



Exploring the mediation effect of social support and self-esteem on the relationship between humor style and life satisfaction in Chinese college students



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined the mediator effects of social support and self-esteem on the relationship between humor style and life satisfaction in Chinese college students. We had 477 university students, with age range of 18–23 respond to self-report measures of humor style questionnaire, multi-dimensional scale of perceived social support, Rosenberg self-esteem scale and satisfaction with life scale. Results of structural equation modeling showed that social support and self-esteem fully mediated the relationship between affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor and life satisfaction. The final model also revealed a significant path from affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor through social support and self-esteem to life satisfaction. The results are discussed in terms of the conceptional context.

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1. Introduction

Being one of the hot topics in positive psychology, many studies relating humor have been done. In these studies, humor was found to be related to both physical and psychological well-being. Greater sense of humor was assumed to be relevant to several positive characteristics such as positive mood (Celso, Ebener, & Burkhead, 2003; Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Kuiper, Martin, & Dance, 1992; Martin, 2001). However, a detrimental effect of humor has also been found (Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Martin, 2002). Some of these contradictory results may be due to the different humor styles that may be more or less beneficial (Martin, 2003). Following the previous studies, the current study aims to investigate the relationship between the styles of humor and life satisfaction, and the mediators in this 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 (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Affiliative humor (adaptive other-focused) is described as the benign use of humor to enhance relationships

with others by reducing conflicts and strengthening relationships. Self-enhancing humor (adaptive self-focused) acts to enhance or protect the self as a defense or coping mechanism, as a way to relieve tension, and as a way to assert feelings of control in the face of adversity. Aggressive humor (maladaptive other-focused) is described as the use of humor to enhance the self at the expense of others, typically by the excessive use of sarcasm or disparagement humor. Self-defeating humor (maladaptive self-focused) is the use of humor to enhance relationships with others at the expense of self and is characterized by the excessive use of self disparaging humor.

1.1. Humor style and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction, which reflects an individual's evaluation of his or her life as a whole (Diener & Diener, 1995), is one of the most examined variables which are associated with humor style. Dyck and Holtzman (2013) found that higher satisfaction with life scores were positively related to affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles, but negatively related to self-defeating humor. People with adaptive humor styles appear to derive greater pleasure and satisfaction from various social experiences and life events, it is just the opposite for people with maladaptive humor styles (Herzog & Strevey, 2008; Karou-ei, Doosti, Dehshiri, & Heidari, 2009).

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1.2. Humor style, social support, self-esteem and life satisfaction

Although the research literature is clear that humor style is associated with life satisfaction, far less is known about the mechanisms or processes underlying this relationship. What potential mediating variables can account for the association between humor style and life satisfaction? Although some ideas have been put forward in the research literature (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012), not much research has tested this key question empirically.

A likely candidate to mediate the association between humor style and life satisfaction is social support. Some theorists have asserted the use of humor to be positively associated with high social competence (e.g., Fitts, Sebbly, & Zlokovich, 2009; Yip & Martin, 2006), to be a useful skill in the development of relationships and the effective promotion of successful social interactions (Martin et al., 2003), and thus to enhance both quality of relationships and the availability of social support, which in turn lead to a richer sense of subjective well-being (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). Some evidence supports the hypothesis. For instance, people with adaptive humor styles are likely to perceive greater social support (e.g., Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Jackson, Fritch, Nagasaka, & Gunderson, 2002). In addition, research has shown that people who perceive much social support from others report greater life satisfaction (e.g., Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012a, 2012b, in press). Recently, some researchers have verified the hypothesis. They found that social support acted as a partial mediator of the relationship between humor style and life satisfaction (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013).

In a similar way, self-esteem might be hypothesized to mediate the association between humor style and life satisfaction. Self-esteem refers to an individual's general sense of his or her value or worth (Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003). On the one hand, self-esteem has been found to be associated with life satisfaction, and it is one of the most examined predictor variables of life satisfaction besides demographic characteristics, social relationships, and personality (Kong & You, 2013; Zhang & Leung, 2002). On the other hand, those with high levels of self-esteem comes from, at least in part from their use of self-enhancing humor which makes them enhance themselves (Martin et al., 2003; Stieger, Formann, & Burger, 2011; Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). Thus, humor style is likely to be associated with life satisfaction by means of self-esteem.

1.3. The current study

On the one hand, in spite of the frequent observation that social support and self-esteem are indeed related to humor style and life satisfaction, it remains unclear whether social support and self-esteem – given their significant correlation (Kong & You, 2013; Kong et al., 2012a, in press) – are really differentially and specifically associated with the relationship between humor style and life satisfaction, respectively. Testing the concurrent mediating effects of social support and self-esteem would broaden our consolidated understanding of the mechanism how humor style and life satisfaction are connected. On the other hand, an important limitation in the humor style literature is that the majority of the studies were conducted within Western countries. Testing these findings in an Asian culture would provide meaningful evidence for the external validity.

In summary, the present study tested the mediating effects of social support and self-esteem on the humor style-life satisfaction relationship in a sample of Chinese university students. Based on the previous studies, we proposed two possible hypotheses: (1) humor style significantly predicted life satisfaction. (2) Social

support and self-esteem mediated the association between humor style and life satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 477 students (203 males and 274 females) from two colleges in Xi'an and Beijing, two mid-sized cities in the middle and northern part of China. The age range was 18–23 (mean age = 20.81 years, standard deviation = 1.16 years). Behavioral protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Shaanxi Normal University. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Humor style questionnaire (HSQ)

The HSQ, developed by Martin et al. (2003) consists of 32 items which are rated on a 7-point Likert-type response format (1 = very strongly disagree; 7 = very strongly agree). The HSQ contains items such as, "Even when I'm by myself, I'm often amused by the absurdities of life" (Self-Enhancing), "I laugh and joke a lot with my closest friends" (Affiliative), "If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it" (Aggressive), and "I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders, or faults" (Self-Defeating). Cronbach's alpha for the four subscales were excellent (affiliative, .78; self-enhancing, .77; aggressive, .77; self-defeating, .71). The HSQ has good levels of reliability and validity (e.g., Zhao et al., 2012). In this study, Cronbach alpha coefficient for the HSQ was .77.

2.2.2. Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

The MSPSS, developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988) consists of 12 items which are rated on a 7-point Likert-type response format (1 = very strongly disagree; 7 = very strongly agree) to assess three sources of social support: significant others' support, family's support, friends' support. For example, "My family really tries to help me", "I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows", and "There is a special person who is around when I am in need". The MSPSS has good reliability and validity (e.g., Kong et al., 2012a, 2012b, in press; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2013, in press). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the three subscales were: Significant Other: .83; Family: .85; and Friends: .87. The scale had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .91.

2.2.3. Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES)

The RSES, developed by Rosenberg (1965) consists of ten items which are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree). Sample items from RSES are "I am able to do things as well as most other people." and "Ultimately, I tend to feel like a failure." The RSES has good levels of reliability and validity (Kong et al., 2012a, in press; Zhao et al., 2012, 2013). In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the RSES was 0.83.

2.2.4. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The SWLS, developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) consists of 5 brief statements to measure the satisfaction with life component of SWB. Respondents rated each of five items along a 7-point scale from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree. It includes items such as, "I am satisfied with my life" and "In most ways my life is close to my ideal". The SWLS has good reliability and validity (Kong et al., 2012a, 2012b, in press; Zhao et al., 2013). In this study, Cronbach alpha coefficient for the SWLS was .82.

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