Experiential Avoidance as a Mediator between Rejection Sensitivity and Social Interaction Anxiety

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Abstract

Due to the overarching and related concepts involved in interpersonal sensitivity, this study aimed to look at the differences between, and relationships of, some of its concepts by explaining the mediating effect of experiential avoidance on rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety. One hundred fifty-nine undergraduates within the National Capital Region, aged 16 to 40 (M = 19.29, SD = 2.89), and comprising 89 females and 70 males participated in the study. Results show that both rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance significantly affect social interaction anxiety. Also, a full mediation occurs when experiential avoidance serves as a mediator. This is explained through the occurrence of habitual coping, whereby the cognitive aspect of behavior (in this case, rejection sensitivity) becomes dormant and unnecessary. Some variables which may have possibly accounted for the relationship between these concepts may be considered for future research to validate and better understand the findings of this study.

Keywords: experiential avoidance, rejection sensitivity, social interaction anxiety

Introduction

Several psychologists, such as Freud, Maslow, Horney, Sullivan, and Fromm have accounted for the concept of belongingness in their theories. Belongingness hypothesis states that every human being has the insistent drive to create and maintain long-lasting and significant interpersonal relationships; and the failure to do so may lead to psychopathology and other ill effects inflicted by the individual (Baumeister, & Leary, 1995).

Dating back to the history of evolution, it may be seen that belongingness was already an important aspect for survival: people formed groups to hunt and fight against predators, they picked mates to care for their offspring, and shared their resources among group members (Baumeister, & Leary, 1995). Belonging is indeed important in maintaining one's quality of life – Maslow's hierarchy of needs places love and belongingness above basic needs (Maslow, 1968). This pertains to the human motive of satisfaction which is gleaned from being part of a group of people. Thus, people become vulnerable to and suspicious of the actions of the people around them if their feeling of belongingness is perceived to be threatened. However, such vulnerability more often than not leads to feelings that are the opposite of belonging. Hence, this makes such people more prone to depression and anxiety disorders.

An overarching construct used to explain this is interpersonal sensitivity. Boyce and Parker (1989) defines this as the "undue and excessive awareness of and sensitivity to, the behavior and feelings of others" (p. 342). This trait is attributed to one's personal inadequacy and frequent misinterpretations of others' behaviors, which then lead to sensitivity to social feedback, vigilance with the reactions of other people toward oneself, excessive concern about the behavior and comments of others, and fear of being criticized, whether perceived or actual, by others (Boyce, Hickie, Parker, & Mitchell, 1993; Boyce & Parker, 1989; Davidson, Zisook, Giller, & Helms, 1989). These manifestations result in discomfort and avoidance of being with a group, and non-assertive behaviors. While Boyce & Parker (1989) coined the term interpersonal sensitivity, Harb, Heimberg, Fresco, Schneier, & Liebowitz (2002) suggest a more narrowed-down term for the construct – interpersonal rejection sensitivity – to emphasize the individual's perceived threat towards interpersonal rejection.

Rejection: Antithesis to Sense of Belonging

Rejection is one of the feelings people may become vulnerable to when they feel as if they do not belong to a group of people. Depending on the person's readiness to perceive and react to cues of rejection, responses such as aggression, depression, emotional detachment, and resentment may be manifested by the individual (as cited in Downey, & Feldman, 1996). This is called rejection sensitivity. Seen as a defense motivation system, individuals are motivated to protect themselves against possible rejection from their significant others, such that their negative thoughts, feelings, and physiological responses are already activated on possible cues of the said phenomenon – an *if . . . then* phenomenon (Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004). For example, *if* my friend does not respond to my text message within an hour, *then* I will not talk to her anymore. This response is not the same for every individual as level of rejection sensitivity varies. Highly rejection-sensitive (HRS) individuals are those with heightened tendency toward anxious expectations, perceptions, and intense reactions to rejection (Downey et al., 2004).

Figure 1 shows how Levy, Ayduk, Downey, & Leary (2001) conceptualized rejection sensitivity. Here, rejection sensitivity is seen as an innate trait, and is only activated by trigger stimuli. Depending upon their degree of sensitivity to rejection and perception based on the stimuli, an individual processes cognitive and affective thoughts about how to react. This then results in behaviors, either positive or negative, depending upon the formed cognitive and affective thought, which further forms the rejecting experience of the individual.
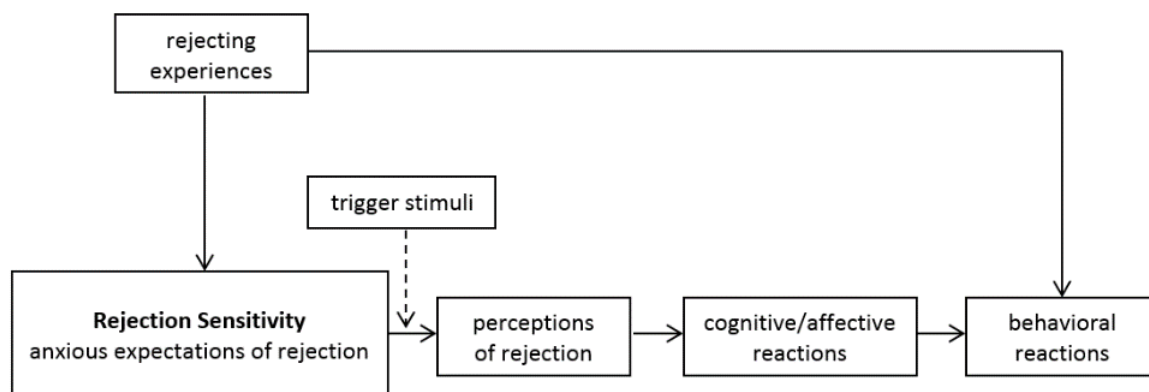

Figure 1: Rejection Sensitivity Model (Levy, Ayduk, Downey, & Leary, 2001)

Social Anxiety as a Correlate of Rejection Sensitivity
Several studies show that rejection sensitivity correlates with social anxiety, defined as the anxiety experienced by people due to their inability to create positive impressions on others (Downey, & Feldman, 1996). A cognitive-behavioral framework has been proposed by scholars to understand this construct (as cited in Kashdan, Goodman, Machell, Kleiman, Monfort, Ciarrochi, & Nezlek, 2014). This framework suggests that fear and avoidance of social interactions arise from dysfunctional beliefs (e.g. negative evaluations by others, exposed character flaws, and visible anxiety), which then leads to unhelpful reactions by the individual such as hypervigilance to cues of social failure and over self-monitoring. Also, consistent with other models made on anxiety disorders, there is a presumption that anxiety in social situations is a response to a perceived threat (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Taking these into account, highly rejection sensitive (HRS) individuals would tend to avoid social interactions that might possibly expose them to rejection (a perceived threat) due of the belief that they have once been rejected, thus inducing anxiety in the individual.

It may also be argued that in relating social anxiety and rejection sensitivity to a broader personality trait, features of introversion might be reflected due to the avoidant behaviors that an individual displays (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Downey & Feldman (1996) also found that HRS individuals have difficulty maintaining intimate adult relationships. This supports that perceptions of being rejected result to difficulty in maintaining social interactions, hence creating social anxiety.

Based upon the type and specificity of evaluative fears, two broad domains of social anxiety are identified: performance and social interaction. Performance anxiety arises when there is fear of being scrutinized by others during specific tasks such as writing, public speaking, and test taking, while social interaction anxiety involves fear and shyness in situations where communication with other people (e.g. social gathering and dating) is expected (Mattick, & Clarke, 1998). Different scales are also used to measure performance (e.g. Social Phobia Scale)

and social interaction anxiety (e.g. Social Interaction Anxiety Scale) because albeit their correlation, they are distinct from one another (Heidenreich, Schermelleh-Engel, Schramm, Hofmann, & Stangier, 2011; Safren, Turk, & Heimberg, 1998). Hence, these instruments are administered together to gauge the general concept – social anxiety.

Experiential Avoidance as a Correlate of Rejection Sensitivity
It is evident from the concept of rejection sensitivity that it leads to certain behaviors adopted to avoid perceived threats. Another concept related to rejection sensitivity is experiential avoidance (EA), a phenomenon that occurs when a person is reluctant to deal with particular private experiences such as bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, behaviors, and predispositions, and makes ways to change the form and frequency of these events (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follete, & Strosahi, 1996).

Several theorists (e.g. Kashdan, Weeks, & Savostyanova, 2011; Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2010) have proposed that this is an essential element in the development of social anxiety, such that greater experiential avoidance leads to greater social anxiety. Specifically, the findings of Kashdan et al. (2014) showed that although EA levels in an individual were similar across situations, the relationship between experiential avoidance and social anxiety depends on the context of the situation. When the situation calls for more mentally challenging tasks where the self is highly vulnerable to dysfunctional beliefs, EA is more relevant as compared to situations that call for minimal mental effort. For example, experiential avoidance may lead an individual to engage in a non-significant conversation with a stranger, but not in interactions that would require intimacy and compassion, because the element of rejection among strangers is not relevant to them.

Other research has also stated that EA is a rejection of private experiences that leads to emotional distress (Gutierrez, Zarazaga, & Damme, 2011), while Kashdan et al. (2014) found support that experiential avoidance temporarily leads to social anxiety. Experiential avoidance is also seen as a form of coping by some individuals (Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, & Steger, 2006). However, this form of coping is believed to have short-term effects only, and has a negative implication in the long run.

Rejection Sensitivity, Social Anxiety, and Experiential Avoidance
Martin & Miller (2013) explained the concepts of rejection sensitivity, social anxiety, and experiential avoidance as components of interpersonal sensitivity. According to their findings, rejection sensitivity is the cognitive aspect of it, while avoidance is the behavioral component. Social anxiety covers all the components, namely cognitive, behavioral, and motivational.

While being components of a bigger construct, several empirical studies have also shown possible relationships among the three. A number of studies state that experiential avoidance leads to social anxiety, but is contextual in nature. As well, rejection sensitivity correlates with both experiential avoidance and social anxiety. This is consistent with the assumption of cognitive behavioral theory that cognitions, behaviors, and emotions interact with each other.

Thus, rejection sensitivity, social anxiety, and experiential avoidance have been deemed related to each other by scholars. Despite the established relationships among these, no literature has yet explicated direct relationships among them. Given the theoretical assumptions and findings from the reviewed literature, this study aims to explore how these variables affect one another.

Specifically, mediation was used to concretize the framework of cognitive behavioral theory.

It has been mentioned earlier that social anxiety stems from dysfunctional beliefs which then leads to unhelpful reactions. Thus, depending on the individual's level of rejection, he/she tends to create ways to avoid this feeling, which then leads to anxiety. This assumption emphasizes that one's reactions explains one's cognition, which in turn affects one's state of emotion.

In choosing the role of the three identified concepts, other assumptions have been taken into consideration. First, social anxiety is sub-classified into two distinct types – performance and social interaction. In order to narrow down the results, only a particular type of social anxiety was used in this study. Since the concepts deal mostly with interpersonal expectations and behaviors, social interaction anxiety is better represented. Second, in utilizing the assumption of cognitive behavioral theory on the emergence of social interaction anxiety, experiential avoidance serves as the mediator because rejection sensitivity is the cognitive component of IS, while experiential avoidance is the behavioral component of IS. Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework of this study.

On the other side, it is also important to note that this study did not account for other factors (e.g. socio-demographics, family background and history, prior experiences) that might play into the relationship of these concepts, because this study looked at the mediating role of experiential avoidance as a behavioral manifestation of one's level of rejection sensitivity, which in turn leads to social interaction anxiety.

Under the theoretical underpinning of cognitive behavioral theory and the research gaps in literature, this study aimed to answer the following questions: (1) how does rejection sensitivity affect social interaction anxiety? (2) how does experiential avoidance mediate the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety? And (3) how does rejection sensitivity affect social interaction anxiety when the relationship is mediated by experiential avoidance? From the above research questions, it is hypothesized that (1) there is a significant positive correlation between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety; (2) experiential avoidance significantly mediates the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety; and (3) when experiential avoidance mediates the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety, the relationship becomes non-significant – a full mediation.
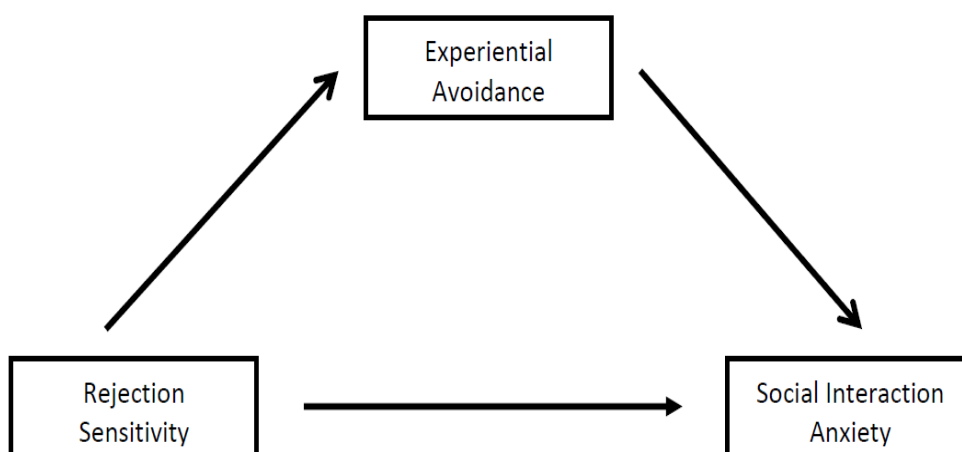

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Method

Research Design

A cross-sectional, explanatory design was used in this study. Three variables were measured using scales that were used in previous studies and were found to be reliable: (1) rejection sensitivity as the independent variable, (2) social interaction anxiety as the dependent variable, and (3) experiential avoidance as the mediator.

Sample and Sampling Design

There were 159 participants in the study, which included undergraduate students from some of the universities within the National Capital Region. Majority of them study in De La Salle – College of Saint Benilde (31%), De La Salle University – Manila (15%), PATTS College of Aeronautics (14%), and University of Santo Tomas (8%). Also, there were 89 females (56%) and 70 males (44%) who participated in the study. 56% of them are aged 18 and 19 (M = 19.29, SD = 2.89) and reside in the NCR (74%).

Instruments

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (AAQ-II; Bond, Hayes, Baer, Carpenter, Guenole, Orcutt, Waltz, & Zettle, in press). Using a seven-item, one-factor scale, experiential avoidance was measured by rating the statements from 1 (never true) to 7 (always true). Sample items include "I'm afraid of my feelings"; "My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life"; and "It seems like most people are handling their lives better than I am." In analyzing the reliability measure of the seven items used in the scale, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 was derived which is a good indicator of the reliability of the scale.

Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick, & Clarke, 1998). Social interaction anxiety was measured using a 20-item scale which involves statements that were rated from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely true). Some statements in the scale are "I find myself worrying that I won't know what to say in social situations"; "When mixing socially, I am uncomfortable"; "I am unsure whether to greet someone I know only slightly"; and "I have difficulty talking to attractive persons of the opposite sex". Among the twenty statements, three items were reversely scored in data analysis (e.g.: "I find it easy to make friends my own age."; "I am at ease meeting people at parties, etc."; and "I find it easy to think of things to talk about"). Yielded Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 indicates that the scale is a reliable measure of the variable being measured.

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Eighteen situations were cited for this questionnaire. Each situation has two sets of questions answerable by a 6-point Likert scale which aims to approximate the (1) level of anxiety and (2) perception of the participant on the possible response of the other person. Sample situations include "You ask someone in class if you can borrow his/her notes."; "You ask you parents for help in deciding what programs to apply to"; and "You ask a friend to do you a big favor". Measures of Cronbach's alpha for rejection sensitivity situations, level of anxiety, and perception were 0.88, 0.91, and 0.89 respectively, which shows that the scale was a reliable instrument for measuring rejection sensitivity, given that it measures both the level of anxiety and perception of the individual in a given situation.

Procedure
The study was conducted in two modes: online and manual survey. For the online questionnaire, the survey – which included the informed consent and the three instruments – was made via Google Forms and linked to social media networks. For the manual survey, parcels containing the informed consent and the three instruments were handed over to qualified participants.

Results were encoded and cleaned through Microsoft Excel while data analysis was run using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 20.0). Items that needed to be reversed were processed before computing for measures of the variables. Mean scores were derived to measure levels of social interaction anxiety and experiential avoidance. Meanwhile, for the rejection sensitivity, product between the level of anxiety and perception of the participant was first computed before getting the mean score.

Descriptive statistics (including age, university, place of residence, and sex) were also gathered for the profile of the participants, while mediation analysis was performed to test for the hypotheses of the study.

Data Analysis

After data cleaning and item reversals, scales used were validated first from the sample population using Cronbach's alpha. Since the scales yielded good results, mediational analysis was performed using PROCESS tool by Andrew Hayes, an installed plug-in software. Bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples, and Sobel test, was used to test for the significance of the indirect effect (second hypothesis). A confidence interval of 95% was also used for the bias-corrected confidence estimates. In presenting the results of the study, unstandardized coefficients were reported to explain effects in raw units, unless otherwise stated.

Results

Three hypotheses were tested for this study. First, there is a significant positive correlation between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety. Second, experiential avoidance significantly mediates the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety. Third, when experiential avoidance mediates the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety, the relationship becomes non-significant – a full mediation. Statistically speaking, the first hypothesis looks into the total effect of rejection sensitivity on social interaction anxiety, while the second and third hypotheses explore the direct and indirect effects in the model. To prove these hypotheses, Andrew Hayes' PROCESS tool was utilized in SPSS 20.0

Hypothesis 1 – Total Effect
In a mediation model, the total effect corresponds to path c – the effect of rejection sensitivity on social interaction anxiety, including the direct and indirect effects. Result showed that there is a significant positive relationship between the two, even though there is a weak association between them, $c = 0.04$, $t(157) = 2.35$, $p<0.05$. Nevertheless, we accepted the first hypothesis of this study.

Hypothesis 2 – Indirect Effect
To measure the indirect effect of rejection sensitivity on social interaction anxiety, product of

coefficients of path *a* (relationship between rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance) and path *b* (relationship between experiential avoidance and social interaction anxiety) was derived. Results showed that path *a* and path *b* indicated a positive relationship between the variables, $a = 0.09$, $t(157) = 2.64$, $p<0.01$ and $b = 0.29$, $t(157) = 8.79$, $p<0.00$. From these values, it can also be observed that path *b* had a greater association relative to path *a*. Despite huge discrepancies in magnitude of the beta coefficients, paths *a* and *b* were both significant.

The indirect effect, *ab*, was 0.03. Using the Sobel test, this effect was found to be significant, $z = 2.52$, $p < 0.05$. Bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples and bias-corrected confidence estimates were also used to assess the indirect effect of the model. Given the 95% CI, the lower limit was 0.001 while the upper limit was 0.05. With these criteria, the second hypothesis of this study proved to be acceptable.

Hypothesis 3 – Direct Effect
Path *c* of the mediation model refers to the direct effect of rejection sensitivity on social interaction anxiety when mediated by experiential avoidance. Result showed that there is no significance, $c = 0.01$, $t(157) = 0.99$, $p>0.05$. However, in using the enter method to do multiple regression, social interaction anxiety was predicted quite well from both rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance with an adjusted $R^2 = .35$, $F(2,156) = 42.73$, $p = 0.00$. Hence, the third hypothesis of this study was also accepted.

The significant indirect effect and insignificant direct effect supported full mediation in the study.

Discussion

Findings of this study confirmed the three stated hypotheses, which confirmed the assumptions made by cognitive behavioral theory. Results showed that each concept had a direct significant relationship to the other concepts which provides support to Martin and Miller's (2013) study that concepts can be overarched by a bigger concept – interpersonal sensitivity. Moreover, insights on cognitive behavioral theory in the context of social interaction anxiety were further elaborated through the mediating role of experiential avoidance.

Mediating Role of Experiential Avoidance
The results of this study showed that rejection sensitivity significantly affects experiential avoidance in the same way that experiential avoidance significantly affects social interaction anxiety. Also apparent in the results of this study was the great discrepancy between the regression coefficients of path *a* ($a = 0.09$) and path *b* ($b = 0.29$). Hence, the relationship in path *b* was stronger than the relationship in path *a*. In contextualizing this to the concepts, this is possibly because experiential avoidance is not always the option to every individual perceiving threats of rejection. However, when experiential avoidance comes in, there is a great tendency for one to experience anxiety in social situations. Thereby, this supports previous literature that experiential avoidance is a form of coping among individuals, which induces anxiety in the long run (Kashdan et al., 2006).

Since experiential avoidance is a form of coping by an individual, this phenomenon would continue to persist whenever an individual perceives a particular event as a potential source of rejection. Thus, to avoid the feeling of rejection, experiential avoidance becomes an automatic behavior because it becomes a habitual way of coping with the perception of being rejected. This occurs because individuals are motivated to defend themselves against these unwanted

phenomena (Downey et al., 2004). For example, when walking a person looks down to prevent the possibility of seeing known people and being disappointed when not greeted by them. This habit may be adopted by individuals depending upon their level of rejection sensitivity. People with low rejection sensitivity may opt to still walk without looking down and in turn not greet the people they know, while others would choose to seldom go out anymore. From this, it can be seen that all these behaviors would lead to social interaction anxiety but is contextual on the level of rejection sensitivity (Kashdan et al., 2014). In other words, people employ experiential avoidance differently depending upon their level of rejection sensitivity. Thus, the assumption of contexts and coping by experiential avoidance explains its mediating role in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social interaction anxiety.

Insignificance of Rejection Sensitivity Given the Presence of Experiential Avoidance
Results of this study showed that rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance are predictors of social interaction anxiety. However, when experiential avoidance was played as a mediator, the role of rejection became non-significant. This finding generally states that cognition does not have anything to do with social interaction anxiety when it is already accompanied by certain behaviors. This is, in part, opposing what some cognitive-behavioral theorists propose: that both cognition and behaviors affect one's emotions.

Since experiential avoidance is seen as a habit to cope with the feeling of being rejected, it is essential to understand how habits are formed. According to Duhigg (2012), there are three steps through which habits form: trigger/cue, then routine, and then reward. Trigger leads the individual to let behavior unfold automatically, which in turn leads to the behavior itself because of the reward that this gives. This cycle goes on because certain parts of the brain have particular roles to play in the development of behaviors. According to neuroscientists, the basal ganglia is responsible for development of behavior, while the prefrontal cortex is responsible for decision making. When behaviors develop automatically, the prefrontal cortex becomes dormant, and thus there is no need to think anymore.

Similar processes occur with experiential avoidance. The perception of being rejected triggers experiential avoidance to unfold and become an automatic reaction in order to avoid the phenomenon of rejection. Since it becomes an automatic reaction, thinking becomes unnecessary; hence the non-significance of rejection sensitivity.

In general, the results of the study showed that rejection sensitivity leads to social interaction anxiety. However, when an individual chooses to employ experiential avoidance to cope with his/her perception of being rejected, their level of rejection sensitivity becomes non-significant. The cognition becomes unnecessary to lead to social interaction anxiety due to the mechanism involved in the creation of habits. Thus, it is only the behavioral component that becomes a source of anxiety for the individual.

Conclusion

Understanding the relationships among these concepts is helpful in crafting therapies to treat particular psychological and mental health problems, specifically anxiety disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorders. There have been several third-wave cognitive behavior therapies that may be modified and utilized based on the findings of this study. Specifically, an integration of psychodynamic therapy would be helpful because experiential avoidance serves as a form of coping (a defense mechanism) to one's rejection sensitivity. However, there are certain limitations of this study that must be taken into account. First, even though full

mediation was seen in the study, it is important to take note that path *a* and path *b* were stronger than path *c.* This statistical result might have contributed to the non-significance of the direct effect. Second, accounting for the mechanism of habit would actually render the direct effect to be non-significant. This being the case, there remains the possibility of the presence of other potential mediators. Thus, even though full mediation is promoted in this study, future research is encouraged to explore other mediators. Third, the population used in this study only involves undergraduate students. Typically, individuals of this age are in the period of adolescence where issues might be different from older people. Thus, future researches may consider exploring the issue with other populations. Fourth, this study does not take into consideration the presence of extraneous variables that might also be affecting the relationships among these concepts. Thus, it is also recommended for future studies to consider other environmental and socio-demographic variables that might affect rejection sensitivity, experiential avoidance, and social interaction anxiety. For example, history of mental illness in the family, socio-economic status, and coping styles may moderate the effect of mediation. Hence, a moderated mediation may be used to provide deeper understanding of the relationships.

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