=Much more time.

Being a first-generation student assumes that the student is the first person in their family to attend college. The student is going through the process without guidance, at least from family, on the application process, college life, standardized testing, among many other factors. The independent variable, first generation college student, is measured by the question “What is the highest level of education that your parent(s) have completed?” To this question answer values are: 1=Did not finish high school, 2=Graduated from high school, 3=Attended college but did not complete degree, 4=Completed an associate’s degree (A.A., A.S., etc.), 5=Completed a bachelor’s degree (B.A., B.S., etc.), 6=Completed a master’s degree (M.A., M.S., etc.), 7=Completed a doctoral degree (PhD., J.D., M.D., etc.). For my analysis I dummied the original into 0=Not first generation, compiling answer values 5 through 7, and 1=First generation, incorporating answer choices 1 through 4.
The first control variable is upper-class student has been recoded to a dummy variable so that the values are 0= lower class students and 1=upper class students. The next control variable is athlete which determined if the respondent was an athlete or not, and this variable was dummied so that 0=not student athlete, and 1= student athlete. The following control variable I analyzed was gender which was dummied so that 0=men, and 1=women. The last control variable used in this study is race, which was recoded and dummied so that 0=non-white and 1=white.

FINDINGS

Univariate Results

Table 1 shows the mean, median, and standard deviation for all the variables.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

As seen above, the mean for first generation students is 0.132, in other words, on average, participants in the population were not first generation since being not first generation is coded 0 and the mean is closer to 1. The median is 0 and the standard deviation is 0.339, making the distribution very skewed non-first generation. Figure 1 is a representation of the independent variable and illustrates that the majority of the population were non-first-generation college students. There are only 13.2 percent of the students whose parent’s highest level of education was at most an associate degree.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Based on Table 1, students’ score on the preferred sleep time scale is on average a 3.95 or “Ok with current time” but closer to 4 which is “a little more time” sleeping. The median for this
variable is 4, and the standard deviation is 0.809. Figure 2 demonstrates this dependent variable, preferred sleeping time. Only 0.5 percent prefer much less time sleeping, and 1.9 percent of respondents would rather a little less time sleeping. The majority of the participants, 70.7 percent of students, wanted at least a little more time to sleep, and 26.95 wanted much more time to sleep. There was a 27.1 percent of students that were fine with the amount of time they sleep at night.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Students in this sample slept on average about 6.58 hours on a typical weekday, the median number of hours is 7 and the standard deviation is 1.252 hours. Figure 3 illustrates the first dependent variable which measures the hours participants reported they slept on a typical weekday. 45.1 percent of students get seven hours of sleep on a typical weekday and 18.8 percent get eight or more hours. However, 35.9 percent of college students get six or less hours of sleep on a typical school night, 14.4 percent get 5 or less.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

The mean for the variable for class year is 0.51, the median is 1, and the standard deviation is 0.500 as seen on Table 1. Since this is a dummy variable, from this information we can conclude that half of the population are under-class and the other half is upper-class students. Figure 4 shows half of the sample is composed of upper-class students and the rest are first and second year students.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

The results on Table 1 show something similar for the variable Athlete; the mean is 0.48, median 0 and standard deviation is 0.5. Therefore, about half of the sample are student athletes and the other are not and this is illustrated on Figure 5. There is a difference between the means
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and medians because here might be a slight difference in the total number of students after deleting missing data.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

The gender variable on Table 1 shows that the sample was more populated by women than male students as women for this dummy variable is coded 0, and the mean is .66, the median is 1, and the standard deviation is 0.473. Figure 6 shows the third control variable, gender. The graph shows that 66.4 percent of the students surveyed were women and 33.6 percent were men.

[Insert Figure 7 about here]

The last control variable is race, and this variable has a mean of 0.86, a median of 1 and a standard deviation of 0.344 according to Table 1. Figure 7 conveys that only 13.7 of the sample self-identified as non-white or a person of color, and 86.3 percent was white.

Bivariate Results

Table 2 illustrates the analysis first generation college students, dependent and control variables at the bivariate level. Since none of the relationships between the variables are above .7, there is no issue of multicollinearity. The first relationship between student’s preferred sleeping time and the hours the student slept on a typical weekday has a negative and moderate correlation of -.279 that is statistically significant at the \( p > .05 \) level. Therefore, as a students’ hours slept on a typical weeknight increases their score on the preferred sleeping time scale decreases. The next statistically significant relationship is between the independent variable first generation status and the dependent variable hours slept on a typical week night. The correlation coefficient of -.148 shows a weak negative relationship, so on average first generation students
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sleep less on a typical weekday. There are no statistically significant relationships between hours slept on a typical weekday and upper-class status, athlete status, gender and race.

The next variables that have statistical significance are dependent variable regarding the student’s preferred time sleeping and their class year. The correlation coefficient .096 is weak and positive showing a relationship which suggests that on average under-class students prefer more sleep than upper-class students. First generation status, student athlete status, gender and race do not share a statistically significant relationship with student’s preferred sleeping time.

The relationship between variables first generation college student and race is statistically significant with a correlation coefficient of -.323. Since the relationship is moderate and negative, the results show that on average white people are less likely to be first generation students. There is no statistically significant relationship between being first generation and one’s gender, athlete status, or class year. Similarly, the control variable upper-class student has no relationship with being a student athlete, gender and race.

The student’s athlete status shows a statistically significant relationship with both gender and race. The correlation coefficient between student athlete and gender is -.139, showing in a weak and negative relationship that can be analyzed as on average women are less likely to be student athletes. The correlation coefficient between student athlete and race is .100, which is weak, so we can say that on average student athletes are more likely to be white. There is no statistically significant relationship between race and gender.

Multivariate Results
The multivariate analysis shown in Table 3 gives us more insight into the relationship between the dependent variables and the independent and control variables. The $R^2$ of the first model indicates that 2.8 percent of the variation in the dependent variable hours slept is explained by independent variable first generation. The first model is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, with an $F$ of 2.482. The independent variable first generation is the strongest and only statistically significant predictor of a student’s hours slept ($\beta = -.137$). Therefore, we can conclude that controlling for all other variables, first generation students sleep fewer hours than their peers and being first generation has the strongest effect on how many hours a student sleeps at night. The second model is not statistically significant and has a $F$ of 1.970.

DISCUSSION

Past literature expressed that first-generation students perform in different ways and at different levels than student’s who have college graduate parents (Garza and Fullerton 2018; Merritt 2008). The literature coincides with the results of this study since they show students do sleep less as only 20 percent of teens in the United States sleeps the recommended amount (Winsler et al. 2015) and in particular first generation college students have less time to sleep due to the lack of resources they have and their socioeconomic status that creates a financial strain which causes students to put add working hours to their schedules. Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital theory express that the difference in student academic and social performance is due to the economic, cultural and social backgrounds they come from. For example, a study elaborates that “social capital may explain how some ‘ethnic’ students mobilize social relations to overcome hardships and insufficiencies, and in this specific case, deficiencies related to their first-generation status” (Birani et al. 2013:284). Students who come from underprivileged
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backgrounds have less support and background making it more difficult to adapt and perform like other students. For that reason, I hypothesized that first generation college students sleep fewer hours in a typical weekday, and that first-generation college students prefer to spend more time sleeping than they currently are. My findings suggest that while they are indeed sleeping fewer hours they do not in fact want more hours of sleep. The findings in this study do not show support for previous literature that showed that first year students had poorer sleeping habits than upper class students (Barone 2014; Doane et al. 2015; Galambos et al. 2011) since that relationship is not significant in my results.

CONCLUSION

In the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of students that are the first in their families to apply to and graduate from college. This study attempts to assess how these students are performing compared to their peers by looking at how much they sleep at night. I predicted that first generation college students would be have fewer hours to sleep on a typical week night and would prefer to sleep more. I tested the relationship between independent variable first generation and dependent variables preferred sleeping time and time slept on a typical weeknight, controlling for race, gender, class year, and athletic status using data from 432 students who responded the 2006 NCAA GOALS study conducted at Skidmore College. The findings show significant a correlation between first generation students and sleep deprivation.

Limitations and Future Research

While conducting this research there were quite a few limitations. The most important aspect that limited the data was the small sample size. This study focused on the experience of
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first-generation four-year college students however this group of students only made up 13.2 percent of the sample. The small sample of first-generation students from a prestigious small liberal arts school makes it difficult to report patterns seen in the data, and therefore future research should explore a bigger sample of students from different environments and locations. Even though my independent variable was below 20 percent of the students surveyed, this research project brings up a lot of areas that should be explored in the future to continue the conversation about how we can better the lack of resources for first generation students. Therefore, I propose that future research analyzes data from various institutions in order to get well rounded and generalizable results that can provide information on how these students can be helped efficiently. Another limitation that I encountered was the lack of variables used to explain the relationships. Future research is encouraged to consider how controlling for the students’ income impacts how many hours they sleep, as well as time spent in extracurricular activities as they are time commitments that impact their study time. Another variable that should be considered is whether the student is employed and how many hours they work as this also can impact the number of hours they can sleep at night as Barone (2014) shows, but also how much time they have to complete their assignments.

The essence of this study was to determine whether first generation students’ lack of sleep says something about the conditions and adversities they face while attending college. Lack of sleep can give an idea about how much time a student takes students to complete their assignments, how much free time they have to complete their work, and even their mental and physical health. Minority students do not have the same resources and privilege that students whose parents went to college do. They do not come equipped with a private school education, do not have the same opportunities available to them, they do not have the guidance from their
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parents. As Merritt (2008) suggests, higher education institutions should better accommodate students who do not have that privilege because all have the capacity to do outstanding work, what differs is their backgrounds and that is something that cannot be changed.
REFERENCES


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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1. First Generation Student Status

<table>
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<th>First Generation Student Status</th>
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Figure 2. Preferred Sleeping Time
Figure 3. Hours Slept in Typical Week Night
Figure 4. Upperclass status
Figure 5. Student Athlete Status
Figure 6. Gender
Figure 7. Race
Table 1. Mean, Median, and Standard Deviations for Variables ($N = 432$)

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First Generation Students and Sleep Deprivation

Table 2. Correlations ($r$) between First Generation College Students and Six Variables (list wise deletion, two-tailed tests, $N = 432$)

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*p < .05
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<td>.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>-.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F(5, 426)$</td>
<td>2.482*</td>
<td>1.970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05