

Loneliness and Expressive Suppression; The Role of Pessimism about Expressivity



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Overview

Loneliness triggers a state of hypervigilance to social threats (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). As a result, lonely individuals tend to form pessimistic views of the social world, and, accordingly, choose prevention-focused interaction strategies in order to minimize the possibility of negative social evaluations (Lucas et al., 2010). Ironically, these cautious strategies may harm lonely individuals' social interactions (Pilkonis, 1977) and lead to a vicious circle of loneliness.

In the present research, we extended this theory to examine the relationship between loneliness and expressive suppression of emotions. Specifically, we predicted that:

- (a) Social isolation will lead to negative beliefs about expression of emotions (including an expectation of negative evaluations in response to emotional expressions).
- (b) This point of view will lead to the suppression of emotions as a cautious strategy to avoid negative social interactions.

These hypotheses were supported across three studies ($N = 625$) using correlational (questionnaires and vignettes) and experimental designs.

Study 1

In this study, the relationship between loneliness and two emotion regulation strategies (i.e., reappraisal and expressive suppression), and the mediating role of attitudes towards expressivity was examined.

Participants: Recruited through M-Turk; $N = 217$; 59% female; $M_{age} = 38.61$

Procedure: Participants completed an online survey that included the following measures.

UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, 1996): 20 items ($\alpha = .94$)

- o Example: "There is no one I can turn to."

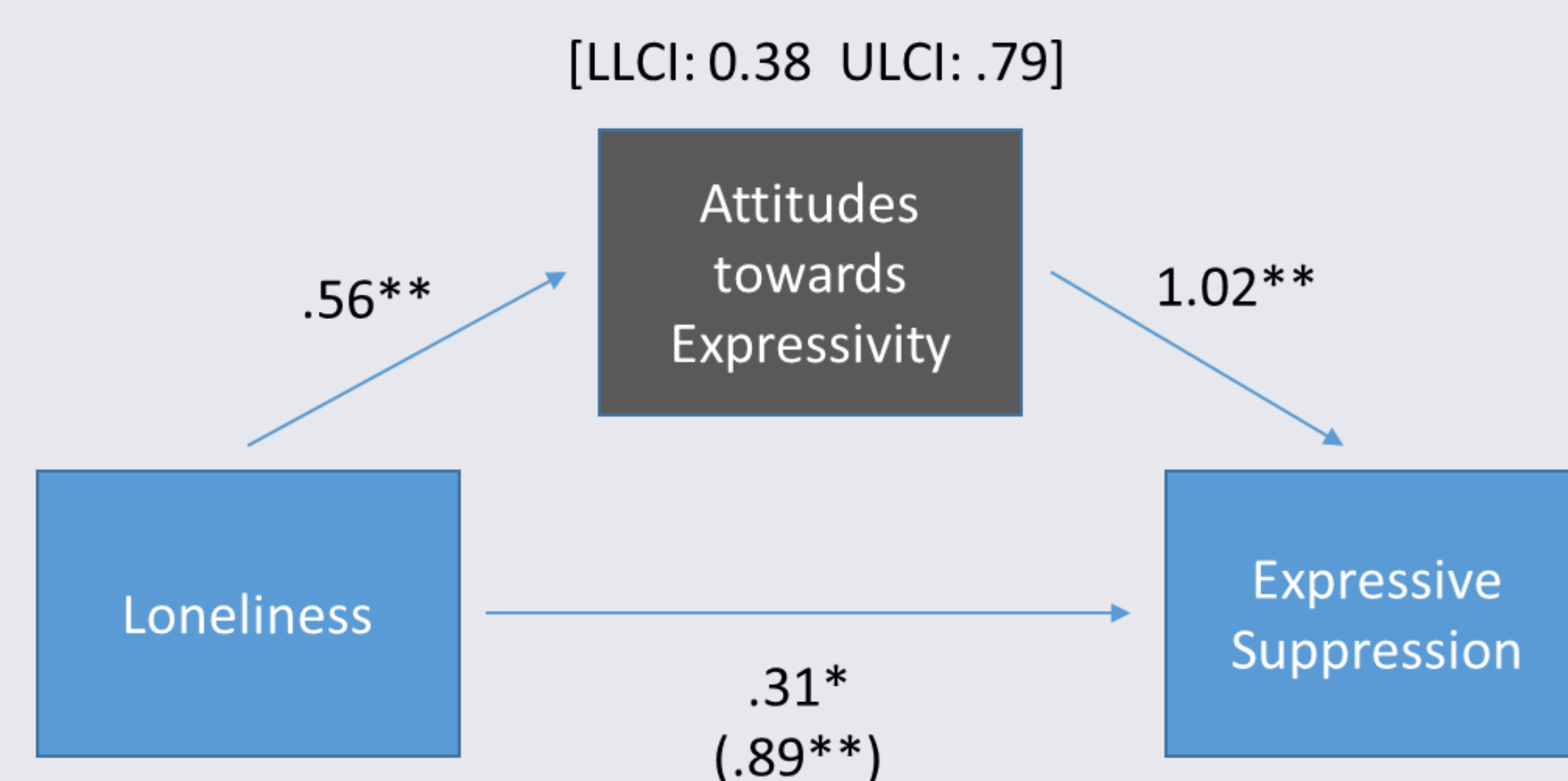
Attitudes towards Emotional Expressivity scale (Dalgleish et al., 1997; 15 items; $\alpha = .92$)

- o Example: "I think getting emotional is a sign of weakness."

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003; $\alpha = .82$)

- o Reappraisal (6 items; $\alpha = .91$)
- o Example: "When I want to feel more positive emotions, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation."
- o Suppression (4 items; $\alpha = .82$)
- o Example: "I control my emotions by not expressing them."

Study 1: Results



* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$

Study 2

In this study, the findings of the first study were replicated and extended in three ways:

- (a) Vignettes were used to assess the participants' suppression of emotions and attitudes towards expressivity in a specific scenario.
- (b) In addition to negative attitudes towards expressivity (prevention focused), positive attitudes (promotion focused) were measured.
- (c) The model was tested while controlling for two personality traits, extraversion and neuroticism, which are often associated with suppression of emotions.

Study 2 - Method

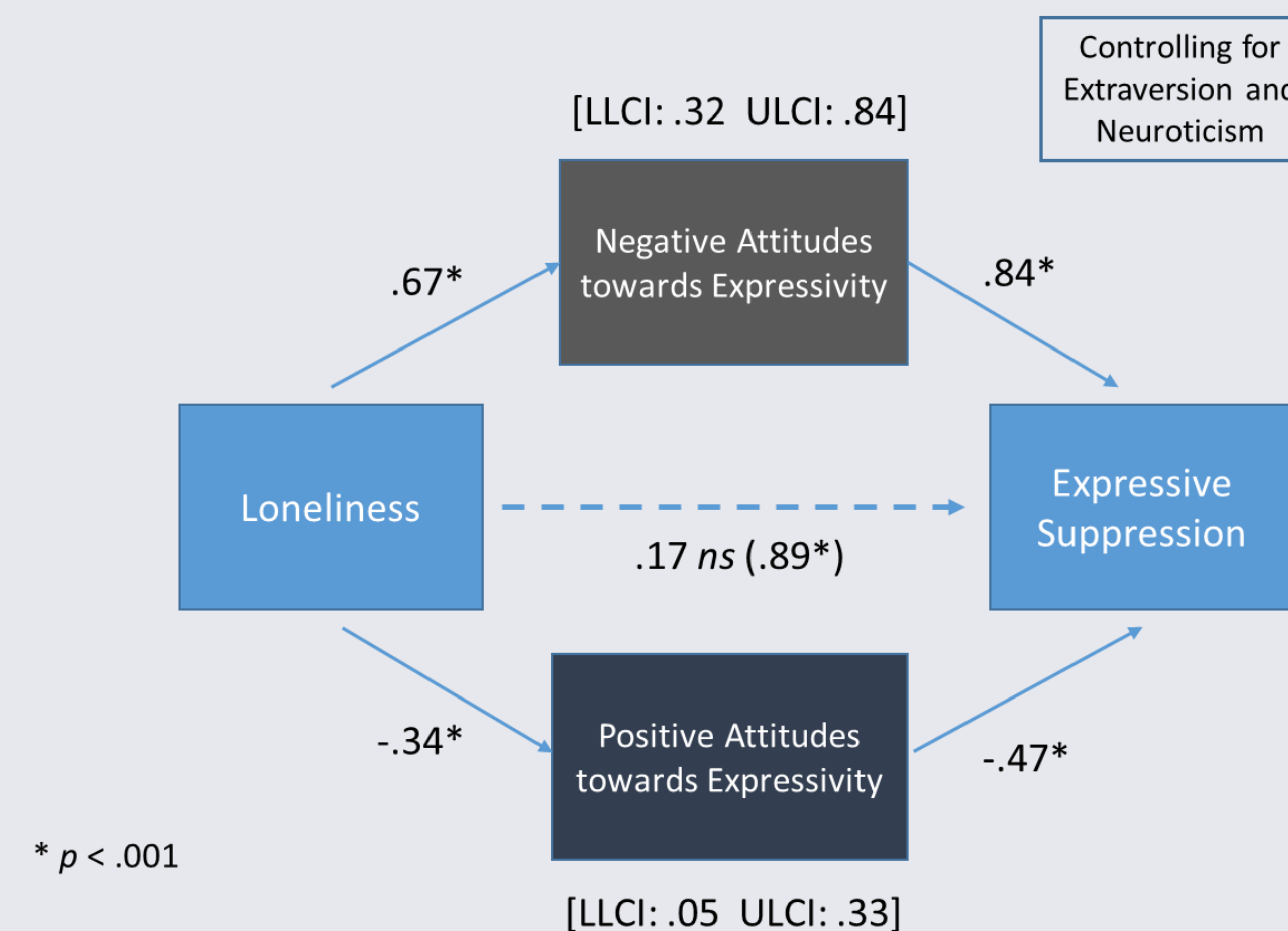
Participants: Recruited through M-Turk; $N = 188$; 52.5% female; $M_{age} = 36.60$

Procedure: Participants were instructed to imagine a scene at a party. They see a person that seems interesting, and they approach the person and start a conversation. At some point, the conversation leads to a very emotional memory, and they decide to talk about it. The participants are then told to report the extent to which they will express their emotions (suppression scale as explained below). They are then told to imagine that they expressed all of their emotions. What would the consequences of their expression be (attitudes towards expressivity, as explained below)? Finally, they completed a measure of loneliness and Big Five personality traits.

Measures:

- (a) **Expressive suppression:** 10 items, $\alpha = .93$
 - Example: "I will keep my feelings to myself."
- (b) **Negative attitudes towards expressivity:** 13 items, $\alpha = .95$
 - Example: "Showing those emotions will cause me embarrassment."
- (c) **Positive attitudes towards expressivity:** 6 items, $\alpha = .79$
 - Example: "By expressing my emotions, I will be seen as more likeable."
- (d) **UCLA Loneliness scale:** 20 items, $\alpha = .95$
- (e) **Ten Item Personality Measure** (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003)

Study 2: Results



* $p < .001$

Study 3

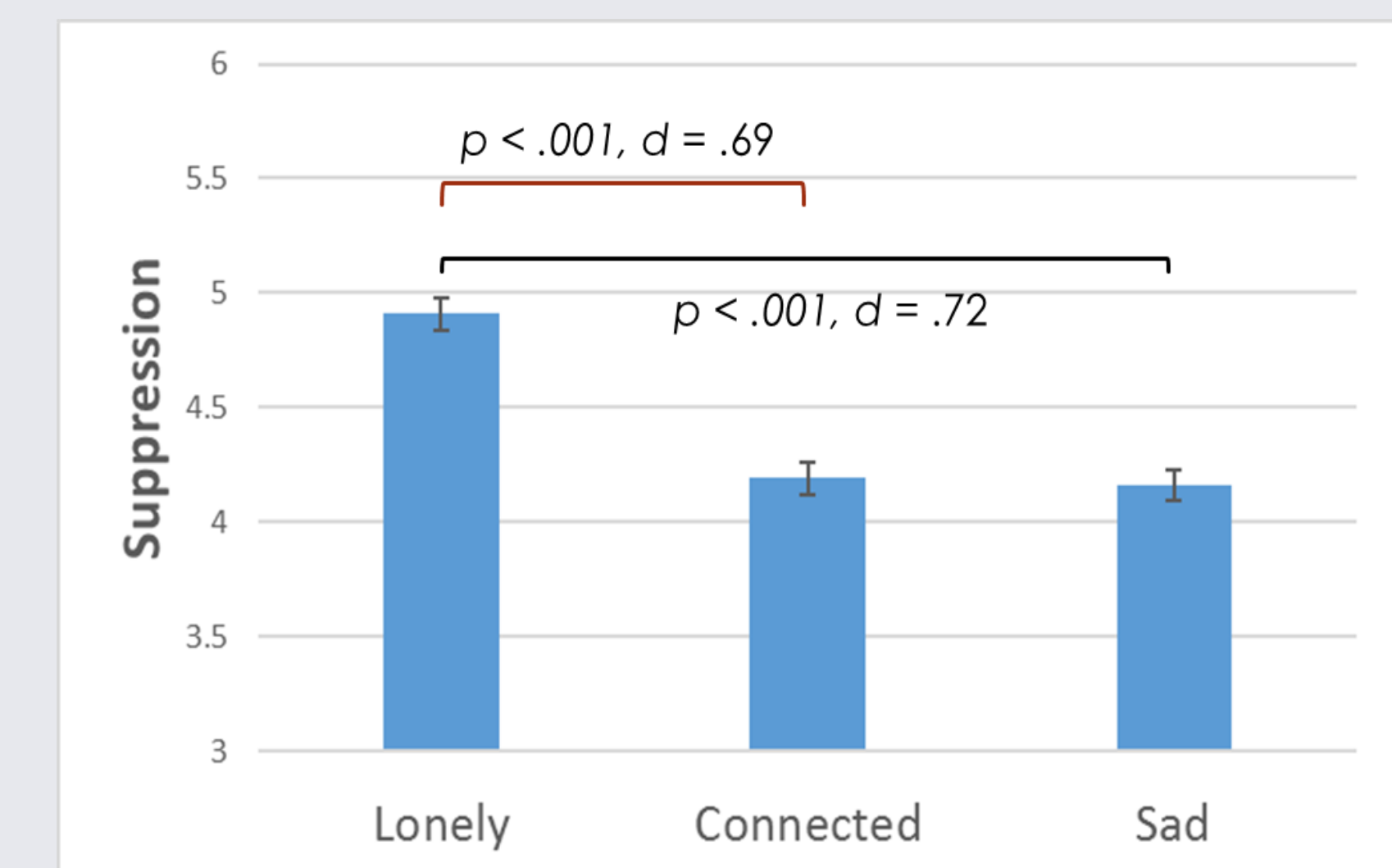
In this study, we tested the model with an experimental design. In a between-subjects design, the participants were randomly assigned to think and write about a time when they felt (a) isolated, (b) socially connected, or (c) sad. Afterwards, similar to Study 2's procedure, they imagined an interaction and reported their expressive suppression, and their attitudes towards emotional expressivity based on the imagined interaction.

Participants: Recruited through M-Turk; $N = 220$; 57.3% female; $M_{age} = 36.70$

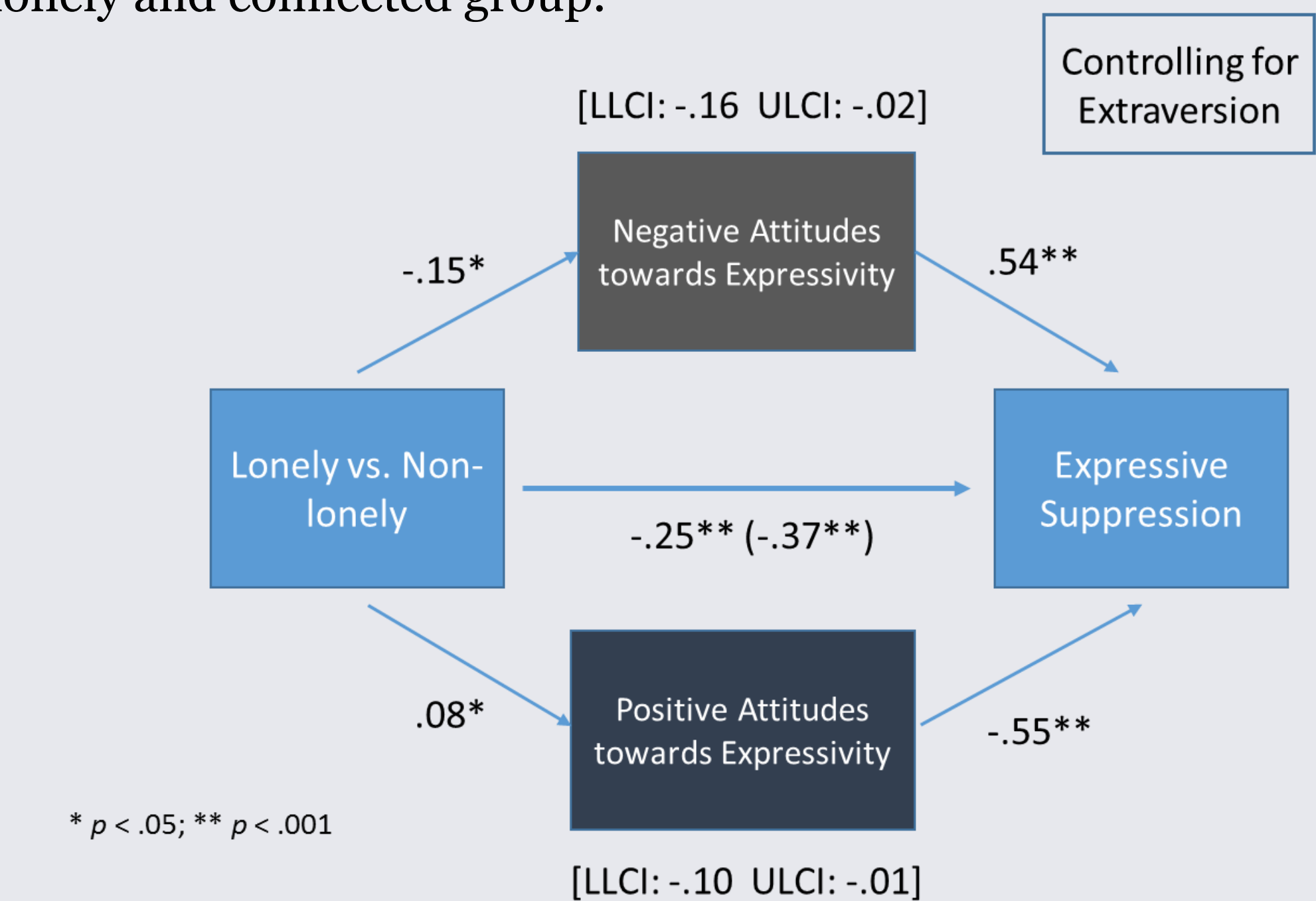
Procedure: Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they were instructed to write about a time when they felt (a) isolated ($n = 72$), (b) socially connected ($n = 74$), or (c) sad ($n = 65$). Afterwards, they went through an imagined interaction scenario exactly as it was discussed in the Study 2. Finally, they completed measures of chronic loneliness and Big Five personality traits.

Study 3 - Results

While controlling for extraversion, there was a main effect of condition on suppression, $F(2, 205) = 11.10$, $p < .001$, partial $\mu^2 = .10$. As seen in this figure, those in the loneliness condition reported significantly higher suppression than those in the sad and connected condition.



After dummy-coding the independent variable (Lonely = -1; Non-Lonely = 1), mediation analysis was run using PROCESS, and the results revealed that negative and positive attitudes towards expressivity partially explained the difference between lonely and connected group.



* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

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