



The More Modest You are, the Happier You are: The Mediating Roles of Emotional Intelligence and Self-esteem

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Abstract

Modesty, often defined as a goal-direct self-presentational behavior, is highly beneficial to behavioral health regulation, self-efficacy, interpersonal relation, and group performance. Recent theories and studies have provided evidence that modesty is linked to adaptive well-being, but the potential mechanisms underlying this relationship remain poorly understood. This study examined the mediating roles of emotional intelligence (EI) and self-esteem (SE) in the relationship between modesty and subjective well-being (SWB) as well as depression among 500 Chinese adults. The results showed that higher levels of modesty were positively associated with EI, SE, SWB, and negatively correlated with depression. Furthermore, EI and SE were positively related to SWB, and were negatively related to depression. Path analyses indicated that EI and SE mediated the relationship between modesty and both SWB and depression in-sequence. EI was also a direct mediator between modesty and depression, whereas SE played an indirect role through its relationship with EI. These findings suggest an important role of modesty in promoting well-being and provide the preliminary evidence regarding possible mechanisms through which modesty contributes to well-being.

Keywords Modesty · Emotional intelligence · Self-esteem · Subjective well-being · Depression

1 Introduction

Well-being has long been discussed in psychological research, where the focus was mainly on understanding how to make people experience their lives in more positive ways. It is well-documented that people seek to maintain unrealistically positive self-evaluations or self-enhancement (Alicke and Sedikides 2009; Taylor and Brown 1988). While a large body of research has shown that these positive illusions about the self are beneficial to personal well-being (Marshall and Brown 2007; Taylor and Brown 1988), some researchers suggested that self-enhancement has potential damage to both intrapersonal and interpersonal adjustment (Colvin et al. 1995; Robins and Beer 2001). Recent

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theories and empirical findings in positive psychology have identified a classification of character strengths which functions in promoting human flourishing and well-being (e.g., gratitude, optimism, and self-regulation; Peterson and Seligman 2004; Weber et al. 2013). Modesty is among the character strengths that has been attracting the attentions of psychologists in the past few decades (Ashton and Lee 2007; Bond et al. 1982; Chen et al. 2009; Ridge and Ingram 2014; Sedikides et al. 2007; Shi et al. 2017; Watling and Banerjee 2010; Zheng et al. 2017). Moreover, modesty has been regarded as an important psychological attribute associated with adaptive well-being outcomes, such as better behavioral health regulation, less negative affect, self-efficacy, respect and likeability by others, good interpersonal relation, and better group performance (see reviews by Sedikides et al. 2007; Chen et al. 2009; Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Psychological studies often approach modesty in behavioral terms. For example, Cialdini et al. (1998) defined modesty as the “public under-representation of one’s favorable traits and abilities” (p. 473), and further explained a goal-direct self-presentational behavior to obtain favorable social images and results. Based on this definition, Chen et al. (2009) examined the behavioral aspects of modesty and identified three components: self-effacement (the restraint in pursuing self-interest and under-representation of one’s positive traits, accomplishments and contributions), other-enhancement (the expression of concern for others and elevation of others for ingratiation and relationship building), and avoidance of attention-seeking (one’s tendency to actively avoid self-promotion and self-aggrandizement in public). Different from self-enhancement promoting well-being through illusionary self-perceptions and feeling better than others, modesty concentrates on self-regulation, the importance of others, and interpersonal harmony. Modest behavior aids in self-regulation attempts by protecting people from taking foolish risks or making poor decisions especially under conditions of ego threats (Baumeister et al. 1993; Dunning et al. 2004). In addition, modesty in presentations brings benefits to people because they serve as an appropriate way to maintain other’s face and avoid interpersonal conflicts (Bond et al. 1982; Ho 1998; Weaver et al. 2017). As a result, people with high levels of modesty are more likely to maintain emotional well-being and reduce the risk of psychological maladjustment (e.g., narcissism, depression; Robins and Beer 2001).

Despite that being modest is important to personal well-being, some researchers found that modesty negatively correlated with subjective happiness (Shimai et al. 2006). Another recent study showed that modesty failed to predict individual well-being but positively predicted depression in a sample of adolescents (Stankov 2013). Furthermore, most studies are conducted in Western cultures, whereas little of which is known about the unique effect of modesty on well-being in Asian cultural contexts, particularly in Chinese culture. Previous studies have suggested that well-being is deeply influenced by culture (Diener et al. 2003; Kitayama and Markus 2000; Suh and Choi 2018). For example, relationship harmony is considered to be an important source of positive feelings and happiness for people with high levels of interdependence more than for those in the West (Hitokoto and Uchida 2015; Lu et al. 2001; Shin et al. 2018; Uchida and Kitayama 2009). Since modesty is especially likely to serve a social goal of interpersonal harmony in China (Bond et al. 1982; Han 2011; Markus and Kitayama 1991), it can be more significant in predicting well-being among Chinese people. Therefore, we addressed these issues by replicating the relationship between modesty and well-being in a Chinese sample. More importantly, we intended to test whether emotional intelligence (EI) and self-esteem (SE) could mediate that relationship. Subjective well-being (SWB) and depression both served as indicators of well-being.

1.1 Modesty, Emotional Intelligence, Self-esteem, and Well-Being

Literatures review suggested that EI can be a key mediator between modesty and well-being. EI refers to a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions or the ability to perceive, understand, manage and regulate emotions in the self and others (Petrides et al. 2007). Previous research has provided important insights into the association between modesty and EI. People with high levels of modesty are more adapt at managing their emotional expressions and responses (Exline et al. 2004; Sedikides et al. 2002), and tend to focus on long-term objectives rather than fulfilling short-term emotional needs (e.g., feeling good about themselves following a success; Crocker and Park 2004). In addition, modesty fosters the ability to understand others' needs and feelings, which may lead to greater EI. Studies have shown a positive link between modesty and the understanding of emotion display rules in social interactions (Heyman et al. 2010; Quintanilla and Giménez-Dasí 2017). For example, modesty downplays personal achievements and regulates the expressions of positive emotions, in order to reduce the possible threat to others' self-esteem (Chen et al. 2009). Researchers further found that modesty may increase happiness by enhancing personal social relationships (Bond et al. 1982; Han 2011), and EI contributes to the quality of those relations, in increasing emotion regulation and social competence (Andrei et al. 2016). There is also a large body of studies demonstrating the benefits of EI on promoting SWB and reducing mental distress (Kong et al. 2012; Wang and Kong 2014; Szczygieł and Mikolajczak 2017). Hence, we assumed that modesty, defined as goal-direct self-presentational behaviors, plays a role in the development of EI and thus contributes to higher SWB and less depression.

SE is another potential mediator between modesty and well-being. It reflects individual's general sense of self-value. Although some scholars found connection between modesty and low self-esteem (Cai et al. 2007; Kurman and Sriram 2002), others claimed that modesty enhanced SE of Chinese (Cai et al. 2011; Han 2011). Previous studies also suggested that people exhibiting modest behaviors are more likely to maintain a greater sense of self-efficacy that is important for well-being (Chen et al. 2009; Weber et al. 2013). According to the Terror Management Theory, individuals can achieve and maintain positive self-esteem through compliance with social norms in a specific culture (Greenberg 2012). As modesty has been considered an important social norm in East Asian cultures such as China, Japan, and Korea, obeying the modesty norm can make East Asians feel good about themselves, leading to a high level of self-esteem. Moreover, SE has shown to be one of the strongest predictors of well-being (Diener and Diener 1995; Cheng and Furnham 2003). Thus, modesty is likely to be associated with high levels of well-being by greater sense of SE.

In addition, previous research has demonstrated that EI significantly predicted higher levels of SE, and EI exerted an influence on well-being both directly and indirectly through SE (Mayer and Salovey 1997; Kong et al. 2012). Thus, we also expected that people with high levels of EI may lead to greater SWB as well as lower levels of depression by stronger senses of SE.

1.2 The Current Study

In summary, the purpose of this study was to elucidate the mechanisms underlying the association between modesty and well-being (i.e., SWB and depression) among Chinese

adults. Based on the theoretical rationale developed above, we predicted that EI and SE might serve as mediators in a sequential mediation model. Specifically, we hypothesized that modesty would predict higher levels of EI and SE. These variables, in turn, would independently predict greater SWB and lower level of depression. We also expected to see a sequential mediation, with modesty positively predicting EI, leading to a stronger sense of SE, further enhancing SWB and decreasing depression.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and Procedures

Five hundred part-time Chinese undergraduate students from Peking University participated in the study (convenience sampling; 150 were men; mean age \pm standard deviation = 25.88 ± 5.46 years, age range: 18–49 years, 83.6% from 18 to 30, 13.6% from 31 to 40, 2.8% from 41 to 49). Among the participants, 72.6% majored in liberal arts, and 26.8% in science and 0.6% did not report his/her major. Regarding work status, 60.2% were in employment at the time of data collection, 37.8% were only students, 2% did not report his/her work status.

This study was approved by and conducted in accordance with the Committee for Protecting Human and Animal Subjects in the School of Psychological and Cognitive Sciences, Peking University. Participants were ensured beforehand that the study was anonymous and voluntary, and they would receive research credit for their psychology classes as compensation. The investigator read the informed consent to the participants and obtained their oral consent for participation before they completed the questionnaires. A brief instruction informed the purpose of the survey and data confidentiality procedures. Participants were instructed to complete a set of questionnaires online (<https://www.sojump.com/>) in a quiet classroom. It took approximately 20 min for the participants to complete all the questionnaires. This method of collecting data has been found to be reliable and valid by previous studies (i.e., Demir et al. 2018; Kong et al. 2019; Swickert et al. 2019).

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Modest Behavior Scale

The 39-item Modest Behavior Scale (MBS; Chen et al. 2009) was adopted to measure the behavioral manifestations of modest self-presentation. The scale contains three components including self-effacement (SE; 9 items, e.g., “Deny my strengths when praised”), other-enhancement (OE; 16 items, e.g., “Thank the person who criticizes me”), and avoidance of attention (AA; 14 items, e.g., “Avoid saying too much about myself”). Each item was rated

2.2.2 Emotional Intelligence

The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS; Schutte et al. 1998) is a 33-item self-report measure based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) definition of emotional intelligence. The EIS measures the extent to which participants perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions both in the self and others. Example items are "I like to share my emotions with others" and "When I experience a positive emotion, I know how to make it last". Items are rated on 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher total scores indicate higher EI. The scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in Chinese populations (Kwok and Gu 2017; Liu 2018). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the EIS in this study was .89.

2.2.3 Self-esteem

The 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg 1965) was used to assess global self-esteem. Example items are "I am able to do things as well as most other people" and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (reverse coded). All items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The RSES has been widely used in many countries (Schmitt and Allik 2005). The Chinese version of this scale has been demonstrated to be reliable and valid in assessing self-esteem among Chinese people (Kong et al. 2015). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .88.

2.2.4 Subjective Well-Being

The Index of Well-being (Campbell et al. 1976) was used to assess the degree of well-being. It consists of two subscales assessing general affect (GE; 8 items; weight of 1) and life satisfaction (LS; 1 item; weight of 1.1). A total score is calculated by *index of general affect + life satisfaction* $\times 1.1$ (Campbell et al. 1976). Responses were given on a 7-point scale. Higher scores indicate higher subjective well-being. The scale has demonstrated good test-retest reliability as well as strong levels of criterion validity in Chinese college students (Li and Zhao 2000). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .80.

2.2.5 Depression

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck et al. 1987) is a 21-item self-report measure assessing severity of depressive symptoms during the past week on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 3). Higher total scores indicate more severe depressive symptoms. The Chinese version of BDI has shown high internal consistency and good construct validity (Shek 1990), and can be reliably used as a self-reported inventory to assess depressive symptoms for Chinese samples (Yang et al. 2012; Zhang 1990). Cronbach's alpha was .90 in the current study.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive Data and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between study variables are shown in Table 1. The kurtosis and skewness of all study variables were within the range between

− 1 and + 1, confirming the normality of the data. All variables were significantly correlated in conceptually expected ways. Modesty positively correlated with EI, SE, and SWB, and negatively correlated with depression. In addition, EI and SE were positively related to SWB, and negatively related to depression. There were negative correlations between modesty, EI, SE, and SWB scores and age ($r = -.15, -.10, -.14$, and $-.10$, respectively, all $ps < .05$). No significant gender differences in any study variables were found (all $ps > .05$).

3.2 Mediation Analyses

To determine whether the relationship between modesty and well-being was mediated by EI and SE, two mediation analyses were conducted using a PROCESS macro implemented in SPSS (Model 6; Hayes 2013). This macro also includes bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs) for assessing the significance of each indirect path (mediation), with significant mediation indicated by a confidence interval that excludes zero. We generated 5000 bootstrapped resamples to estimate bias-corrected 95% CIs for the mediation effects. In order to estimate standardized coefficients, all variables were converted to z-scores prior to analysis. Mediation analyses were conducted separately for SWB and depression, while both gender and age were added as control variables. Results of the mediation analyses are presented in Table 2.

The results showed that the total effect of modesty on SWB (the sum of the direct effect and the indirect effects) was significant ($\beta = .22$, CI [.13, .31]). Furthermore, the total indirect (mediated) effect of modesty on SWB (the sum of all indirect paths) was significant ($\beta = .14$, CI [.07, .21]). Specifically, EI and SE mediated the relationship between modesty and SWB in-sequence ($\beta = .11$, CI [.08, .15]). In other words, modesty predicted increased EI ($\beta = .43$, CI [.35, .51]), which predicted SE ($\beta = .55$, CI [.46, .63]), and in turn predicted greater SWB ($\beta = .48$, CI [.39, .57]). However, the specific indirect effects of modesty on SWB through both EI (independent of SE) and SE (independent of EI) were not significant, which suggests that EI and SE did not independently mediate the relationship between modesty and SWB. The direct effect of modesty on SWB remained significant after controlling for mediators ($\beta = .08$, CI [.01, .16]), indicating that EI and SE partially mediated the positive relationship between modesty and SWB. The overall model (including two mediators as well as gender and age as covariates) explained 32% variance in SWB, $F(5, 494) = 47.21$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .32$ (see Table 2, Fig. 1).

As predicted, the total effect of modesty on depression (the sum of the direct effect and the indirect effects) was significant ($\beta = -.12$, CI [−.21, −.03]). Moreover, the total

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Modesty	140.29	13.60	–				
2. Emotional intelligence	119.38	12.93	.44**	–			
3. Self-esteem	31.21	4.99	.22**	.54**	–		
4. Subjective well-being	10.04	2.41	.23**	.39**	.55**	–	
5. Depression	10.23	8.10	−.13**	−.43**	−.56**	−.48**	–

$N = 500$

** $p < .01$ (two-tailed significance tests)

Table 2 Summary of bootstrapped mediation analyses of the effects of modesty on subjective well-being and depression through emotional intelligence and self-esteem ($N=500$)

Outcomes	Mediation analysis paths	Estimated	95% bias-corrected CI	
			Lower	Upper
Subjective well-being	Total effect	.22 ^a	.13	.31
	Direct effect	.08 ^a	.01	.16
	Total indirect effect	.14 ^a	.07	.21
	Modesty → EI → SWB	.04	-.01	.09
	Modesty → SE → SWB	-.02	-.06	.03
	Modesty → EI → SE → SWB	.11 ^a	.08	.15
Depression	Total effect	-.12 ^a	-.21	-.03
	Direct effect	.06	-.02	.14
	Total indirect effect	-.18 ^a	-.26	-.11
	Modesty → EI → depression	-.09 ^a	-.15	-.04
	Modesty → SE → depression	.01	-.03	.06
	Modesty → EI → SE → depression	-.11 ^a	-.16	-.07

All paths were estimated while controlling for gender and age; Standardized regression coefficients shown for each path

CI bias-corrected confidence intervals based on 5000 bootstrapped samples, EI emotional intelligence, SE self-esteem

^aEmpirical 95% confidence interval does not include zero

indirect (mediated) effect of modesty on depression (the sum of all indirect paths) was significant ($\beta = -.18$, CI $[-.26, -.11]$). Specifically, results indicated significant sequential mediating effects of EI and SE on the association between modesty and depression ($\beta = -.11$, CI $[-.16, -.07]$), with modesty predicting increased EI ($\beta = .43$, CI $[.35, .51]$), which in turn predicting stronger SE ($\beta = .55$, CI $[.46, .63]$) and therefore reducing the vulnerability to depression ($\beta = -.46$, CI $[-.55, -.38]$). The indirect effect of modesty on depression via EI was also significant ($\beta = -.09$, CI $[-.15, -.04]$), suggesting that EI, independent of SE, mediated the relationship between modesty and depression. Higher level of modesty leads to increased EI, which in turn predicted less depression. In contrast, SE did not significantly mediate the relationship between modesty and depression (independent of EI). Modesty did not uniquely predicted SE, although SE uniquely predicted depression. With the mediators controlled, the direct link between modesty and depression was no longer significant ($\beta = .06$, CI $[-.02, .14]$), indicating that EI and SE fully mediated the negative relationship between modesty and depression. The overall model (including both two mediators and gender and age as covariates) explained 34% variance in depression, $F(5, 494) = 50.50$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .34$ (see Table 2, Fig. 1).

4 Discussion

The present study provides direct evidence of the relations between modesty, EI, SE, and well-being in Chinese context. The results of path analyses revealed that EI and SE played a sequential mediating role between modesty, SWB and depression, indicating that

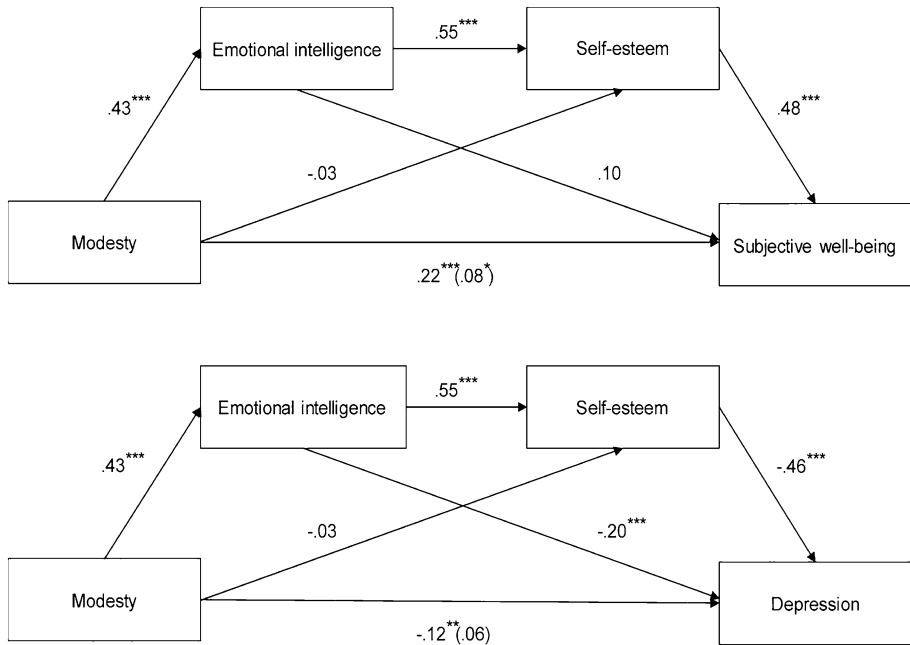


Fig. 1 Sequential mediation model showing emotional intelligence and self-esteem as mediators of the association between modesty and both subjective well-being and depression; all paths values represent standardized regression coefficients. The coefficient in brackets represents the direct effect of modesty on subjective well-being and depression when mediators are included, and the coefficient outside brackets represents a model in the absence of two mediators. Results are controlled for gender and age. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$

modesty can significantly promote EI and SE, which in turn predicted higher levels of SWB and lower levels of depression. These findings suggest that greater EI and SE might be considered as the mechanisms through which modesty contributes to well-being.

First, we found that modesty could positively predict SWB and negatively predict depression. These findings correspond with recent theory and research indicating that modesty can be a character strength linking to adaptive well-being (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Specifically, modest presentation through self-effacing behaviors such as not bragging or downplaying personal achievements enables individuals to create favorable impressions and prevent others from experiencing the feeling of being threatened. Furthermore, previous studies have found that Chinese are more likely to feel good about themselves in overtly modest behavioral presentations (Cai et al. 2011; Han 2011). Therefore, our findings suggest that modesty may function as an important strategy for establishing and maintaining well-being among Chinese. Correlational analyses also revealed negative correlations between modesty, EI, SE, SWB, and age. While some researchers have suggested that modesty can develop with age and life experiences (Banerjee 2010; Fu et al. 2010), it was intriguing to find that modesty was negatively related to age in our study. We suggest that this may be due to difference between the ages of the participants. For example, participants in our study had a broader range of age (ranging from 18 to 49 years) than in Fu et al.'s (2010) study (ranging from 7 to 11 years). Empirical evidence in favor of associations between EI, SE, SWB and age also appears to be mixed. Whereas some have not

found negative correlations (Birks et al. 2009; Diener 1984; Young and Mroczek 2003), others found that EI, SE, and SWB increase across the adult life span (Horley and Lavery 1995; Orth et al. 2010; Wong and Law 2002), and others have demonstrated that the relationship between age and these variables appeared to follow an inverted-U curve (Derksen et al. 2002; López Ulloa et al. 2013; Orth et al. 2010). Although we did not establish a hypothesis regarding these correlations, we point out these findings as an opportunity for further research.

In addition, the results of mediation analyses were partially consistent with the hypotheses. The path of modesty \rightarrow EI \rightarrow SE \rightarrow SWB/depression was supported. This path indicates that EI and SE sequentially mediated the association between modesty and well-being. That is, EI was a mediator between modesty and SE while SE mediated the associations between EI and SWB and depression. The mediating effect of EI is in accordance with previous studies demonstrating that modest self-presentation strategies enable individuals to understand others' emotional needs, and regulate their feelings (Crocker and Park 2004; Sedikides et al. 2007). These qualities may serve as the factors making the modest self-presenter to be better adjusted, psychologically and socially, and in turn promotes satisfaction, confidence, and social acknowledgment of self-worth (Han 2011; Shi et al. 2017).

Apart from that, the specific indirect effects of modesty on SWB through both EI (independent of SE) and SE (independent of EI) were not supported, which means that EI and SE did not independently mediate the relationship between modesty and SWB. These findings suggest that the beneficial influence of modesty on SWB is not simply due to an ability to recognize and manage emotions of oneself and others or increased SE. Instead, individuals performing modest behaviors may achieve SWB via the sequential mediating effect of EI and SE. In relation to depression, our results showed that EI independently mediated the relationship between modesty and depression. This is in line with previous findings of a negative correlation between EI and depression (Salguero et al. 2012). Greater use of modest self-presentation tactics may increase better regulation of emotional needs and an ability to cope more successfully with negative experiences by using an effective regulatory process (Salovey et al. 1999; Sedikides et al. 2007). In contrast, SE did not mediate the relationship between modesty and depression in the absence of EI, which suggests that SE is a mediator between EI and well-being rather than between modesty and well-being. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that modesty denotes self-effacing presentations, but does not necessarily mean a lack of self-esteem (Han 2011; Chen et al. 2009). However, the correlation between modesty and self-esteem was significant and positive, implying that self-esteem failed to be maintained by performing modest behaviors after controlling for EI in multiple mediation analyses. Taken together, these results suggest that EI might be a key trait for modest people to achieve self-esteem and well-being.

There are some limitations in our study. First, the current study was a cross-sectional design which prevents drawing any causal relationships among the variables. A longitudinal or experimental design is needed to determine the causality or directionality of the relationships between modesty, EI, SE, and well-being. Second, the data in this study was gathered only through self-reported measures. Multiple methods (e.g., parent, peer reports) could be used to reduce the limitations imposed by the subjectivity of self-report in the future. Third, our sample consists of Chinese participants, which should be considered with different regions and cultures in future research (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Finally, previous studies have suggested that different types of modest behavior may be related to distinct psychological outcomes (Chen et al. 2009), thereby future research can investigate whether different forms of modesty affect well-being differently.

In conclusion, this study represents a first attempt to investigate both EI and SE as underlying mechanisms of the relationship between modesty and well-being. Findings of this study replicated and extended previous research in that greater use of modest self-presentation tactics promotes higher EI, and then elevated SE, which in turn predicted higher SWB and lower depression. The results of sequential mediating roles of EI and SE between modesty and well-being might further shed light on complex relationships among these variables. In addition, these findings suggest that the cultivation of modesty may work as a preventative therapy to help individuals to increase their well-being in future as well as decrease psychological maladjustment (e.g., depression). It may also function as an active therapy by helping them develop greater EI and enhance their SE.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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