

Are you happy with your friends?

The impact of behavioral immune system on social networking strategy and subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

If you could choose, would you prefer a narrow and deep circle of friends or a broad and casual circle of friends? Social relationships are fundamental to one's happiness, but how the shape of the social network affects one's happiness may depend on the socioecological circumstances one is situated within. The present research showed that as a function of the behavioral immune system, individual differences in sensitivity to disease breed divergent preferences for social networking strategy. In Study 1, exposure to a disease prime led participants high in perceived vulnerability to disease (PVD) to expect themselves to be happier in a narrow and deep social network rather than a broad and casual social network. In Study 2, participants high in PVD reported higher life satisfaction and more positive emotions when they actually had a narrow and deep social network than a broad and shallow social network. Together, these results suggest that disease sensitivity may bring functional changes to one's size and structure of social network and eventually subjective well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Individual differences in social networking strategy

- Despite these apparent benefits of social networks, individuals differ in the type of social networks they pursue (Sutcliffe, Dunbar, Binder, & Arrow, 2012): small and deep social networks versus broad and shallow social networks.

Functional trade-offs: self-protection and affiliation

- Even though social affiliation is a fundamental human motive, this motive is calibrated by the immediate situational constraints one encounters (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010).
- Previous research has found that people who are chronically high in PVD display more avoidance tendencies when it comes to social affiliations, because associating with a large number of people increases the risk of catching infectious diseases (Schaller, 2011).

Pathogen threat, social networking, and life satisfaction

- From an evolutionary point of view, positive evaluation of one's life and positive emotions follow attitudes and behaviors that would have produced higher survival and reproductive success for ancestral human life (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000).
- The present research hypothesized that people who are chronically high in PVD may be happier in a narrow and deep social network rather than a broad and shallow social network.

STUDY 1

Participants

Two hundred fifty-three participants (153 females, 100 males) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Mean age of participants was 32.82 ($SD = 10.10$).

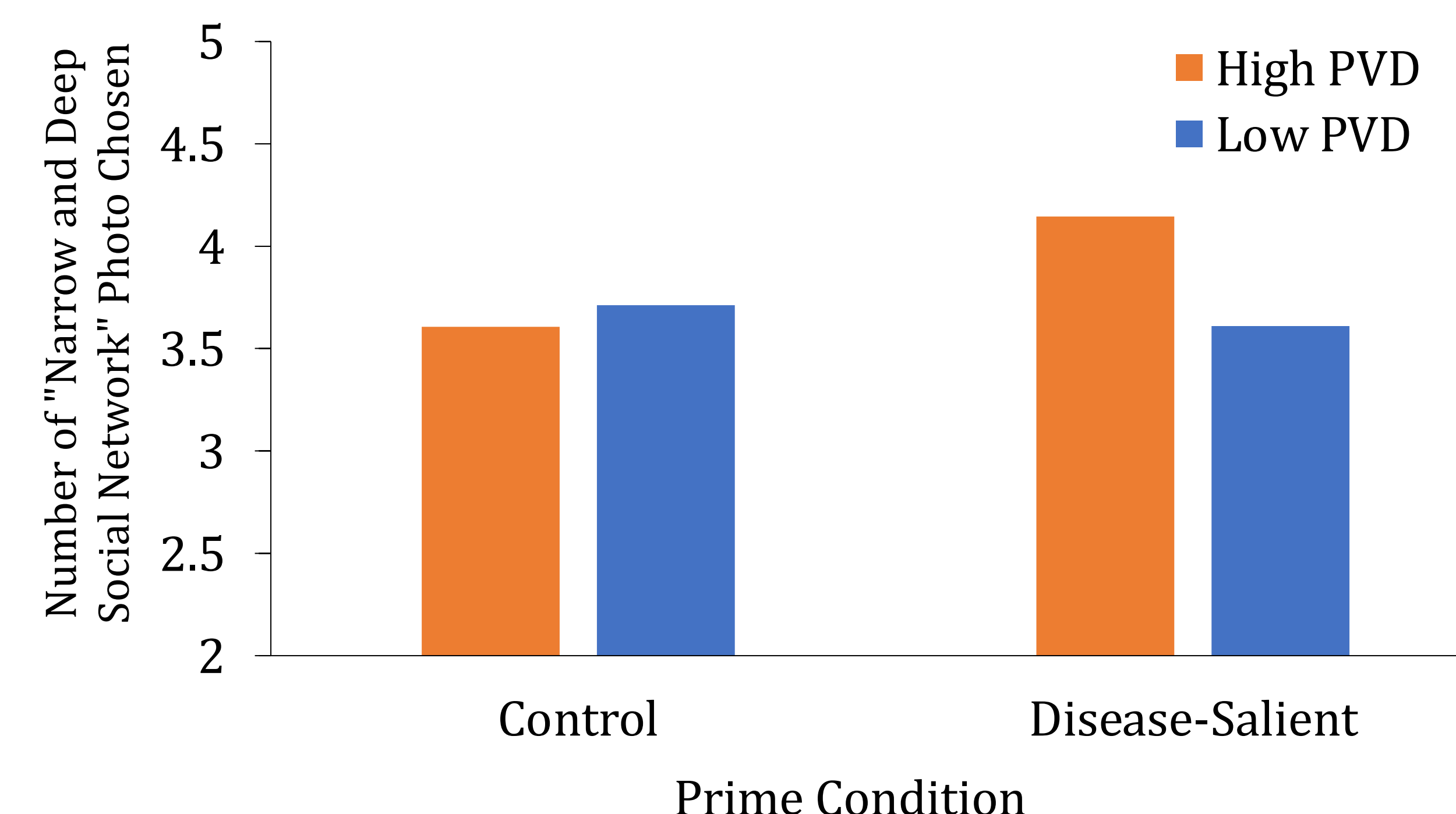
Procedure

- 1) Perceived Vulnerability to Disease (PVD) scale: measuring chronic individual differences in sensitivity to disease (Duncan, Schaller, & Park, 2009)
- 2) Slideshow manipulation: disease threat slideshow (prime) vs. office supplies slideshow (control)
- 3) Expected happiness in a binary choice of social networking scenarios (lunch, dinner, cookout, preparation for an event, picnic): a narrow and deep social event vs. a broad and casual social event ("Imagine yourself in each of these social settings. In which situation do you expect yourself to be happier?")



Results

There was a significant interaction between prime condition and individual differences in chronic PVD, $F(1, 249) = 4.01, p = .046$. In disease-salient condition, high-PVD individuals expected themselves to be happier in a narrow and deep social network rather than a broad and casual social network, $F(1, 249) = 5.69, p = .018$. Low-PVD individuals were not particularly affected by the prime conditions, $F(1, 249) = 0.18, p = .673$.



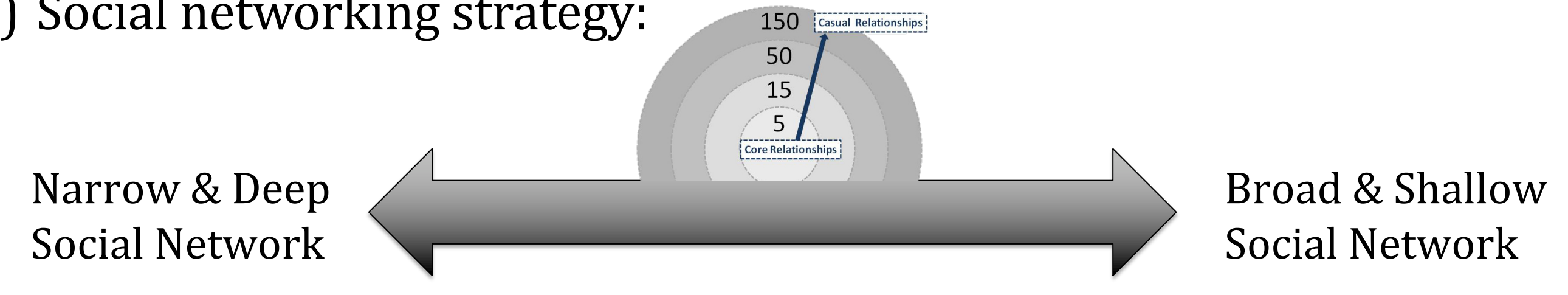
STUDY 2

Then, are high-PVD individuals *actually* happier when they have a narrow and deep social network?

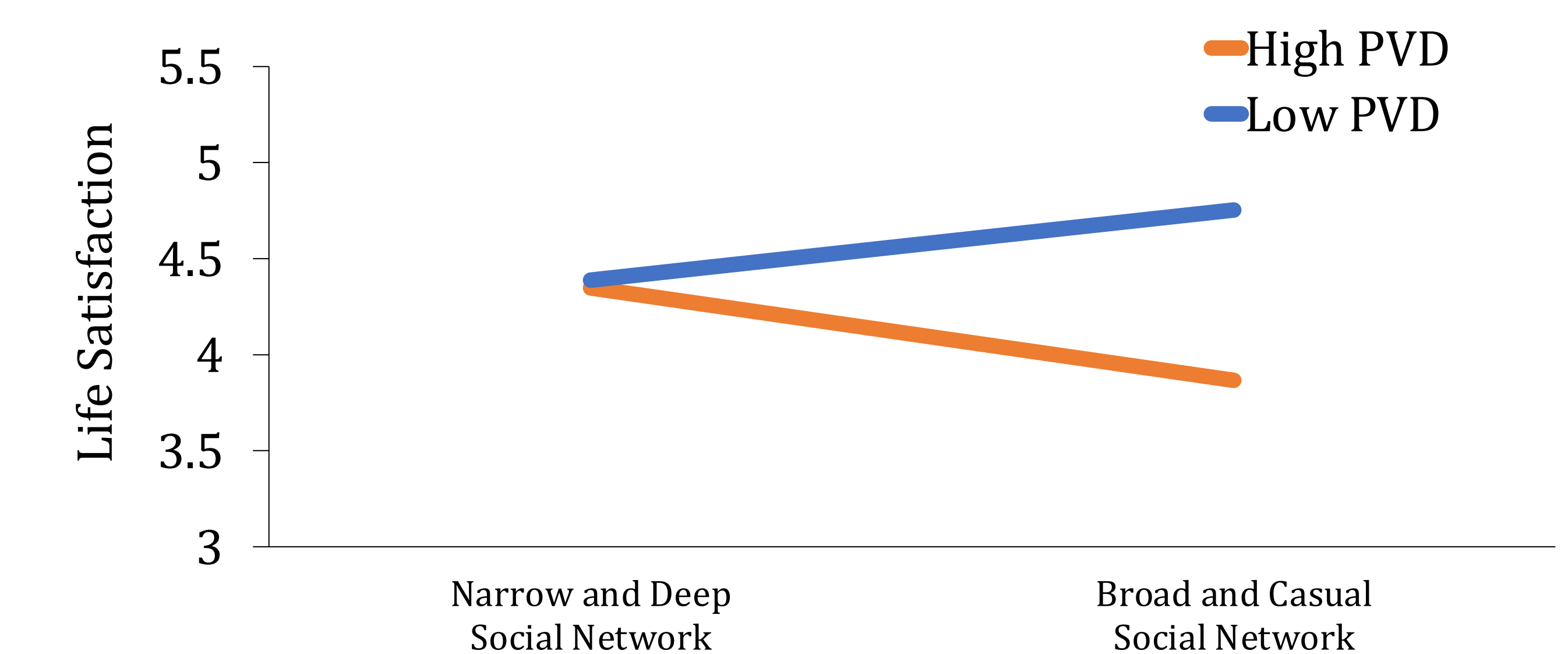
Participants

Three hundred and four participants (185 females, 119 males) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Mean age of participants was 34.14 ($SD = 11.43$).

Procedure

- 1) Perceived Vulnerability to Disease (PVD) scale
- 2) Social networking strategy:
- 3) Subjective well-being
 - Satisfaction with Life Scale (cognitive aspect)
 - Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (affective aspect)

Results



Significant interaction emerged, $t(300) = 2.46, p = .015$. High-PVD individuals were happier when they had a narrow and deep social network, $t(300) = 2.06, p = .041$, but not low-PVD individuals, $p = .158$.

CONCLUSION

Individuals who are chronically vulnerable to diseases expect themselves to be and actually are happier in a narrow and deep social network rather than a broad and casual social network.

The current study leaves interesting avenues for future research on subjective well-being as an inner compass that signals direction towards fitness-relevant goals (Buss, 2000; Grinde, 2002; Nesse, 2004).