

Keep thy friends close: Maintenance behaviours, gender differences and contingent self-esteem

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Abstract: Friendship holds a special significance for the kind of satisfaction, growth and support it provides. The impact of friendships intensifies as adolescents move to the stage of young adulthood since they have entered a developmental period characterised by greater independence. Whether friendships sustain or fade away, is determined by the needs they continue to fulfil. The aim of the present study was to determine whether friendship maintenance behaviours predict friendship contingent self-esteem. The study included 120 young adults (60 males and 60 females) ranging in age from 16 to 22 years, who were administered Friendship Maintenance Scale (FMS) (Oswald et al., 2004) and Friendship Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (FCSE) (Cambron et al., 2009). The nature and differences in perception of same-sex and opposite-sex friendships in men and women were also studied. This study, with its contradicting findings from previous studies, opens the door to fresh discourse on whether the shifting concept of gender and the societal landscape actually influence people's perceptions of friendships. The study may reflect how changing societal maps, fluid notions of gender, co-ed systems of education, and the distinctions between same-sex and opposite-sex friendships are changing.

Keywords: friendship, friendship maintenance, self-esteem, same sex friendships, opposite sex friendships

Friendships are considered crucial in one's life. Friends enrich one's lives, provide satisfaction (Demir & Weitekamp, 2007), help in socialization (Ferrer & Fugate, 2002), life adjustment and understanding societal norms (Berndt & Keefe, 1995).

Friendships have different roles and functions across developmental stages of one's life. While friendship during childhood meant sharing toys and playing parallel to each other, for teenagers and young adults, it is linked closely to trust and intimacy. Research also states that adults value work friendships more since they provide knowledge and awareness about things (Pica & Verno, 2010). For older adults, friendships improve their mental health and protect them from depressive thoughts and feelings of isolation (Blieszner et al., 2019).

People tend to befriend people who are mostly like them, having similar interests and traits (Fournet & Barrat, 2014). Studies also claim that people tend to become better friends with individuals of same sex than of opposite sex (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). This may stem from the fact that since the age of two,

individuals are grouped separately based on their sex, hence, friendships get confined to the divided groups only (Howes, 1988; Maccoby, 1998). Still, as people age, their opposite sex interaction also increases and they are able to form friendships with them as well (McDougall & Hymel, 2007). However, gender differences continue to persist in perception of friendships. Felmlee and colleagues (2012) showed in their study that women, in their friendships, hold stricter 'rules' or norms and higher expectations relating to trust and intimacy than men.

Maintaining Friendships

Like any other human relationship, friendships too turn sour and lose their effect. Wiseman (1986) talked about friendships as being fragile bonds because there is no actual social pressure to maintain them. Research highlights that individuals use similar maintenance behaviour in friendships like they do for other relationships, comparatively, they take less effort in friendship maintenance (Canary et al., 1993). Fehr (1996) talked about conflict resolutions in friendships which brought features like self-disclosure, honesty, and

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openness in the picture. It was Oswald and colleagues (2004) who defined friendship maintenance as behaviours involving strategies and routine behaviours used to sustain committed and satisfactory relationships. Four major traits were identified by them under friendship maintenance - interaction, positivity, supportiveness and openness.

Interaction entails spending time together and participating in collaborative activities. Being in close proximity is vital for friendships because it allows other qualities to shine. When people have best friends, they are more comfortable with other people and have better interpersonal happiness than those who find it difficult to form friendships.

Positivity includes the pleasant emotions, conversations and behaviours that benefit both individuals. Everyday contacts with another person result in feeling at ease and being emotionally happy (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Furthermore, when something wonderful happens, we want to inform our best friend causing a convergence of emotions in which the buddy also receives a surge of positive sentiments (Anderson et al., 2003).

Supportiveness means that friends bring assurance and are available when we require assistance. It has been discovered that closest friends offer their support equally, resulting in a self-other agreement: when each friend considers their companion as an extension of themselves.

Openness is the stage at which both friends feel comfortable disclosing personal and sensitive information to one another.

In the present study, since the researchers are looking at gender difference as a crucial variable, how different genders perceive friendships and to what extent they engage in friendship maintenance behaviours will be explored.

Female friendships are higher in quality and self-disclosure which is believed to maintain that relationship (Leung, 2002). Also, compared to men, women show more relational maintenance behaviour when it comes to friendships (Demir et al., 2011; Oswald et al., 2004). When it came to comparison

related to homophily, men stated same sex and opposite sex friendships to be more or less similar while women regarded opposite sex friendships as less intimate and reliable.

History of Gender Differences in Friendship

The expectation that opposite-sex friendship (OSF) psychology will differ from SSF psychology is supported by compelling evolutionary theoretical grounds. Men experienced more adaptive issues in prehistoric environments related to hunting and warfare than did women, whereas women witnessed issues closely related to gathering and childcare (Silverman et al., 2007). Thus, men's same-sex friendship (SSF) psychology exhibits preferences for buddies engaging in conflict and hunting-related behaviours. On the other hand, the adaptive issue of finding trustworthy childcare has had an impact on female friendships. Most importantly, OSFs might have made better partners than friends, which again boils down to survival needs.

Research (Hays, 1989; Rose, 1984) shows that there can also be gender disparities in the usage of maintenance behaviours. Male friendships have also shown less reciprocity than female friendships between same-sex partners. For example, compared to male SSFs, female SSFs reported higher levels of closeness, acceptance, attachment, compassion and trust. Males claimed that engaging in same-sex interplay cost them time, frustration, and boredom.

Studies on cross-sex friendship maintenance practices have produced a range of results. For instance, Rose (1984) found that cross-sex friendships were less likely than same-sex friendships to report using maintenance techniques. On the other hand, the acceptance, effort, time, and commitment levels in male and female same-sex friendships were higher, as were the degrees of similar interests.

However, Monsour (2016) regarded that we had been poorly defining same-sex and opposite sex friendships, and do not understand their benefits truly. It is an artificial gender binary concept along the lines of which we are trying to create these differences and understand friendship. There is nothing natural and scientific about these differences, rather just sociological constructs.

Self-esteem and its link to friendship

Friendships with high self-esteem have various characteristics such as mutual affection and respect, and positive interactions outnumber negative ones more frequently. Disagreements don't endanger the friendship. Friendships with strong self-esteem are caring because they encourage intimacy and connection among the participants. Both friends feel secure and at ease.

Although friendships have significant effects on individuals, it can be harmful to one's mental health to base one's self-worth on the calibre of one's friendships. Having self-esteem that is reliant on one or more domains is known as contingent self-esteem, a concept first proposed by James (1890). Experiencing both positive and bad experiences in a particular domain can cause changes in overall self-esteem. The amount to which one regards relationships as part of oneself and self-esteem that is dependent on peer acceptance (Crocker & Knight, 2005) is also measured. Self-esteem that depends on how well friendships are going is known as friendship contingent self-esteem.

Present Study

Although there are a significant number of studies that demonstrate the differences between same-sex and opposite-sex friendships, there are very few that move beyond the single variable. Also, most of the research is quite old in the sociological context considering the increase in exposure and concept of equality among different genders. Thus, the researchers wanted to revisit those gender differences in friendship styles, maintenance and association with self-esteem.

The purpose of this study was also to assess the impact of friendship on one's self-esteem. Through the literature reviewed, the researchers could not find studies available on the subject in an Indian societal context for young-adults. Since friendships impact one's self-esteem in various ways, this study's findings will be crucial to understand the role of maintenance behaviours on one's self-esteem.

Objectives

- To study differences in male and female friendship maintenance patterns.
- To study the differences in friendship-contingent self-esteem between men and women.
- To study the nature and differences in perception of same-sex and opposite-sex friendships in men and women.

Hypotheses

- There will be no significant difference in friendship maintenance perceptions in men and women.
- There will be no significant difference in men and women's friendship maintenance perceptions of same-sex friendships.
- There will be a significant difference in men and women's friendship maintenance perceptions of opposite-sex friendships.
- There will be no significant difference in friendship contingent self-esteem in men and women.
- Friendship maintenance perception will predict friendship contingent self-esteem.

Method

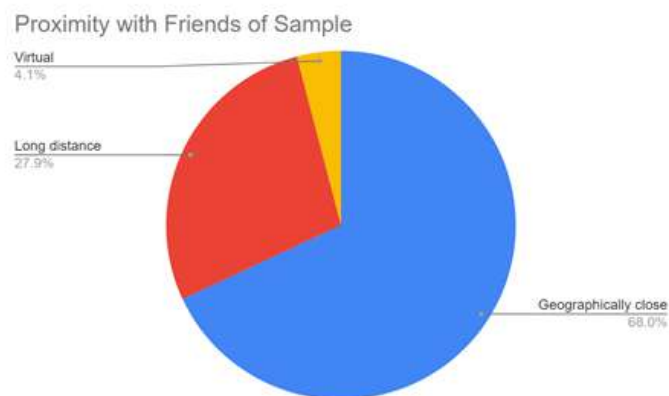
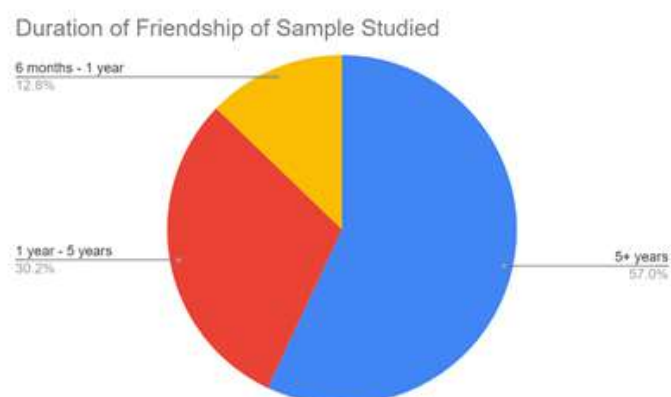
Participants

120 young adults (60 males and 60 females) between the age group of 16 to 22 years participated in the study. 30 males and 30 females filled the questionnaire keeping in mind a friend of the opposite sex, and same for same-sex friendship. A non-probability convenience sampling method was used. The questionnaire's link was distributed through internet groups. The participants were instructed to keep only one friend (either of same-sex or of opposite-sex) in mind while filling the questionnaire over Google Forms.

The mean age of the participants was 19.45 years, all residing majorly in Delhi, India.

Table 1*Demographic characteristics of the participants*

Gender	Friendship type	N	M
Male	Same-Sex	30	20
	Opposite-Sex	30	19.22
Female	Same-Sex	30	20.11
	Opposite-Sex	30	21.2

Figure 1*Proximity with Friends of the sample***Figure 2***Duration of Friendship of the sample*

Measures Used

This study made use of a questionnaire (google form) which consisted of questions related to friendship maintenance and the impact of friendship on one's self esteem.

Friendship Maintenance Scale (FMS) (Oswald et al., 2004). A 20-item questionnaire, FMS assesses friendship maintenance using four subscales - Positivity, Supportiveness, Openness and Interaction. The Cronbach alpha reliabilities for each subscale is high (Positivity - 0.92, Supportiveness - 0.90, Openness - 0.84, Interaction - 0.74). The participant is supposed to consider either their best or close friend who does not also fall under the category of their significant other to answer the items by rating along a 11 point Likert scale with anchors "never" (1) and "frequently" (11).

Friendship Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (FCSE) (Cambron et al., 2009). The FCSE scale is an eight-item scale with a 5-point Likert system (1= very little like me, 5= very much like me). While two of the items of the scale

come from pre-existing self-esteem scales, rest of the items were particularly constructed by the developers of the scale. The Cronbach alpha value was reported by the scale developers as .93, showing internal reliability. The scale also showed high validity with other measures of self-esteem and yet stood out distinct from other measures as well for being strictly friendship-contingent.

Analysis

t-tests for independent samples were run to study the differences between male and female friendship maintenance scores and friendship contingent self-esteem scores. Male versus female same-sex and male versus female opposite-sex data was also analysed through t-tests to see differences. Within same genders as well, same-sex versus opposite-sex data was examined to find significant differences. Lastly, a linear regression analysis was also done to see any relation between friendship maintenance and friendship-contingent self-esteem.

Results

Table 2

Independent samples t-test scores for differences in Same-Sex versus Opposite-sex friendship maintenance behaviour and contingent self-esteem in men and women

Variable	Mean (SD)		t (df=58)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Same sex friendship maintenance behaviour	158.33 (25.55)	168.90 (20.65)	.47	1.022
Opposite sex friendship maintenance behaviour	154.70 (34.08)	163.67 (18.97)		
Same sex Friendship contingent self esteem	15.10 (7.59)	16.83 (5.16)	2.47	.41
Opposite sex Friendship contingent self esteem	19.67 (6.71)	17.50 (7.26)		

The results showed no significant difference between same-sex and opposite-sex friendships of men as well as women on the variables of maintenance behaviour and self-esteem

Table 3

Impact of friendship maintenance perception on friendship contingent self esteem

Variable	B	ΔR^2	t	F
Friendship contingent self esteem	.04	.01	.48	.23

The regression analysis showed no significant impact of friendship maintenance perception on contingent self-esteem of the participants.

Discussion

Friendship is one of the closest ties that individuals have. Good quality friendships are crucial for a person's well-being because they promote intimacy and connection among those involved. The current study's objective was to look into young adults' friendship maintenance behaviours, understand how friendships impact one's self-esteem and how these dynamics come into play. The interplay of same-sex and opposite-sex friendships was studied, with the goal of determining whether there are any differences in maintenance behaviours. Lastly, an investigation was carried out to comprehend if friendship maintenance behaviour has an impact on friendship-contingent self-esteem.

Previous literature in this domain showed that gender differences exist in the use of maintenance behaviours (Hall et al., 2011; Hays, 1989; Oswald et al., 2004; Rose, 1984). Female same-sex friendships, for example, reported much higher degrees of intimacy, acceptance, attachment, compassion, self-disclosure, and trust than male same-sex friendships (Hays, 1989). In addition, when it comes to friendships, women exhibit greater relational maintenance behaviours than men (Demir et al., 2011). Also, when it comes to homophily comparisons, women perceive opposite sex friendships to be less intimate, less trustworthy, and less reliable as compared to men.

Today, the understanding of gender is changing. Considering the urban context specially, there is an extensive exposure to gender continuum, varied sexual

orientations and co-existence of these identities in shared physical spaces. The researchers hence were interested in studying the validity of friendship related constructs in today's time. The researchers proposed a few hypotheses in the current study that went against the existing literature, and wanted to see if they were held true or not.

The first hypothesis of the study stated that there will be no differences in men and women's scores on friendship maintenance scale. As can be seen in Table 3.3 and 3.4, this hypothesis was accepted. In contradiction to the existing literature (Demir et al., 2011; Oswald et al., 2004) which showed that women put in more effort in maintaining friendships than men, there was no difference found in the present study.

The second hypothesis of the study postulated that men and women will also not have any differences in friendship maintenance behaviour in same-sex friendships. On the contrary, the third hypothesis said that men and women will vary in their friendship maintenance behaviour when it comes to opposite-sex friendships. While the second hypothesis was against the existing literature, the third one was in line with the previous studies only because the researchers believed people still hold some biases and values in the Indian context when it comes to opposite-sex friendships. Interestingly, the second hypothesis was retained while the third one was proven false. The results showed no differences in scores in either kind of friendships. Previous findings by researchers (Gallagher et al., 2020; Hays, 1989; Rose, 1984) showed that women found trust and intimacy more in same-sex relationships as compared to opposite-sex friendships while only men did not find any such differences in their same sex friendships or opposite sex friendships.

Further, the fourth hypothesis stated that there would be no difference among men and women's friendship-contingent self-esteem scores.

Four out of five hypotheses of the present study bring out an idea that the perception of friendship (same sex or opposite sex friendships) among men and women is more or less similar and no statistical differences exist among them. These are in stark contrast to previous research. One may believe that previous research in this area is quite old and times have changed since then. But what has actually changed in the last two to three decades is the sociological map of our world. From becoming a globalized world to empowering women in every area of work, society has significantly reduced the gap between men and women, and thus, blurring the lines that separate their roles and identities. Discussions and reports from the World Bank (2011) and United Nations show that the wage gap between women and men has significantly reduced in low-income sectors because of globalization. Better job opportunities have been created for women worldwide. Speaking at a more micro-level, co-ed education has been implemented worldwide to bridge the gender difference in society. While Narwana and Rathee (2017) believe that only providing co-education is not enough to reduce the differences, it can be believed to have some effect.

If the researchers highlight the demographic of the sample, it will become evident that most of them belong to urban socio-cultural background, having studied in co-ed schools and colleges, having exposure to same sex and opposite sex friendships in their social environment. This can be attributed as a reason why they may not have perceived any differences in the two kinds of friendships. This continuous interaction between girls and boys since childhood reduces awkwardness and hesitation, thus, giving space to develop healthy friendships, without directly seeking the opposite-sex as a romantic or mating partner (Rose, 1984).

Over the years, differences have arisen in the way gender is perceived. Times have evolved and gender is now seen as a fluid concept and not just through the binary lens with which it was viewed in the past.

Gender identities or expressions that differ from their biological sex or from societal and cultural gender standards, are being reported by an increasing number of youngsters and adolescents. Some people identify as transgender, while others identify as nonbinary or gender flexible (Diamond, 2020). As stereotyped heteronormative gender norms weaken, this development enables for the expression of nonconforming gender neutrality (Gosling, 2018). Their gender identification or expression is protean in nature and can include one, several, or no gender. Thus, the binary systems can no longer explain friendship maintenance easily.

The last hypothesis was a unique addition by the researchers in this area of research as they addressed the question if friendship maintenance behaviour influences friendship-contingent self-esteem or not. The findings (Table 3.5) showed no significant result, hence, the hypothesis did not hold true.

One argument that could be given for the last finding can be associated with the fact that most of the participants in the study (68%) had friends living in close proximity to them (see Figure 2.1). Research by Preciado and colleagues (2012) suggests that the importance of distance in friendship weakens as individuals get older, and distance becomes more important for creating than for maintaining friendships. Still, one might ask if distance has to do anything with friendship maintenance behaviour and contingent self-esteem. The present research shows that individuals do not engage much in friendship maintenance behaviour in close-proximity friendships, thus, not leading to a high link with contingent self-esteem. One might even attempt to say that long distance might demand more effort and maintenance behaviour to continue friendships as seen in other research (Johnson et al., 2009). This gives way for further research in this area.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are limitations to the present study with respect to understanding the friendship dynamics in the Indian context. There is a lot of disparity in the population with respect to factors like level of education, employment, personality factors, residence and there will always be differences in the urban and rural set up. The urban population has easy access to resources and

more interaction with the opposite sex.

Even after its limitations, the present study still brings a new discourse of discussion in the existing literature. It brings the idea that with the changing sociological map, norms and gender differences in the globalized world, the nature of friendships and people's perceptions of them are also evolving. Gender is no longer a binary construct, the exposure to other sexes is not an alien concept in urban and even rural settings, friendships are not confined to physically proximal spaces and has expanded to virtual and global spaces. Considering all these notions, the implication of the present study can be seen in the form of a transition from old research set in a different sociological landscape and the new world that is slowly unfolding. Future research can consider the above mentioned changes and see how friendship and its contingent self-esteem evolves in these new settings. The contrasting findings of this study shall give something to researchers to think about, and dwell into more reasons for these disparities in today's time.

Conclusion

The present study explored an age-old question of how men and women perceive friendships and make efforts in maintaining them. As dictated by previous literature, men and women differ in their maintenance behaviour and contingent self-esteem when it comes to same-sex and opposite-sex friendships. The results of the present study showed no such differences in maintenance behaviour and contingent self-esteem. Globalization, changing gender roles and reducing differences among men and women in education and workspaces could be the possible reasons. Also, the changing idea of 'gender' as a notion was also an attributable reason. Lastly, the sample being completely urban and having grown in proximity and exposure to opposite-sex relations, emerged as a reason for the findings and limitation to the study as well. This research, with its divergent findings from existing studies, gives a space for new discussions and studies on whether the changing idea of gender and sociological landscape actually influence the perception of friendships among people.

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