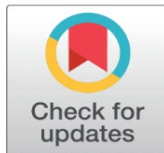


THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPATHY AND FRIENDSHIP QUALITY IN YOUNG ADULTS

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5897](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5897)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Despite the fact that social media has numerous negative side effects, it cannot be denied that it has helped in making the nexus of individuals stronger. We live in a networked society where relationships are power. It is high time to find out whether Empathy, a basic human trait can influence the quality of friendships that one forms online.

Methods: 197 emerging adults have been selected by means of purposive sampling from emerging adults in and around the city of Kolkata, West Bengal, India by keeping in mind certain criteria. They were given self report inventories of Perth Empathy Questionnaire (PES) and Friendship Quality on Social Network Sites Questionnaire (FQSNSQ) and data was collected accordingly.

Results: There is a positive and significant relationship between the two variables – empathy and friendship quality at 0.01 levels. Empathy explained approximately 23% of the variance of the Friendship Quality. for each point increase in Empathy, the predicted Friendship Quality will increase by approximately 2.4 points.

Conclusion: There is a moderate and positive relationship between empathy and friendship quality meaning that friendship quality improves with the increase in empathy within the individual.

Keywords: Empathy, Friendship Quality, Empathetic Relationship, Young Adults, Emerging Adults



1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy was found to be the key game-changer in psychotherapeutic research. Empathy normally develops in children between the ages of 7 to 12 years, having secure attachment style parenting, an open and caring community in school, and being exposed to socialization.

Friendships, on the other hand, have an important role in the lives of adolescents. Quality friendships decrease the negative effects of self-consciousness and increase social adjustment in adolescents.

1.1. RESEARCH ON EMPATHY

There are two most common theories of Empathy – A) Theories of mind (also popularly called ‘mind-reading’) which means that personal experience affects the way we perceive other people’s problems and pains, which often comes into play when people coming from different backgrounds and different languages want to express their emotions with each other. They are not able to do so due to the lack of similarity in communication and expression. This also becomes a factor in the textual messages shared on social media. Often the emotions that are clear in telephonic or face-to-face conversations, do not get equally expressed or understood while sharing textual messages over social media. But as a

person interacts more and has more opportunities to know the other person, textual messages also open up a domain for empathy. B) Simulation Theory – This would mean that people mirror other people's behaviors and emotional states. Even over online interactions, this kind of empathy helps one to share messages that are empathetic and emotionally congruent. (Collins, F. M., 2014.)

There are two aspects to empathy: affective empathy is an emotional reaction to another person's emotional condition, and cognitive empathy is the ability to comprehend the mental processes of another, stated Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, (2006). Barry and Madsen, (2009), Burnett and Blakemore, (2009), Laursen, (1996) was of the opinion that to connect with peers, emerging people rely on their emotional capacities because connections are more fragile during this developmental stage.

Clients were found to express in more detail their childhood issues once they recognized the therapist's empathy. It was also found that the therapist's empathy varied differently with different clients. Therapists were generally more empathetic to patients who had less pathology and were more intelligent but were still lacking in self-esteem (Elliott, R. et al, 2011). Empathy was also found to be the key mediator in both pro-social and violent media use and pro-social behavior. It was also found that the more exposure to any kind of media (whether pro-social or violent) the less the tendency to demonstrate pro-social behavior. This might be because excessive media usage bars a person from engaging in social activities, where a person learns to be empathetic to the needs of others. Long-term pro-social media effects were also found to be mediated to a great extent by trait empathy (Prot, S., et al, 2014).

1.2. RESEARCH ON FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

Friendship quality was highly correlated with accurately perceiving the other's traits, motives, and goals and having a normative view of the friend's personality. Friends who viewed each other favorably and shared their internal desires and motives shared greater strength of friendship than those who didn't. Friendship quality also improved if the person perceived their friend to have a similar personality type (Huelsenitz, C., et al., 2020).

Good quality of friendship has been linked to pro-social behaviors, social adjustment, social development in children, development in self-esteem, and lower introvert tendencies in children but has no direct relation to the influence of friends in life, says Berndt, T. J. (2002). Quality rather than quantity of friends helps build a base and hence protects from all kinds of cyber-bullying, cyber-victimization, depression, and peer victimization, observed Foody, M., et al., (2019). Love, perspective-taking, social intelligence, kindness, and humor are not only characteristics that people look forward to in a friend, but they also help increase the quality of friendships, found Wagner, L. (2019).

The findings imply that negative relationship quality may be more strongly associated with friendship experiences than either the number of friends or good friendship quality and that loneliness may be more directly related to friendship experiences than depressed symptoms (Fan, T., & Bellmore, A.; 2023). Eggermont, K., & others(2021) found that total friendship quality was significantly and adversely correlated with non-suicidal self-injury. These studies signify that good-quality friendships create a buffer against the highs and lows in life.

In today's world, emerging adults have frequently explored a new avenue for finding friends without barriers. Of teenagers, 57% have made new friends online. Online gaming and social networking are the most popular digital spaces for friend-finding. With 61% of boys and 52% of girls having made online friendships, boys are more likely than girls to do so. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are the most popular places for youngsters to make friends online (64% of those who have done so say they did so through social media), followed by networked video games (36%).

For this current article, we focus on the online friendships made by young adults through different social media platforms

1.3. RESEARCH ON EMPATHY AND FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

Empathy has also been seen to affect the quality of friendships and Collins, F.M., (2014) proved that people who spend more time on social media also learned to express "virtual empathy". However, the expression was highly related to the type of personality of the individual, meaning people with more trait empathy tend to have more online empathy and they display more empathy in the real world. Empathy has also been seen to reduce conflicts and improve the quality of friendship in the real world as well as in the online world. Empathetic use of social media or display of "virtual empathy" on social media also improves the quality of friendships online.

Being empathetic could increase the quantity and quality of uplifting messages. Being able to support someone emotionally may be difficult, especially through a medium that does not allow access to audio-visual stimuli. Prospective providers might benefit from adopting empathy since it might make them more conscious of and accepting of their emotional states, which may help them better listen to and feel one with the troubled person (Jones, S.M., et al.; 2019). This may further lead to increasing the quality of friendship which would lead to the overall well-being of a person. The quality of friendship that a person maintains often depends on trait characteristics – like aggression, narcissism, resilience, positive emotion and personal dispositions like extraversion, neuroticism, or openness to experience. It is beyond the scope of the present article to search whether any or all of these traits moderate the effect of empathy. The proposed study would not model trait characteristics that make individuals automatically pre-disposed to forming and maintaining more enriching emotional bonds.

Depending on the type of empathy and the student's gender, different peer interactions among teenagers were associated with different characteristics of empathy. Numerous research found that empathy was not substantially correlated with popularity but was positively correlated with peer attachment and the quality or intimacy of friendships (Portt.E, et al 2020).

2. HYPOTHESES: BASED ON THE PERCEIVED GAP IN LITERATURE IT IS HYPOTHESIZED THAT:

H: Empathy significantly impacts the development of friendship quality formed over social media networks.

3. METHODS

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

Data was collected from 229 emerging adults in the age group of 18-25 years old in and around the city of Kolkata, West Bengal, India using purposive sampling. The final count of 197 was reached after cleaning the data employing some inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final group of participants consist of men (n=96) and women (n=101).

3.2. TOOLS

In this study we used the Perth Empathy Scale(PES) (Brett, J., et al, 2022) [Perth] which is a self-report 20-item comprehensive measure of empathetic ability. It estimates cognitive empathy (the ability to recognize emotions in others) and affective empathy (empathetically feeling others' emotions), across both positive and negative domains. It was found to have good content validity and reliability across non-clinical populations. It has equally five questions for each of the two measures for each domain – 5 questions for cognitive empathy in the positive domain, 5 questions for cognitive empathy in the negative domain, 5 questions for affective empathy in the positive domain, and 5 questions for affective empathy in the negative domain. It was found to have a Cronbach alpha of 0.88. It has a 5-point Likert Scale format with 1 (Very unlike me) to 5 (very like me).

We also used the Friendship Quality on Social Network Sites Questionnaire (FQSNSQ) (Verswijvel, K., et al., 2018)[13] which is a 16-item questionnaire measuring 5 dimensions of friendship quality – satisfaction, companionship, help, intimacy, and self-validation each checked separately for each dimension. Satisfaction has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93, Companionship has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94, Help has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, Intimacy has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94, Self-validation has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. It uses a 5-point Likert Scale format ranging from Totally Disagree (1) to Agree (5).

3.3. PROCEDURE

The ethical considerations of data collection were maintained in this research. All the participants were informed about their roles in this research and their consent was taken. The data were collected in questionnaire format whose detailed instructions were provided to them verbally and in written. The questions were all compulsory, meaning each question had to be answered before moving on to the next set. The instructions for the items were printed in the questionnaire and were also made clear, verbally.

A total number of 197 datasets, out of 229, were retained after the data cleaning and selection procedure, which eliminated some unwanted data. The data were cleaned based on some exclusion criteria like random responding (i.e.,

option 1 or 5 throughout the questionnaire). The data were also checked for statistical validity and significant outliers were removed using statistics like range, deviation statistics, and box-whisker plot.

Then, the retained 197 data were subjected to descriptive statistics and product-moment correlation and regression analyses. The data coding, analyses and visualization was done by SPSS v.26

3.4. RESULTS

Table 2 shows the mean, SD, and range of the variables in this study. The mean Empathy was found to be 48.15, which was much higher than the mean of 18.23 as given by Soucie, K. M. et al. (2012)

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Empathy	48.15	10.85
Friendship Quality	36.96	4.84

		Empathy	Friendship_Quality
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	.480**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0
	N	197	197
	Pearson Correlation	.480**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	
Friendship_Quality	N	197	197

Figure 1 Correlation Matrix of Empathy and Friendship Quality

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the extent to which Empathy could predict Friendship Quality. A significant regression was found ($F[1][195]=58.314$, $p=.000$). The R^2 was .230 indicating that Empathy explained approximately 23% of the variance of the Friendship Quality. The regression equation was:

$$FQ = [26.663] + [2.4] * \text{Empathy}$$

That is, for each point increase in Empathy, the predicted Friendship Quality will increase by approximately 2.4 points. Confidence intervals indicated that we can be 95% certain that the slope to predict Friendship Quality from Empathy is between .159 to .269. The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson value = 2.19)

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1055.431	1	1055.431	58.314	.000 ^b
	Residual	3529.32	195	18.099		
	Total	4584.751	196			
a. Dependent Variable: Friendship_Quality						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy						

Figure 2 ANOVA Model

4. DISCUSSION

The current study found that empathy has a significant influence on the friendship quality maintained by individuals. The ability to manage conflict and intimacy were positively correlated with empathy. Additionally, as judged by both members, those with greater intimacy and conflict management skills had closer friendships and less disagreements, respectively, found Chow, C. M., et al.; (2013). Friendships that are more supportive for both men and women have been associated with empathy (Ciarrochi, J., Parker, et al.; 2017).

In both sexes, dispositional affective empathy was negatively correlated with conflict participation and positively correlated with problem-solving. Higher levels of dispositional empathy are linked to more effective conflict management found De Wied, M., Branje, S. J., & Meeus, W. H. (2007). The findings of the current study also corroborates the findings that empathy has a significant impact in increasing the quality of friendships that an individual maintains.

This is a well-known fact that birds of a feather flock together or that individuals are more likely to empathize with those they know or who have comparable social traits, Ford, R. M., & Aberdein, B. (2015).

People who had rather less empathy were found by Schlenker, B. R., & Britt, T. W. (2001) to have more negative impressions about their friends. This stands in line with the fact that one-point increase in empathy gives a 2.4-point rise in friendship quality as established by this study.

Meuwese, R. and other (2017) found that teenagers who have friends who are more popular and chosen by them report having better friendships. The empathy levels of their friends and the prosocial behavior of the teenagers themselves served as partial mediators of these relationship effects. Empathizing happiness was linked to fewer internalizing symptoms and higher positive friendship quality, according to Smith, R. L. (2015).

Coefficients ^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B		Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	26.663	1.383		19.285	0	23.937	29.39
	Empathy	0.214	0.028	0.48	7.636	0	0.159	0.269
a. Dependent Variable: Friendship_Quality								

It is clearly seen from Figure 3 that the Standard Coefficient β for Empathy is 0.480 with a corresponding p-value of 7.636 which is significant at 0.05 levels. This suggests that there is a moderate and positive relationship between empathy and friendship quality meaning that friendship quality improves with the increase in empathy within the individual. Friendship quality also depends on prospective friends' perceived empathetic characteristics, as Meuwese and others (2017) found.

Empathy was associated with more supportive friendships for both males and females, independent of the number of friendship nominations, found Ciarrochi, J., et al., (2017). Worthen, M. F. (1999) was of the opinion that, empathy improves adjustments to social partners, which boosts social competency. They contend that empathy lessens the importance of the person's thoughts and feelings, making the partner's wishes the main focus of attention.

Both the friendship network and the relationship between attachment and friendship quality were mediated by empathy, found Lee, P. H., & Shin, Y. (2018). From the discussion above it is found that earlier research supports the current research findings that empathy has a strong positive influence on friendship quality formed by people.

5. CONCLUSION

Empathy is not only a psycho-therapeutic medium for treatment but also a key trait in individuals. Learning to understand others' problems by simply seeing, listening or chatting with them, to feel what they feel in a certain situation forms one of the strongest basis for better human relationships. This is established beyond an iota of doubt that friendships are one of the most important of relationship after family, not only for adolescents but in every age group. Friendships help people endure through the roughness of life and maintain emotional and social stability. Better friendships, like this study has found and is supported by many other studies, are formed and sustained with people who have higher levels of empathy rather than with people with lower levels of the same. Hence, it is apparent that an increase in empathy or empathetic attitude towards human relationships play a prominent role in the improvement of friendship quality that one forms and sustains online.

This is the age of social media and since social media has blurred the social and geographical boundaries, it is easier for individuals to form friendships online over social media platforms. These friends often never meet face-to-face or do not physically share the same organizational affiliations. Friendships here are often based on mutual trust, bonding, and affection. In most of the cases of such friendships formed online, the medium of communication are various messaging platforms, where though there are options of using video and audio services, most communication is done through typed messages. Empathy is especially required in the friendships formed over social media because in most of the cases, there is no audio-visual clues and emotional affect is often lost through typed words and letters. However, an empathetic

person would still be able to recognize the true feelings of the others and be able to respond in a manner that is appropriate and is aimed towards building better relationships, even on social media platforms.

This study confirms the fact that empathy and the quality of friendships maintained online are positively and directly correlated to each other.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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