



## Full Length Article

## Shyness and online prosocial behavior: A study on multiple mediation mechanisms



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## ABSTRACT

Internet technologies provide more opportunities for social interactions. However, previous literature suggests that the convenience provided by the Internet in establishing social connection may not facilitate shy individuals to engage in online positive behaviors (e.g., prosocial behavior) as frequently as others. In contrast to larger effort devoted to studying negative outcomes in cyberspace, insufficient interest has been focused on online prosocial behavior. This study aims to investigate the association between shyness and online prosocial behavior and related mechanisms. According to the Cognitive and Affective Processing Systems of personality, cognitive (social self-efficacy) and affective (empathy) factors were introduced as mediators. Self-reported measures were administered to 805 Chinese undergraduate students in 2017. Results showed that shyness was negatively correlated with online prosocial behavior, and this association was completely mediated by social self-efficacy, perspective taking, and empathic concern. Specifically, shyness exerted a negative influence on the abovementioned mediators, thereby decreasing the tendency to act prosocially online. Moreover, the mediating effect of social self-efficacy was larger than that of perspective taking and empathic concern. Identifying these mediators further enables us to work out effective measures to encourage shy individuals to engage in more prosocial behavior online that will promote their psychological and social well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Shyness is an important personality variable that can be defined as emotional distress and inhibition that occur in the presence of others. It seems that a considerable proportion of people in the general population may label themselves as shy. For example, about 42% of American college students considered themselves to be presently shy, and about 25% chronically shy (Zimbardo, 1977). Shyness is positively associated with self-consciousness, insufficient self-confidence, anxiety, and inhibited behavior in social situations (Hammick & Lee, 2014; Zimbardo, 1977). Fortunately, some researchers found that Internet technologies provide shy individuals with convenient ways of establishing social connections (Chiou, Chen, & Liao, 2014), so they may express and disclose themselves with greater ease and freedom in online settings than in the offline world (Hammick & Lee, 2014; Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004). However, Internet technologies may not

necessarily bring benefits for shy individuals, leading them to enact more positive social behavior in cyberspace. In fact, many researchers found that frequent Internet use may even produce negative effects on shy individuals' psychological and social functioning (e.g., Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Orr et al., 2009). For example, a close link between shyness and Internet addiction (e.g., computer game addiction, mobile phone addiction) has been revealed by recent literature (Ayas, 2012; Chak & Leung, 2004; Han, Geng, Jou, Gao, & Yang, 2017). Such addiction and problematic use of the Internet may be harmful to social and emotional functioning in the offline world (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007; Huan, Ang, Chong, & Chye, 2014).

In contrast to considerable research focused on negative outcomes in the cyberspace, to date insufficient interest has been devoted to studying shy individuals' online positive behaviors (e.g., prosocial behavior). Whether shy individuals are still less likely to enact such positive behaviors on the net than non-shy people is a question deserves close investigation. Prosocial behavior can be defined as a voluntary action which is intended to benefit others (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Prosocial engagement may be especially important for shy individuals, because existing literature suggests

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that prosocial behavior can bring various benefits for the actors, including emotionally disturbed ones, such as increased positive emotion and enhanced social connection (Alden & Trew, 2013; Alessandri, Caprara, Eisenberg, & Steca, 2009; Son & Wilson, 2012).

However, prosocial behavior requires interactions and communications between individuals in social situations. Previous findings showed that shy individuals may act less prosocially in real life situations due to behavioral inhibition (Brocklebank, Lewis, & Bates, 2011; Lönnqvist, Verkasalo, & Walkowitz, 2011; Young, Fox, & Zahn-Waxler, 1999). Given the convenience in social interactions provided by the Internet, does the difference in prosociality between shy and non-shy individuals still exist in cyberspace? If so what are the potential mediators that form bridges in the pathway from shyness to less prosociality online? Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether there is still a negative association between shyness and prosociality in cyberspace and related mechanisms accounting for this association. When these mechanisms are identified, effective measures are further expected to be employed to encourage shy individuals to engage in more prosocial behavior in cyberspace. Behaving prosocially can enhance shy individuals' social connectedness, a sense of self-worth and meaningfulness (Son & Wilson, 2012), which may promote their emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Alden & Trew, 2013).

### 1.1. Shyness and online prosociality

Previous literature suggests that there may be a negative association between shyness and prosocial behavior, though this linkage has seldom been directly investigated. For example, Young et al. (1999) found that shy-inhibited temperament was negatively related to empathic concern which was conducive to an individual's prosociality (Batson, Lishner, & Stocks, 2015). Prosocial behavior derives from one's attention to others, and occurs in the process of positive interpersonal interactions. Some features frequently observed in shy individuals such as social anxiety, lack of social skills, inhibited social behaviors, and lower levels of self-confidence, may hinder them from prosocial engagements (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Hammick & Lee, 2014; Reich, 2017; Zimbardo, 1977). Such features further suggest that shy individuals are less likely to care for others and would rather be alone. Consistently, another line of research found that introverted and neurotic individuals who share some features similar to shy individuals (Hammick & Lee, 2014) are also less likely to enact prosocial behavior (Brocklebank et al., 2011; Habashi, Graziano, & Hoover, 2016; Lönnqvist et al., 2011).

If there is a negative linkage between shyness and prosociality in the offline world, does this link persist in cyberspace? Online communication helps shy individuals remove the discomfort and negative feelings derived from face-to-face communications (e.g., Hammick & Lee, 2014). Shy people may be more comfortable to express themselves and participate in social interactions online than offline. However, previous literature suggests that the negative association between shyness and prosociality can not be easily eliminated by the convenience in building social connections provided by the Internet. Some researchers have proposed a connection between online and offline social competence (e.g., Reich, 2017; Wright & Li, 2011). For example, Wang and his colleague (2008) found that participants who self-identified as more altruistic in real life were more likely to help others (e.g., providing answers to questions) in online game than those who self-identified as less altruistic. Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, Cress, and Kimmerle (2011) found that people with prosocial orientation (a preference to maximizing other people's gain) exhibited more online information-sharing behavior compared to people with a

proself orientation, both in the visualization and the non-visualization condition. In support of the co-construction theory (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006), Wright and Li (2011) also suggested that offline prosociality can be generalized into the online worlds. They found that individuals who reported more prosocial behavior (e.g., helping the needy or who is in trouble) in real life settings were more likely to help others (e.g., offer help, cheer someone up) in cyberspace. With an increasing number of supportive findings, the co-construction theory has been applied to explain the connection between online and offline social behavior (Wright & Li, 2011). Such findings indicate that social skills in face-to-face interactions are still useful in online settings (Reich, 2017). That is, more socially competent individuals can be more successful in interacting and befriending online peers compared with less socially competent ones. Consistent with the rich-get-richer/poor-get-poorer hypothesis (Kraut et al., 2002), studies showed that though socially higher anxious and lower self-esteem individuals spend more time online, they made fewer new friends than individuals who thrive interpersonally in the real world (Anderson et al., 2012). Orr et al. (2009) found that shy individuals averagely spent more time on Facebook and had favorable attitudes toward the social networking site, but they had fewer Facebook friends than their non-shy peers. Consistently, Hammick and Lee (2014) also found that though virtual world reduced shy individuals' feelings of communication apprehension, it did not increase their confidence in communication ability. These findings suggest that features of shy individuals in offline social settings can also be generalized into online interpersonal communications. Therefore a negative association between shyness and online prosociality is expected.

### 1.2. The mechanisms between shyness and online prosocial behavior

Based on previous findings, we assumed a negative association between shyness and online prosocial behavior. Meanwhile, the potential mechanisms that form bridges in the pathway from shyness to online prosociality were another issue to be explored in this study. In recent years, researchers tend to use statistical approaches (e.g., moderation and mediation analysis) to investigate the mechanisms by which personality traits affect behavioral outcomes (Hampson, 2012; Hessels, van den Hanenberg, de Castro, & van Aken, 2014). If the effect of a trait on an outcome is reduced or disappeared when an intervening variable is introduced, this intervening variable can be identified as a mediator. The Cognitive and Affective Processing System (CAPS; Mischel, 2004) of personality proposed five cognitive-affective mediating units (encodings, expectancies and beliefs, affects, goals and values, competencies and self-regulatory plans) in order to account for how personality traits affect people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and result in consequential outcomes. Based on CAPS, we identified potential cognitive and affective factors (social self-efficacy, empathy) that may mediate the association between shyness and online prosocial behavior.

Social self-efficacy, a more specific concept of self-efficacy, can be defined as individuals' belief in their capacity to effectively handle interpersonal interactions, successfully initiate social contact, maintain and develop friendships (Bandura, 1997; Connolly, 1989). Social self-efficacy can exert a significant impact on varieties of behaviors in social settings. According to Bandura (1997), people may have little incentive to undertake an activity if they believe that they can not attain desired results from their actions. Shy individuals are self-conscious, inhibited, and prone to experience more negative emotions (Zimbardo, 1977). They also tend to devalue their capacity and are excessively concerned about

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