
Friendship Functions in Emerging Adults in Post COVID-19 Era-A Preliminary Exploration

Areeha Khan Durrani¹, Muhammad Saleem²**Abstract**

The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has affected all spheres of human life without any exception. Friendship is considered a shield against odds, but some changes are observed in friendship patterns and functions of friendship in emerging adults of Pakistan. This significant change encouraged the researchers to design this qualitative study in an indigenous context. Two homogenous focus groups were conducted with educated emerging adults (10 males and 10 females in each group recruited purposefully from Punjab Province only). They were screened before induction and responses were audio-taped with their consent. After collection of data, transcription was finalized in the light of Humble (2015). The transcribed data were analyzed through six step Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) technique by Braun and Clarke (2019). Rigor of the data was also ensured according to Guba and Lincoln (1994). Resultantly, we arrive at a uniform definition of friendship and six emergent themes of friendship functions (being empathetic, flexibility, supportive, help and assistance, sharing and problem solving, and companionship). Further, findings of the study showcased that COVID-19 has negatively influenced the friendship functions by decreasing interdependence among friends that triggered loneliness and social isolation in emerging adults. COVID-19 has lasting effects on those friendship patterns which used to be visible until today. It is further recommended to expand this study on emerging adults of overall Pakistan to establish baseline data.

Keywords: Focus Group Discussion, Friendship Patterns and Functions, Pakistan, Preliminary Exploration, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has significantly changed the daily lifestyle of people and have created several challenges for their social and personal life. The most important challenge faced during this unique

kind of stressor is sustaining well-settled and maintained intimate relationships, which without any distinguish are related to the physical and emotional health of people. Friendship and friend's close relationships are intentional and friends help to reinforce social and behavioral norms. Among all the changes brought by COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest one is quarantine and stay at home recommendations by the authorities. This has profoundly affected the ability of people to maintain their friendships and relationship with friends in many different ways.

In interpersonal relationships, friendships are attributed with human behavior. Studies have reported that friends encourage our financial success, health and even the survival (Brent et al., 2014). Friendship is defined as a

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voluntary relationship (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013), characterized by reciprocity (Rubin et al., 2006) and trust. Friends are also an important source of intimacy, affection and affiliation (Furman & Rose, 2015; Markiewicz et al., 2006). The capacity of having friendships with long lasting relationship from childhood to old age is also a significant factor of defining human's personality (Brain, 1976; Shorland & Douglas, 2010). A number of researches have relied on consensual but unspecific idea of what friendship actually is (Davies et al., 2011). Studies have given several definitions of friendship, but a uniform and specified definition is still not attained. In a study, it was defined that friendship is usually free of exclusive nature and represent very less sense of commitment. It is considered easier to contact the friends whom you are fallen out of touch and this sense provides durability to friendship (Davis & Todd, 1982). But while doing qualitative research, Davis (2012) found contrary results that adult's friendships are not very private and exclusive, lack intensity in emotional expressions, are not regulated by social rules and expectations much. In Pakistani studies, it is suggested that friendships are essentials to adult's life. For females, friends are supposed to provide safe spaces and are havens in a world that is otherwise rigged against them (Sheikh, 2020; Zaidi, 2022). Whereas the interaction of adults with close relationships such as friends is considered as a blessing of life because it provides continuous companionship (Aftab & Sakiz, 2021).

Friends help one another to develop a sense of identity that extends beyond birth family, cultural or ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status. While the concept of friendship exists across human society, its definition, nuances, and role in individual lives vary according to culture, religion, era, gender, and social status (Bukowski et al., 2009). Regardless of its various

interpretations, however, friendship plays an important role in human development. Friends are people "who engage in mutual companionship, support and intimacy." These interactions and relationships are usually much more involved than typical peer to peer behavior (Janke, 2020).

The most appropriate model of friendship is presented by Blieszner and Adams (1992) stating that friendships consists of internal structures and ties between the partners, having homogenous nature of relationship, considering each other at the same level of intimacy with the equal status. The process of friendship consists of thoughts, feelings and actions involved in behaving with each other and respecting all the phases of friendships such as forming, maintaining and dissolution (Goldstein, & Morgan, 2002). Till date, the research on friendship is quite old and keeps a very short history. The cultural definition of friendship is yet to be explored.

Apart from several qualities friends seek in each other, friendship also serves various functions, as friends tends to provide emotional satisfaction and help along with intimacy and companionship (Mowen & Boman, 2018). The feeling of worth and secrets sharing, hence, fulfilling integration needs. The studies of friendship usually focus on the social networks and pattern of interaction rather than the functions which friends tend to serve (Lowenthal & Robinson, 1976). In the friendship research, the psychological issues are rarely focused and expectations being studies fall under the broad idea of interpersonal perception and attraction. There is a great proportion of research on interpersonal perception related to friendship and directly does not address the functions which are served by the friends. Past research has scarcely addressed friendship functions. There are several theoretical and empirical functions of friendship which are considered salient in the literature such as gregariousness (Vollan,

2011), providing helping and supportive behavior, providing intimacy (Taylor & Oberlander, 1969), sense of similarity (Krackhardt, & Kilduff, 1990), having compatible relationship, sense of status, and power (Mak, 2020). The literature which have empirically researched the theoretical friendship function is very limited. The development of friendship and its relation with various life stages is a point of great attention. Sutton-Smith (1982) summarized that all the close interpersonal relationships develop from the reaction to interaction. The friends tend to provide mutuality and equality within the relationships, though few theories have presented the developmental sequences in order to evaluate the friendship functions at different stages of life.

In emerging adulthood, individuals tend to have multiple close friendships. The emerging adulthood age is 18-29 years (Arnett, 2018). It is a developmental period which connect adolescence and young adulthood during which the young ones have attained full status of being adult. In this stage of emerging adulthood, young people are in process of developing the skills, character, qualities and capacities which are considered important by their culture to complete the transition into adulthood (Arnett, 2006, 2007). This transition of adulthood is such important and special time of life in which the individual has the former status of adolescent and upcoming status of adulthood (Arnett, 2007, 2018). Among all other interpersonal relationships which individual have during this transitional stage, friendship is another important relationship during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007, 2012).

For measuring the friendship functions in adolescents, Aboud and Mendelson (1992) developed an instrument on respondent's assessment of the degree to which the friends fulfill friendship functions in children and young adolescents. In a review of already

present measures (Aboud & Mendelson, 1992), the authors pursued to define the friendship functions which were considered theoretically different, mainly differentiated between the best friends, casual friends and non-friends. It was assumed that if not all, few of the functions are perceived and fulfilled by the individuals and there should be covariation between the measures of different friendship functions. Gender also provides a criterion for validating friendship measures, because there is ample evidence that gender differences do exist, with women's friendships characterized by better overall quality, closeness, enjoyment, intimacy, and nurturance (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005). Thus, any friendship measure should be sensitive enough to differentiate women' and men' friendships and the friendship functions they perceive.

The Pakistani literature shows that among interpersonal relationships, friendships are less focused by the researchers. With thorough literature review, the fact is established that for every emerging adult, friends have significant role in their lives and friendships serve distinct functions which varies at every stage of life. It is observed by the authors that due to cultural diversities, like all other relationships, the perception of friendships also differs indigenously. Since, there is collectivist culture in Asian countries, specially in Pakistan, so it is presumed that cultural variations will play a significant role in operationalization of friendship and describing the friendship functions. Moreover, due to wake of COVID-19, the mode of contact and communication was significantly changed, resulting in altered patterns of every relationship; friendships are not an exception. So, this study sought to conduct a preliminary exploration of friendship functions in emerging adulthood along with changes perceived by this age group during COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives of the Study

1. To arrive at uniform definition of friendship in emerging adults.
2. To explore the friendship functions in emerging adults after COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

Q1: What is friendship in your view?

Q2: What functions one friend can perform for another friend?

Q3: What changes you have observed in friendship functions during this COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative research design was used in this study for preliminary exploration of friendship and friendship function in emerging adults.

Participants and Sample

In current study, 10 females and 10 males participated from The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. All the participants belonged to various cities of Punjab, Pakistan. The respondents were emerging adults taken purposefully through screening

form with age range of 18-29 years (Arnett, 2018). The demographic characteristics consists of the age, city and gender of all participants (See Table 1). The emerging adults were recruited on the criteria of their age and asked one question “Do you think that you have reached adulthood? by keeping in mind three conditions: i) acceptance of responsibility ii) making independent decisions and iii) becoming financially independent. The response format of this question was Yes, No and In- between. The individuals who answered no and in between were considered as emerging adults, whereas individuals reporting Yes were excluded (Arnett, 2007). In total, 32 (16 males, 16 females) participants were approached and after screening 20 (10 females and 10 males) were considered eligible. The screening form also asked about the number of friends they have on social media application Facebook, interaction with their online friends like tagging and commenting. Respondents were also asked about the number of their real-life best friends and casual friends having same gender or opposite gender.

Table 1

Baseline Characteristics of Sample from Punjab Province (N=20)

Sr. No.	Gender	Age	City	Sr. No.	Gender	Age	City	Mean Age & SD
FGD #1				FGD # 2				
R1	Female	21	Rawalpindi	R1	Male	22	Sahiwal	
R2	Female	22	Bahawalpur	R2	Male	26	Okara	
R3	Female	20	Chistian	R3	Male	23	Bahawalnagar	
R4	Female	22	Lahore	R4	Male	21	Bahawalpur	
R5	Female	24	Faisalabad	R5	Male	22	Gujranwala	M=22.55
R6	Female	22	Rahimyarkhan	R6	Male	21	Faisalabad	SD= 1.5
R7	Female	23	Multan	R7	Male	23	Rawalpindi	
R8	Female	24	Bahawalpur	R8	Male	23	Multan	
R9	Female	21	Muzafargarh	R9	Male	22	Bahawalpur	
R10	Female	25	Rahimyarkhan	R10	Male	24	Bahawalpur	

The Table 1 shows the respondents number with their gender, age and city. The mean and

standard deviation of respondent's age is also mentioned.

Data Collection Procedure

For preliminary study, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted having homogenous characteristics (FGD # 1= 10 females; FGD # 2= 10 males). The eligible emerging adults were invited to voluntarily participate in FGDs. The moderator with more than 10 years of experience and notetaker was assigned to conduct FGDs smoothly. The respondents were first informed about the purpose, nature and scope of the study. They all were encouraged to talk freely and share their views smoothly. The ground rules of FGDs were also communicated to the participants by the moderator. The FGDs were audio recorded with the consent of respondents and their non-verbal cues were also focused (Hennink, 2013).

Data Transcription

All the responses of the participants were manually transcribed by following the guidelines of Humble (2015). The transcribed data were read and re-read to ensure its validity. The transcribed responses were also translated and back translated in order to acquire the accuracy and meaning. Then, they were read and re-read several times to ensure its validity. All the transcribed responses were translated and back-translated to gain the accuracy in meanings. The transcriptions were also revised with consultation of qualitative experts to achieve its validity. The transcribed data and field notes were also compared to avoid any subjectivity and biasness.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the data, analysis was done by using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) by Braun and Clarke (2019). Following the six steps technique of RTA, the first step was to get familiar with the data by reading

actively, critically and taking familiar notes from the data. In second step, a list of codes was generated and all the data relevant to each code was organized. Initial themes were generated from coding list in third step. The reviewing and development of themes was completed in fourth step. The themes were refined, defined and names in fifth step and at sixth step, the final themes were reported.

Rigor of the Study

The trustworthiness and truthfulness of data was obtained by following the guidelines of Guba and Lincoln (1994). The credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability were included to ensure the rigor of the study. A continuous debriefing and supervision were continued throughout the process for ensuring credibility whereas confirmability was sustained through checking and rechecking of audio taped responses, transcription and field notes. The findings of this study may be applied to the similar context which confirms the transferability of data. The findings and procedures of this study were reported in depth so that future researchers can repeat the method of inquiry to achieve similar results which depicts the dependability of this study.

Ethical Considerations

The respondents were required to give written consent for participating in this research. The consent form provided them was comprised of all the information regarding purpose, nature, risk and benefits associated with the study. They were also informed about their right to withdraw from research at any time. Respondents were also ensured about the confidentiality and privacy of their identities and were assigned respondent number during FGDs. They were allowed to express their opinions without any intrusion. Respondents were ensured about their mutual respect, consideration of

opinions and were provided with supportive environment.

Findings and Discussion

After collecting the data, the analysis was conducted using six steps of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The findings are reported and discussed with respect to the research questions below.

RQ1: What is friendship in your view?

The first research questions were asked to operationalize the friendship in terms of indigenous perspective. After conducting the analysis, the study found following emerging themes to describe friendship.

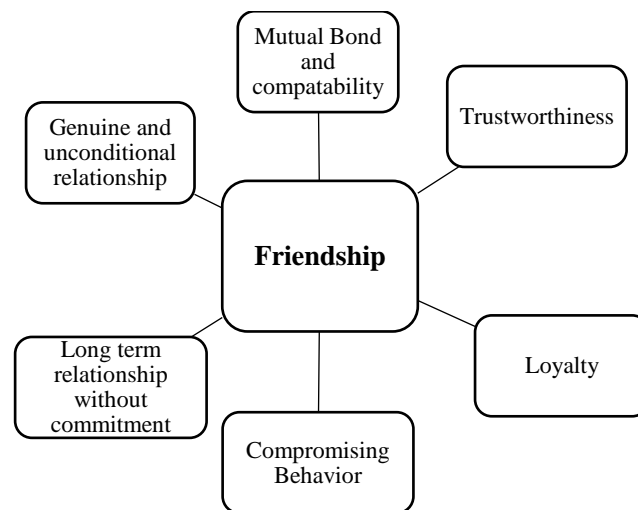


Figure 1

Emerging Themes for Defining Friendship

Defining Friendship

Friendship is a mutual long-term relationship between two people who are like-minded, compatible, develop sense of trust and loyalty, are compromising and genuine to each other without any gain or commitment. Past researches have also reported that friendships are based on the reciprocity, having similar thinking patterns, connection, loyalty and free of commitments (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013; Furman & Rose, 2015; Janke, 2020).

According to the verbatim of a respondent “A person who is trustworthy, loyal, sincere and straightforward with me is my friend” (Respondent 1 (R1), Table 1).

Another respondent stated that, “For me, friendship is a long term mutual bond, my

friends are honest and trustworthy, they are also compromising and understanding” (R4). It was also stated by a respondent that “Friends are those with whom your vibes are matched, who have similar interest like you and are selfless with no gain involved” (R2). A male respondent added that “Friends always remains with us without any commitment. I would consider a person my friend who is loyal, trustworthy and likes the things which I like and is compatible with me.” (R8).

RQ2: What functions one friend can perform for another friend?

In question two, respondents were asked about the friendship functions. After analyzing the data, six major themes were emerged.

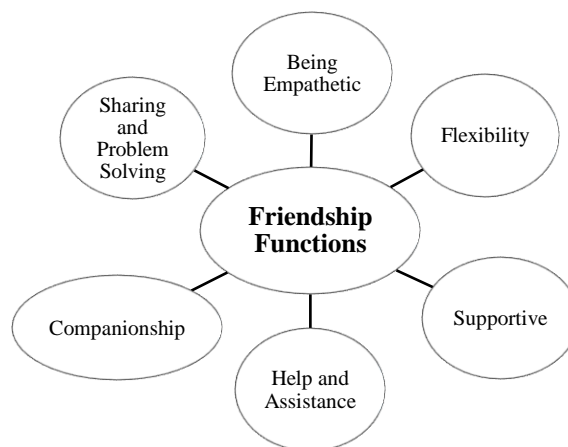


Figure 2
Major Themes Emerged for Friendship Functions

1. Being Empathetic

It is a function of friend to be caring, affectionate, listens and communicates actively, hold warmth and understands the feelings and emotions of another friend. The literature reported that friends are source of affection, they provide intimacy and closeness (Markiewicz et al., 2006). The respondents of study stated that, *"I expect care from my friend and I feel affectionate when my friend is around. There are several emotions and feelings which we can't share with everyone, but my friend is one who understand and feels whatever I am going through"* (R5). This shows that it is major function of friendship to be empathetic for each other. The friends expect to be heard and discuss the inner feelings and emotion keeping each other at equal level. Another respondent said that, *"My friends care for me more than my family and they are very important just like my family members. My friends listen to me and deeply feels my emotions"* (R2). The verbatim of a male respondent was *"It is included in roles of friends to care for each other and understands each other without saying much"* (R7).

2. Flexibility

It refers to the function of a friend to be flexible in terms of accepting flaws and changes, no involvement of ego, force or judgements, welcomes openness and emotional expressivity, providing comfort zone, respecting the differences, values, personal choices and personal space. The respondents suggested that *"I believe that it is a main function of friend to make you feel comfortable while letting you have personal space and personal choices"* (R1).

or *"It is considered as important for the friend to show acceptance of change, understanding flaws without any judgements and respects the difference of opinions"* (R9).

Previously it is also stated that friendship are usually free of any specific kind of nature and shows less sense of commitment (Davies et al., 2011). The friends are supposed to provide an open space and welcoming gestures while sustaining the mutual respect. A male respondent said that *"I can't think of having ego and use of force to sustain the friendships. It may violate the friendship roles if we impose any certain opinion on our friends and makes them uncomfortable"* (R3).

Similarly, a respondent stated that *“it is not a function of friend to be overpowering and using force or getting everything on their ego if not according to their wishes, a friend is supposed to welcome the openness and emotional expression frankly. Everyone has different personalities and patterns of thinking, friends usually have mutual interest but not all, so a friend should give liberty and freedom to other friend in living, talking and behaving with their own way”* (R6).

3. Supportive

It states the function of a friend to provide social support (emotional, financial, psychological and moral), defending and fighting for a friend, provides cover and shelter to their friends.

The social support channels are considered crucial for the survival of human beings. It is expected to have back of your friend when needed. The findings of this study showed the gender differences for expectations of social support, for example, females consider emotional and psychological support more important in friendships whereas the male consider financial and moral support as crucial function of friendship. As stated by a female respondent *“It is crucial for me to get emotional support from my friend, I also consider it important to soothe my friend emotionally. Sometimes, we just want some motivation and psychological counseling from our friends. Simply the catharsis of our feelings to the friends are quite enough to consider them supportive for us”* (R8).

In literature, Janke (2020) and Vollan (2011) also suggested that among all the functions served by friends, support is common and significant one.

In our FGD, a male respondent said that, *“It is duty of a friend to fight and defend other friends in their absence, my best and close friend would be one who covers for my mistakes and provides me shelter in every good or bad situation”* (R5).

“There are certain times in which your friends are not able to pay their petty bills or get something eat during educational settings, me being a friend feels obligatory to support them financially without letting them notice. The financial support should be implicit and it shall not hurt or affect the feelings of the friend. Friends should show supportive behavior to each other” (R4).

4. Help and Assistance

It refers to the function of friend to ensure availability and assistance, guidance about right or wrong, gives advices and providing physical help.

The literature also supports this function of friendship that help, assistance and guidance is reciprocal and expects the fulfillment of needs and goals in the form of tangible aids (Parker & Asher, 1989). Our respondents emphasized on the availability of friends when needed, by stating that, *“A friend should be available for help when needed regardless of time and situation. I believe that your friends understand you and can better help you. I don't think that there is any worth of this friendship if your friend is not available to you for help”* (R9).

Another female respondent stated that, *“We make friends so that we can help each other to complete any certain task. We expect from our friends that they will help us in different times of need”* (R7).

5. Sharing and Problem Solving

This function states that friends share the feelings and problems with friends, owns the problems and find the solution.

Sometimes just sharing the problem with friend and solving it through advices or certain solution is enough. A respondent said that, *“We face several problems in our life, I perceive that I can share my problems with my friends only and they will definitely give me some solid solutions or can show me various ways to solve my problem on my*

own” (R4). Another respondent said, “*I had various bad experiences in my life and faced problems due to those experiences. I could only share those problems with my friends, they not only stayed with me and listened to me but also suggested me solutions to get rid of those problems*” (R20).

6. Companionship

This function of friendship is about spending quality time together, show concerns and closeness, accompanying in adventures and enjoyments, sustaining contacts, celebrating mutual happiness and mourning sorrows.

This is another important function of friendship which is expected by every friend. We prefer to do things with our friends together, it gives sense of closeness, connectivity and companionship (Mowen & Boman, 2018). The respondents of study stated that, “*I enjoy the company of my friend and we call each other ‘Partners in Crime’, we do each and every activity together, it*

could be good bad, ethical or not, legal or not. My friend is supposed to be with me in every manner” (R1).

Another respondent said that, “*The time spent with friends always gives a positive vibe to me. The quality of that time can’t be compared or replaced with anything else. Small celebrations of happiness and sharing of sorrows are part of life and these can be only performed with the friends openly. Keeping in touch with friend and sharing secrets with them is always my favorite thing to do*” (R6, R3).

RQ3: What changes you have observed in friendship functions during this COVID-19 pandemic?

The last question was about the changes occurred during COVID-19 in friendship functions. The analysis reported the following major changes which are sustained even in post COVID-19 Era.

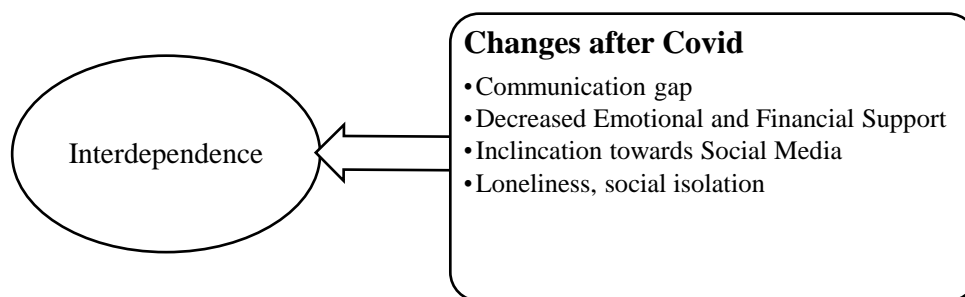


Figure 3

Themes Emerged for Changes in Friendship Functions during COVID-19

Change in Friendship Functions

The respondents reported that certain changes were observed during COVID-19 due to social isolation, loneliness and communication gap was increased, less emotional and financial support was perceived from the friends. Social media use also increased and friends were more inclined towards social media friendships and social networking applications. All of these changes collectively influenced the inter-dependence

between friends. In our study, emerging adults emphasized less interdependence as a major change in friendship functions during COVID-19.

This finding is aligned with recent research by Ernst et al. (2022), stating that COVID-19 causes certain changes in individual’s lives among which loneliness was most prevalent. The social isolation, loneliness and communication gap was a reason to several well-being issues.

A respondent stated that, “COVID-19 was a time of great isolation and loneliness, as physical contact was ended due to quarantine, the expressivity was also reduced. There was hesitation and avoidance in talking on phones or messages. People got involved in online friends, online gaming and emotional sharing with best friends was quite decreased. Mental and emotional issues were raised due to loneliness and isolation. Negative thoughts and feelings were also persistent” (R2).

Another respondent reported that, “During COVID-19 everything was shifted to the online mode and we also got much connected with the social networking applications. The friends were also connected with us through phones or internet. So, we started getting involved in social media more and communication gap was significant during this whole time” (R10).

All these friendship functions were reported mostly by the respondents, but there were certain gender wise preferred functions too. Like, the female respondents prioritized emotional support, care, concerns, flexibility and problem solving as the most important function of a friend, whereas the male respondents talked more about financial support, companionship, spending quality time together, helping and assistance as more significant and preferred functions of friends.

Conclusion

This study utilized interpretive approach to explore the friendship in indigenous context and it is concluded that friendship is mutual bond based on trust, loyalty, compatibility and genuineness. This study was also intended to conduct a preliminary investigation of friendship functions which emerging adults serve resulting in six major themes that are being empathetic, flexibility, supportive, help and assistance, sharing and problem solving, and companionship. As the changes in interpersonal relationships are perceived during COVID-19, our study also

explored the changes in friendship functions during pandemic and findings suggested that during COVID-19, there was less physical contact which increased communication gap, loneliness and social isolation was significant and interdependence between friendships was decreased.

Strengths and Implications of the Study

This study was a preliminary study to explore the friendship functions of emerging adults. The major strength of this study is arriving at definition of friendship and exploration of six friendship functions in indigenous context. Further, the findings of this study related to changes in friendship functions during COVID-19 are also a significant contribution towards the existing body of knowledge. Friendship is the most important but less focused relationship by the researchers. The findings of the study provide practical recommendations for the veterans and social scientists to extend research for extensive inquiry into friendships.

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Contribution of Authors

Areeha Khan Durrani: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft
Muhammad Saleem: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review and Editing, Supervision

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by authors.

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