



## Self-esteem and humor style as mediators of the effects of shyness on loneliness among Chinese college students

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 16 October 2011  
Received in revised form 5 December 2011  
Accepted 21 December 2011  
Available online 20 January 2012

#### Keywords:

Shyness  
Self-esteem  
Humor style  
Loneliness  
Chinese college students

### ABSTRACT

In this study, the mediator effects of self-esteem and humor style on the relationship between shyness and loneliness in Chinese college students were investigated. The participants were 525 students, with age range of 19–23, who were attending two different Chinese colleges in Xi'an and Fujian. Data were collected by using the Cheek and Buss shyness scale, Rosenberg self-esteem scale, humor style questionnaire and emotional and social loneliness scale. Path analysis showed that self-esteem and humor style partially mediated the relationship between shyness and loneliness. The final model also revealed a significant path from shyness through self-enhancing humor and self-esteem to loneliness. Furthermore, a multi-group analysis found that male college students who are less likely to use self-enhancing humor are more likely to result in loneliness than their female counterparts. The results are discussed in terms of the conceptional context.

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### 1. Introduction

Loneliness is a common, but negative emotional experience that has an obvious impact on psychological functioning and physical health (e.g., Eshbaugh, 2010; Jackson, 2007). It refers to a painful experience due to the inconsistency between one's social expectation and her/his actual social network, either qualitatively or quantitatively (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). There are two kinds of factors that foster loneliness: situational factors and characterological factors (Weiss, 1982).

One of the important characterological factors of loneliness in college students is shyness. Previous studies have shown that there was a significant correlation between shyness and loneliness (e.g., Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Fitts, Seby, & Zlokovich, 2009; Gökhan, 2010). For example, shy people usually take an evasive attitude on social interaction, too prone to yield negative emotions, and tend to have a more negative evaluation of themselves and others, which make them less involved in social activities, and thus have a strong sense of loneliness (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001). Schmidt and Fox (1995) indicated that shyness is a valid predictor of loneliness, depression, social phobia and other physical and mental problems. Whereas the literature is clear that shyness is related to loneliness, far less is known about the mechanisms involved. What potential mediating processes can explain the buffering/beneficial effects of shyness on loneliness?

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A likely candidate to mediate the relationship between shyness and loneliness is self-esteem. First, it is a robust finding that high susceptibility to loneliness in college students is also due to their low self-esteem (e.g., Mahon, Yarcheski, Yarcheski, Cannella, & Hanks, 2006; Man & Hamid, 1998; McWhirter, Tricia, Besett-Alesch, Horibata, & Gat, 2002). People with low self-esteem may blame themselves for social “failures” or for having low levels of social contact, and thus reinforce their loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Some researchers also provided evidence that greater shyness is related to lower self-esteem in elementary school children and Adolescents (Lazarus & Philip, 1982; Wadman, Durkin, & Ramsden, 2008). The combined observations of self-esteem's relation with both shyness and loneliness support the idea that self-esteem might mediate the relation between shyness and loneliness. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that self-esteem has been found to mediate the relationship between loneliness and a series of other protective or vulnerability factors (e.g., Çivitci & Çivitci, 2009; Kong & You, 2011; Man & Hamid, 1998; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004).

Researches by Hampes (2005, 2006) provided evidence supporting the potential mediating role of humor style in the shyness-loneliness relationship. Humor style is the way in which individuals tend to express their sense of humor in the social situations. It can be divided into four distinct types, two of which are considered potentially helpful to interpersonal relationships (affiliative and self-enhancing humor), and two of which are considered potentially harmful (aggressive and self-defeating humor) (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Hampes (2005) found that higher loneliness scores were negatively related

to affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles, but positively related to self-defeating humor. Hampes (2006) also found that affiliative and self-defeating humor styles were significantly related to higher shyness scores while in the opposite mode. In fact, Fitts et al. (2009) have recently identified affiliative and self-defeating humor styles as partial mediators between shyness and loneliness. They showed that shy individuals tended to use affiliative humor less, which led to more loneliness. Conversely, shy individuals tended to make more use of self-defeating humor style, which also contributed to an increase in loneliness.

In spite of the frequent observation that self-esteem and humor style are indeed related to shyness and loneliness, it remains unclear whether self-esteem and humor style – given their significant correlation (Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, & Kirsh, 2004; Martin et al., 2003; Stieger, Formann, & Burger, 2011; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2011) – are really differentially and specifically associated with the relationship between shyness and loneliness, respectively. In this case, further investigation can be explored. First of all, there are not many studies around considering both self-esteem and humor style in one and the same study, examining their associations with both shyness and loneliness. Testing the concurrent mediating effects of self-esteem and humor style would broaden our consolidated understanding of the mechanism how shyness and loneliness are connected. Second, a noteworthy deficiency in the humor style and self-esteem literature is that the majority of the studies were executed within Western countries. Testing the mediation models in an Asian culture, especially in Chinese culture would provide meaningful evidence for the external validity. Taken together, the present study tested the mediation effects of both self-esteem and humor style between shyness and loneliness in Chinese college students.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were 525 students (233 males and 292 females) from two colleges in Xian and Fujian, two mid-sized cities in the middle and southern part of China. The age range was 19–23 years ( $M = 21.06$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. The Cheek and Buss shyness scale (CBSS)

The CBSS, developed by Cheek and Buss (1981) consists of fourteen items, four of which are reverse scored. Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of shyness. In this study, Cronbach's alphas coefficient for the CBSS was 0.84.

#### 2.2.2. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES)

The RSES, developed by Rosenberg (1965) consists of ten items which are rated on a 4-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The RSES has good psychometric properties (Corwyn, 2000). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the RSES was .84.

#### 2.2.3. Humor style questionnaire (HSQ)

The HSQ, developed by Martin et al. (2003) consists of thirty-two items to assess four styles of humor: self-enhancing ( $\alpha = .76$ ), aggressive ( $\alpha = .78$ ), affiliative ( $\alpha = .78$ ), self-defeating ( $\alpha = .70$ ), five of the items are reverse scored. The participants rated the items on a 7-point Likert-type response format (1 = very strongly disagree; 7 = very strongly agree). In this study, Cronbach alpha coefficient for the HSQ was .76.

#### 2.2.4. The emotional and social loneliness scale (ESLS)

The ESLS, developed by Wittenberg et al. (Wittenberg, 1986, cited in Shaver & Brennan, 1991) consists of ten items (five of which are reverse scored) measuring emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In this study, Cronbach alpha coefficient for the ESLS was .66.

### 2.3. Procedure

Two classes from the two universities were randomly selected from each grade. Self-report questionnaires were completed by students in the classroom after informing consent. It took approximately 15 min for the students to complete all the instruments.

### 2.4. Analysis Strategy

The two-step procedure introduced by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was used to analyse the mediation effects. The measurement model was first tested to assess the extent to which each of the seven latent variables was represented by its indicators. If the measurement model was accepted, then test the structural model using the maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 7.0 program. In order to control for inflated measurement errors due to multiple items for the latent variable, three item parcels were created for each of shyness, self-esteem and four humor styles constructs. Due to the unequal numbers of items in each parcel, the average scores of the items were used. The following four indices were used to evaluate the goodness of fit of the model (see Hu & Bentler, 1999; Quintana & Maxwell, 1999): (a) chi-square statistics; (b) Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA); (c) Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR): best if below .05; and (d) Comparative Fit Index (CFI): best if above .95. In order to find the best model, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC: Akaike, 1987) with smaller values representing a better fit of the hypothesized model and Expected Cross-Validation Index (ECVI: Browne & Cudeck, 1993) with the smallest values exhibits the greatest potential for replication were additionally examined.

## 3. Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables included are presented in Table 1. All variables were significantly correlated in the predicted directions.

### 3.1. Measurement model

The measurement model involved seven latent constructs (shyness, self-esteem, self-enhancing humor, affiliative humor, self-defeating humor, aggressive humor and loneliness) and 20 observed variables. An initial test of the measurement model generated a very good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (155, N = 525) = 496.905$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .065; SRMR = .06; and CFI = .92. All the factor loadings for the indicators on the latent variables were significant ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that all the latent constructs were well represented by their indicators. Moreover, all the latent constructs were significantly correlated in conceptually expected ways ( $p < .001$ ).

### 3.2. Structural model

The direct path coefficient from the predictor (shyness) to the criterion (loneliness) in the absence of mediators was significant,  $r = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ . A partially-mediated model (Model 1) with five mediators and a direct path from shyness to loneliness revealed

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