Male Iranian adolescent’s reasons for having an other-gender friend

Nasim Bahrami, Masoumeh Simbar*, AbouAli Vedadhir, William M. Bukowski and Bianca Panarello

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study was to identify the primary reasons why male Iranian adolescents enter into other-gender friendships.

Methods: A qualitative study was conducted with a sample of 21 male adolescents recruited in public places in Tehran, Iran. Information about each boy’s experiences with other-gender friends was collected via semi-structured interviews whose contents were analyzed with a conventional qualitative content analysis approach.

Results: Five reasons were identified for engaging in other-gender friendships: (a) for the purpose of entertainment, (b) financial benefits, (c) increased popularity with peers, (d) sensation seeking and (e) sexual experiences.

Conclusion: This study revealed that adolescent males do not follow appropriate goals for communicating with the other-gender. In many cases, these goals could endanger their own health and the health of their other-gender friends. Future researchers must focus on identifying and understanding the factors that influence an adolescent to enter into an other-gender friendship.

Keywords: adolescents; content analysis; friendship; qualitative study.

Introduction

Adolescence is an important developmental period for individuals as they experiment with adult roles, their own identity and their relationships with others. As part of this developmental process, adolescents often focus their efforts on two general life goals: a) establishing a stable, independent identity, and b) merging that identity with others in personal relationships (1).

Following the early-childhood and school-age periods that are characterized by a strong preference for associating with same-gender (SG) peers, adolescence is known to be a time when individuals begin to form friendships and romantic relations with other-gender (OG) peers (2, 3). This important developmental transition is believed to arise from the interplay between individual and social/cultural factors, and appears to have several implications for a young person's sense of identity, his/her emotional, physical, and sexual well-being, and his/her social status among peers. The development of this activity, in turn, has far-reaching consequences for romantic and social trajectories in the later stages of the life span (4, 5).

It is well recognized that having relationships outside the family becomes increasingly important during adolescence (6). Throughout the world, the prevalence of friendships between girls and boys has increased in the past decade (7, 8). By mid-adolescence, most boys and girls have dated (9) and many have had a boyfriend or a girlfriend at some point (7). Experiencing such relationships during this time is said to have a significant impact on many facets of psychosocial development and adjustment (10, 11). It is believed that the experiences of having a relationship with the OG in adolescence play a significant role in the development of one’s identity, close relationships with friends, distortion of domestic relationships, sexual identity, academic achievement and career and professional planning (12).

Friendship has been defined as a “voluntary or unconstrained interaction in which the participants respond to
in adolescence is particularly striking in traditional Islamic societies such as Iran. Iran is a densely populated Middle-Eastern Islamic country with a population of about 77 million that includes 13 million adolescents (22). Adolescents attend single-gender primary and secondary schools where there is no interaction with the OG. Although the Iranian culture has become more “modern” in the past decade, traditional practices still exert a powerful force on many aspect of life. Via forms of mass media and communication outlets, other cultures have a strong influence on Iran’s traditions and culture when it comes to certain practices, such as engaging in heterosexual relationships before marriage, particularly among young people and adolescents (23). By having access to global media, immigration and communication technology, many Iranian adolescents are exposed to images and descriptions from more permissive cultures (23, 24).

The cultural expectations inherent in a society that adheres to particular interpretations of Islamic teachings create a social environment for adolescents that differs from that of Western contexts. Accordingly, the reasons for entering into relations with the OG in Iran may differ substantially from the reasons cited by those in Western societies. The present study was conducted in order to fill this gap in the literature. The specific goal of this study was to identify the factors that motive boys to enter into relationships with girls during adolescence. This study focused primarily on boys because it was assumed that boys and girls have different incentives for entering into OG friendships (25). As quantitative research approaches cannot identify the depth of attitudes, thoughts, and the details of participants' beliefs (26, 27), the present study adopted a qualitative approach based on interviews in an attempt to present a broader view. Accordingly, this study aimed to identify the factors that motivate male adolescents to enter into OG friendships in the Iranian socio-cultural context as a developing country.

**Methods**

**Design**

Given the absence of a well-established theoretical perspective and the lack of a database that can be used to form exact hypotheses, it was decided that a qualitative study employing a semi-structured interview format in conjunction with a conventional content analysis would be the preferred approach for this study. This approach is well-suited for developing valid inferences from textual data that will reveal the breadth and depth of the goals that male adolescents pursue in their relations with the OG (28).
Framing of study questions

We framed the research question based on the goal of identifying the reasons why male Iranian adolescents enter into OG friendships. Initially, we used general open-ended questions such as, (a) would you please describe your experience from your relationship(s) with the other gender? (b) what are the reasons you have for entering into a relationship with the other gender? and (c) how would you describe your relationship(s)?

Setting and sampling approach

The recruitment phase of the study took place in public places such as parks, cultural centers, cinemas and coffee shops in Tehran, the largest and main city in Iran. A sample of 21 male adolescents, aged 14–18 years, who currently had or had had a relationship with the OG was recruited.

To recruit the participants and to arrange the interviews, the first author went to these locations at different times of the day and on different days of the week. She approached adolescents to ask whether they were willing to participate in the study. If a potential participant was interested, an appointment was scheduled for a later date. To maximize the chances of collecting a full range of data, participants were selected in a manner that ensured that participants varied on as many characteristics as possible. A second goal of the recruitment process was to include adolescents who varied in their relationship status. For these reasons, a maximum variation sampling technique was used to recruit adolescents with different characteristics (age, number of family members, educational level of parents, socioeconomic status, and occupational status of parents). Sampling was continued until data saturation was obtained (29).

Ethical considerations

All participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. We guaranteed the confidentiality of the participants' personal information. Moreover, the participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and that their identities would not be revealed in study reports. The participants were told that the voice recorder would be switched off if they felt uncomfortable at any time. In addition, participants were encouraged to contact the researcher if they had any questions or if they wanted any additional information. The Ethics Committee of the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran, approved the study. The aims of the study and details of the procedures were explained to the participants and their written informed consent was then obtained.

Data collection

Throughout the interview process (from October 2013 to April 2015), data were collected up until a point of data saturation (i.e., when no new information was obtained). This point was reached after 21 interviews. Each interview was scheduled according to the participant's preferences and was conducted in a face-to-face manner in a private context. Interview questions were open-ended to allow respondents to thoroughly describe their opinions, perceptions and experiences. During interviews, we particularly focused on the adolescent's reasons for entering into relationships with the OG. Additionally, we used probing questions to obtain more in-depth information about participants' experiences. All of the interviews were conducted by the same interviewer (the first author). Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 min, with an average of 45 min. The interviews were recorded with a digital sound recorder. Immediately after each interview, we listened to its content and made a verbatim transcript.

Data analysis

A conventional qualitative content analysis approach was used for the data analysis. The primary objective of this content analysis was to condense the raw data into categories and to provide a detailed description of these categories (30). The procedure included the following steps.

1. Oral interviews were transcribed by the first author, who then read through the transcripts several times in order to ensure that she understood the material in its entirety;
2. The text was divided into meaningful units, making them denser;
3. The condensed and meaningful units were conceptualized and coded;
4. The codes were sorted into sub-themes based on their similarities and differences;
5. Themes were interpreted as being the expression of the latent content of the text (30).

Trustworthiness and rigor

Trustworthiness and rigor are critically important to qualitative research. To achieve these criteria of research quality, several approaches were used in this study (31, 32). Techniques such as prolonged interactions with each participant and the data, peer-checking, and constant comparison were used for enhancing the credibility of our study's findings. Moreover, a member-checking technique for establishing the dependability of the findings was adopted. Specifically, participants were provided with a summary of codes generated from an initial review of the interview transcripts and were asked to indicate how much the initially identified constructs reflected their experiences. To enhance the accuracy of the findings, several independent reviewers from the reproductive health, psychology and sociology departments were asked to assess the precision of our analytic procedures. All of them approved our data analysis. Finally, detailed descriptions of the data were obtained in order to improve the generalizability of the results.

Results

A total of 21 male adolescents participated in this study. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.
Our analysis showed that friendships between boys and girls vary between dyads, and males enter into OG friendships for different reasons. Adolescent males typically identified five reasons for engaging in other-gender friendships. These included: for the purpose of entertainment, financial benefits, increased popularity among peers, sensation seeking and sexual experiences. However, these motivating factors differed from one adolescent to the next, and were related to personality characteristics and family atmosphere. The following narrations reflect these factors.

**Entertainment purposes**

Adolescents cited several reasons for communicating with the OG. One of them was for the purpose of having fun and being entertained. However, it seems as though many adolescents in this age group simply used such relationships as a way to fill their leisure time. Communicating with members of the opposite gender was simply done for fun. Adolescents engaged in certain activities that they found to be amusing. Some examples include: having phone conversations with the other gender, sending messages or chatting with them, and meeting with them.

*There is nothing in these kinds of relationships; we send short messages for our entertainment not love affairs. We entertain ourselves with our girlfriends. (Participant # 11)*

**Financial benefits**

The boys’ second purpose for communicating with the OG was to benefit from the OG peer’s finances or resources. It was very common for boys to befriend girls who were more financially secure than them. Boys often requested money, gifts, grants or other valuable things from their female friends, in addition to having them pay for their mobile phone charges. Consequently, if girls were unable to provide boys with such things, they were abandoned.

*I had a girlfriend. Her pocket was ripped off; I told her, Nazanin, I need money. She told me ok. Please come to me one hour later and she gave me 50 thousand Tomans. Sometimes I took money from her because she loved me. (Participant # 6)*

*Personally, I take most of money needed for our relationship from her. I take from her money and she pays for my mobile charge. I never used to take money from my father or mother for our relationship. (Participant # 2)*

**Increased popularity among peers**

The third goal that male adolescents had for entering into an OG friendship was to gain credibility among their
peers. During adolescence, friendships can affect each individual either positively or negatively. The influence that peers have on young girls and boys becomes even greater than the influence exerted on each adolescent by his/her parents. Adolescents strive to maintain their friendships with their peers, and as a result may occasionally give in to peer pressure and participate in certain activities in order to gain status within their peer group and to feel more accepted by others. Adolescents strive to maintain their friendships with their peers, and as a result may occasionally give in to peer pressure and participate in certain activities in order to gain status within their peer group and to feel more accepted by others. Boys seek to communicate with the OG as a way to gain credibility among their peers who also have relationships with girls. Failing to establish such a relationship is seen as a disadvantage, which is why boys aim to enter into a relationship with the OG.

*When you say in high school that I have a girlfriend, you get more value and dignity among your friends. Teenagers in high school want to show off. It is discipline for them. (Participant # 6)*

*One of my friends gave me a mobile number of a girl. He told me if you hit on means to flirt with her you are really something. I flirted with her and all of my friends surprised. (Participant # 11)*

**Sensation seeking**

A fourth reason male adolescents had for entering into OG friendships was for the purpose of seeking excitement. However, individual differences may play an important role in the expression of this goal. On the one hand, some teens tended to be very emotional, whereas others were more likely to remain calm when faced with emotional situations. Young adolescents who were curious and who preferred excitement were more motivated to engage in risky behaviors, such as substance abuse and in relationships with the OG, which included sexual acts. These individuals claimed that they get a thrill from engaging in these new and risky activities. Interestingly, communicating with a member of the opposite gender was considered to be a risky and exciting thing to do. It was stated that talking with a girl provided them with knowledge about the other gender, which in turn satisfied their need for excitement. However, once this communication became repetitive, the sense of excitement subsided, and thus they started to seek out new relationships where there would be a new opportunity for excitement. They believed that the beginning of a new relationship raises the sense of excitement more than the continuation of a previous relationship.

*It is exciting to have a girlfriend and be in relationship with her. Relationship with girls Satisfy our excitement sense. (Participant # 19)*

**Sexual experiences**

The last goal young people had for communicating with the OG was to establish a sexual relationship. Most of the boys, even if they had never had any sexual experiences, thought about having such relationships. For some boys, establishing a sexual relationship with a girl was the primary and the only reason why they communicated with the OG. Boys tended to suggest having sex after some trust had been established in the relationship, whereas others preferred to request sex right at the beginning of the relationship. For example, some boys preferred to propose having sex after some trust had been established in the relationship, whereas others preferred to request sex right at the beginning of the relationship. With regards to those boys who entered into relationships with the OG for the sole aim of having a sexual relationship, if the girl had no interest in giving in to his request, he ended the relationship and set out to find another girl who would give him what he wants. For these individuals, the characteristics of the person they want a relationship with, such as the person’s age, personality and social status, are not important. They are only looking to satisfy their sexual needs.

*Clearly tell you, most of boys are seeking for sexual relationship in their relationships. In my idea there is no other purpose for them in their relationships. (Participant # 4)*

*I am thinking about sexual relationship with my girlfriend. This is a part of relationship. Both of us enjoy. (Participant # 19)*

**Discussion**

The present paper provides direct information about the reasons why adolescent boys in Iran enter into OG friendships. The study’s findings indicate that boys enter these relationships for the purpose of entertainment, for financial benefits, in order to gain credibility among their peers, to seek excitement, and finally, to have sexual experiences.

Researchers all around the world have studied the relationships between members of the opposite gender. However, the study of these relationships in Iran is much more of a controversial issue seeing as though these types of relationships are forbidden by religious, cultural and legal conventions. Although these relationships are becoming more frequent for adolescents in Iran, they...
remain officially proscribed. Teenagers cannot talk openly about these experiences with others including parents and teachers. As adolescents in Iran do not receive any type of formal training about heterosexual relationships or any sex-education from schools and/or parents, they are less likely to be aware of the risks involved in engaging in risky sexual behaviors. This represents a potentially serious health issue for large numbers of Iranian adolescents. Although being friends with a member of the OG does not necessarily pose any particular threats, these relationships provide a context in which there is an increased chance for high-risk behaviors to take place, such as unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies and drug abuse. It may also increase one's chances of experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The results of this study demonstrated that having fun was one of the main reasons why adolescent boys communicated with the OG. Adolescents who were entertained by other means during their leisure time were less likely to establish OG friendships. According to the ‘Social Bond Theory’, by increasing the individual’s sense of belonging to a positive social context (significant others, commitment to social institutions, involvement in adaptation activities, and belief in a common value system), appropriate social behaviors are increased (33).

Boys also tended to engage in OG friendships with the hopes of benefiting from the girls’ finances. The desire for experiencing love, passion and intimacy was less commonly cited as an incentive for entering into friendships with girls. Young adolescents who lacked financial and educational resources were more likely to enter into OG friendships before marriage and before starting a family compared to others (34).

In the present study, some teens claimed that they communicated with OG peers in order to maintain or increase their status with their peers. It has been shown that adolescents are more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem and to excel academically if they are accepted by their peers. Those who are less accepted tend to be at a greater risk for experiencing social and psychological problems later on in life (35). Brown’s study also showed that adolescents’ self-esteem was directly related to one’s position in the peer-group (36). Peer effects are commonly associated with episodes of adolescent risk-taking such as delinquency, drug abuse, sexual behaviors and reckless driving (37), because these activities commonly occur in the company of peers (38). Affiliating with friends who engage in risky behaviors has been shown to be a strong predictor of an adolescent’s own behavior (39).

Some of the adolescents in this study stated that satisfying their need for excitement is a factor that motivates them to enter into OG friendships. Sensation seeking is characterized by the search for experiences and feelings, which are “varied, novel, complex and intense”, and by the readiness to “take physical, social, legal and financial risks for the sake of such experiences” (40). The excitement romance brings to one’s life may also provide an important motivator for young people. Boredom is frequent in adolescence (41) and the emotions brought forward by a romantic relationship may allow an adolescent to feel alive and to feel that life is worthwhile (34). In the Arnett’s study (1996), sensation seeking was found to be related to every type of reckless behavior, including five types of automobile driving, sex without contraception, sex with someone known only casually, number of sexual partners, alcohol and drug use, vandalism, and theft (42).

Finally, the desire to have sexual experiences was the factor that most strongly motivated a boy to enter into a friendship with the OG. The results of our study showed that most adolescents stated that the only purpose for entering into a friendship with the OG was to have sex. In some cases, if sex was not provided, the relationship was terminated. Over the last two decades, sex in adolescence has become common, so much so that it has become the norm. By late adolescence, most people have had at least one sexual encounter (43). Research on OG friendships has noted the presence of sexual tension in many of these relationships. For example, Afifi and Faulkner (2000) reported that approximately half of the heterosexual college student population has engaged in sexual activity in an otherwise platonic cross-gender friendship (44). In a study conducted by Monsour (1992), the results demonstrated that within cross-gender friendships, emotional expressiveness and sexual contact were specified as meanings of intimacy by a higher percentage of males than females, while physical contact was specified by a greater percentage of females in those relationships (45).

**Limitations**

Before discussing the implications of this study, it is important to outline its limitations. First, OG friendship is a complex construct that may be defined in numerous ways. For Iranian adolescents in particular, their OG friendships may be inextricably tied to culture and gender. Another potential limitation of this study involves
the fact that these findings may be tempered by the validity of the self-reported measures. Although the assessment procedures were designed to enhance adolescents' valid responses (through the use of a same-gender interviewer who was trained to establish rapport and conduct the interview in a nonjudgmental manner), we cannot establish the validity of the adolescents' responses, particularly when questions pertained to sensitive issues. Furthermore, a common flaw found in studies that rely on a student sample concerns the idea of generalizability. By focusing on a relatively small and specific group of people, the findings of this study fail to include the views of those adolescents who are absent or may have dropped out of school, or those who stay at home or go to work during the day. Finally, like other qualitative studies, the findings of the current study may be situation-specific and hence of limited transferability. These findings may not be generalizable to females, boys of other countries, or adolescents of different ages.

Conclusion

In sum, this study explored the reasons male adolescent's cited for entering into OG friendships. The data revealed that boys typically endorsed multiple reasons including: for the purpose of entertainment, financial benefits, increased popularity among peers, sensation seeking and sexual experiences. Finally, this study revealed that adolescents do not usually have appropriate reasons for communicating with the OG. In many cases, adolescents engage in risky behaviors to increase their chances of establishing a relationship with the OG, however, these behaviors can pose a threat to an Iranian adolescent's health. Future researchers must focus on identifying and understanding the factors that influence adolescents to enter into OG friendships.

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