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Factors that promote and impede other-sex friendships: a qualitative study of Iranian adolescent girls

DOI 10.1515/ijamh-2016-0067
Received June 22, 2016; accepted August 16, 2016

Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study was to identify factors that promote and impede other-sex (OS) friendships in adolescent girls.

Methods: A qualitative study conducted with 20 adolescent girls recruited in public places in Tehran, Iran. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews and coded via the conventional qualitative content analysis approach.

Results: Four factors were identified that appeared to promote entry into OS friendships. These factors include (a) a poor understanding of perceived risks, (b) weak religious beliefs, (c) processes of identity formation, and (d) low self-esteem. In addition, six factors appeared to impede entry into these friendships: (a) self-confidence, (b) prioritizing education, (c) maintaining particular entertainment preferences, (d) awareness of prior unpleasant experiences with boys, (e) having strong religious convictions, and (f) shaming from significant others.

Conclusion: These findings provide unique insights into the factors that stem from different levels of social complexity, which affect participation in a fundamental form of human experience.

Keywords: adolescents; friendship; Iran; other-sex.

Introduction

Although most friendships in childhood are with same-sex peers, (1) friendships, and then romantic relationships with other-sex (OS) peers, become more frequent in adolescence, especially for girls (2, 3). Close relationships with OS peers are thought to nurture self-exploration (4). Specifically, it is believed that experiencing a close relationship with an OS peer affects multiple aspects of development in a positive way (5). These developmental advantages include identity formation, achieving autonomy from one's family of origin, establishing a sexual identity and a sexual orientation, functioning competently in school, making effective academic decisions, and regulating one's emotions (6, 7). Given that current research demonstrates that OS relationships in adolescence affect romantic relationships later on in life (8), it is important to examine these early experiences in more detail.

In the last 18 months, more than half of teens in the USA reported having a friendship with an OS peer that lasted for a minimum of 1 month (9, 10). Researchers working in Western contexts, primarily North America and Western Europe, have emphasized the importance of forming relationships with OS peers during the critical adolescent period (11). Thus, the goal of the present study is to identify the factors that affect whether or not adolescent girls in a traditional Islamic society form close friendships with boys.

The current literature with regard to OS friendship in adolescence is limited to studies of romantic relationships. Few researchers have examined the nature of the relationships between boys and girls, strictly from a friendship, or from a non-romantic point of view (6, 12). To date, what is known about relationships with OS peers during adolescence can be summarized in three points.

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First, OS friendships are less common than same-sex friendships (13). Moreover, the girls and boys who have OS friends are distinct from their peers who only have same-sex friends (14). Second, the characteristics of OS friendships differ from those of same-sex friendships. For example, although adolescents engage in more empathic perspective taking in OS friendships (15), they experience greater self-affirmation in same-sex friendships than in friendships with OS peers (16). Third, it is known that having an OS friend can raise certain challenges. Compared with same-sex friendships, adolescents in OS friendships are more concerned about ambiguity (e.g. the expectations of one’s friend) and fear that others misconstrue the relationship.

Friendship has been defined as a “voluntary or unconstrained interaction in which the participants respond to one another personally... as unique individuals rather than as packages of discrete attributes or mere role occupants” (17). Close friendships are known to have many characteristics, including an implicit level of exclusivity and commitment (18). Cross-sex friendship is a distinct type of friendship; specifically, it is a non-romantic, non-familial, personal relationship between a female and a male. Friendship is a non-romantic form of relationship in the sense that its function can be dissociated from courtship rites, which precede a more permanent commitment to another person. However, it is important to note that non-romantic relationship does not necessarily mean that sexuality or passion is absent from the relationship (19).

Studies of OS friendships have typically focused on the communicative, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of these relationships (20, 21). These studies have examined how adolescents who have an OS friend and adolescents who do not differ on these aspects of friendship. This important developmental transition is believed to arise from the interplay between the individual and sociocultural factors (12). Despite the fact that gender-related constructs are believed to be influenced by social circumstances (22, 23), few studies have examined how adolescents conceive the individual and social factors that promote or prevent one’s entry into a friendship with an OS peer. The need for a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the development of OS friendships is especially important for girls for whom having an OS friend may carry particular risks (13). Currently, very little is known about the social factors and the interpersonal concerns that affect an adolescent girl’s decision to engage in a friendship with a boy. Moreover, much of the existing research on OS relations has been conducted in Western contexts (24, 25), such as North America and Europe, where individuals hold open-minded and modernist views regarding relations between males and females.

The lack of research on the individual and social parameters that are believed to affect one’s involvement in an OS friendship 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, 13 million of which are adolescents (26). Adolescents attend single-sex primary and secondary schools where there is no interaction with the OS. Although Iranian society has become more “modern” in the past decade, traditional practices still exert a powerful influence on many aspects of life. More recently, the Iranian culture is feeling the pressure exerted on them by surrounding cultures to conform to their traditions in several domains such as heterosexual relationships before marriage, particularly among young people and adolescents (27). Despite these influences, in Iranian society, OS friendships prior to marriage are religiously, culturally, and legally forbidden. However, with increased access to global media, immigration, and communication technology, the transmission of images and descriptions of more permissive cultures has been facilitated and has made its way into the awareness of many Iranian youth (27, 28).

Due to the cultural expectations that are imposed by a society that adheres to particular interpretations of Islamic teachings, adolescents in Iran experience a social environment that is very different from the one experienced by their peers who live in Western contexts. Therefore, the factors that influence one’s entry into relationships with OS peers in Iran may differ substantially from those that have an impact in Western societies. Other recent projects have outlined the differences in current relations between women and women in Islamic societies (29). The specific goal of this study was to examine the factors that are believed to encourage adolescents to engage in OS friendship.

The present study was conducted in order to identify how girls perceive the factors that affect their entry into relationships with boys during adolescence. We were especially interested in identifying both the factors that facilitate these relationships and the factors that impede their formation. This study differs from previous studies in many ways and thus aims to fill several critical needs in the literature. In this study, an open-ended qualitative approach was used. Instead of beginning with a limited set of pre-established constructs, the aim was to allow the participants to identify and explain the factors that they believed had the greatest impact on their decision to have, or not to have, an OS friend. In this way, this paper...
responds to the repeated calls for qualitative research in developmental research (30, 31). Another unique feature of this study is the fact that the participants are exclusively female. Girls and boys may differ in their experiences with OS friends, and therefore, we assumed that the factors which act to encourage or inhibit one’s engagement in OS friendships can be different for boys and girls (32). Finally, gender differences exist in terms of the factors that are considered to be the most important during social exchanges between college students. Accordingly, this study aimed to identify the factors that promote and impede entry into OS friendships among Iranian female adolescents. Again there have been repeated calls for research on adolescent development outside of North America and Western Europe (33). This study is aimed at filling this gap via its focus on an understudied group of adolescents, specifically Iranian teenage girls.

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 deriving valid inferences from textual data that will reveal the breadth and depth of the factors that affect the way girls think about engaging in relations with the OS (34).

Framing of study questions

With a preliminary review of the literature, several variables were identified that may have an impact on one’s entry into OS friendships during adolescence. The research question was framed based on the goal of identifying the factors that both deter and facilitate entry into OS friendships for female Iranian adolescents. Initially, general open-ended questions were used such as (a) would you please explain your experiences from your relationship/relationships with the OS? (b) what are the factors that are preventing you from entering into a relationship with the OS? (c) what are the factors that are encouraging you to enter into a relationship with the OS? and (d) how would you describe your relationship/relationships?

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. The participants of this study included a sample of 20 adolescent females, between the ages of 15 and 18 years, who either have or have never experienced a friendship with an OS peer.

In order to recruit participants and to arrange the interviews, the first author went to all of the locations that were mentioned, at different times of day and on different days of the week. Female adolescents were approached and were asked if they were willing to voluntarily participate in the study. In order to ensure a representative sample, participants were assessed on as many characteristics as possible. In addition, the recruiter ensured that those who agreed to participate in the study varied in terms of their relationship status. For these reasons, adolescents differed on several characteristics such as age, educational level of parents, socioeconomic status, and occupational status of parents. Sampling continued until a rich data set was obtained and until no new information was extracted (35).

Ethical considerations

All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to discontinue at any point in the study without any repercussions. The participants were told that the voice recorder would be switched off if they felt uncomfortable at any time. A written informed consent was obtained from each participant and her parents, and the researchers indicated that all data would be kept confidential. All participants were encouraged to contact the researcher if they had any questions or if they needed any additional information regarding the study. The Ethics Committee of the University of Medical Sciences approved the study.

Data collection

During the interview process, data were collected up until the point of data saturation (i.e. when no new information was obtained from all of the participants). This point was reached after a total of 20 interviews. Each interview involved face-to-face interaction and was scheduled at a time that was convenient for the participants. Interview questions were open-ended to allow respondents to describe their opinions, perceptions, and experiences in a thorough manner. The interviewer’s attention was primarily focused on identifying the deterring and encouraging factors that each interviewee perceived as being an important determining force for entering into a relationship with the OS or not. Additionally, probing questions were used to obtain more in-depth information about each participant’s 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; however immediately after each interview, the recorded content was transcribed, verbatim.

Data analysis

A conventional, qualitative content analysis approach was used for the data analysis. The main aim of this content analysis was to condense the raw data into categories and to provide a detailed description of each (36). The procedure included the following steps.
1. Oral interviews were transcribed by the first author, who then carefully read through the transcripts in order to ensure that the material was understood in its entirety.

2. The text was divided into meaningful units, making them more dense.

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 (36).

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 (37, 38). Techniques such as prolonged interactions with each participant and the data, peer-checking, and constant comparison were used for enhancing the credibility of this 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 20 female adolescents participated in this study. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Our analysis showed that adolescents believed that multiple factors could affect the formation of OS friendship. Factors were extracted and categorized as being a factor that either promotes or impedes engagement in friendships with OS peers. Impeding factors fell into six main categories including self-confidence, strong priority for education, engaging in healthy hobbies, unpleasant experiences with others, implicit religious beliefs, and shaming by significant others. Promoting factors formed four main categories including a poor understanding of perceived risk, weak religious beliefs, identity formation, and low self-esteem (Table 2). However, the role that each of these factors played was not the same for all adolescents and was strongly related to an individual’s personality characteristics and family atmosphere. The following narrations reflected these factors.

Promoting factors for entering into a heterosexual friendship

The results demonstrated that six factors facilitated an adolescent’s entry into an OS friendship. These included a poor understanding of perceived risk, weak religious beliefs, identity formation, and low self-esteem. The role of each of these factors is discussed below.

A poor understanding of perceived risks

Having a poor insight into the potential risks that are associated with being involved in an OS friendship was an important factor that promoted one’s engagement into an OS friendship. Adolescents with poor insight tended to have experienced these relationships and were willing to face any resulting consequences. Due to the amount of self-confidence that these adolescents possessed, they believed that if and when this relationship would become inappropriate and unsafe for them, they would be able to detach easily in order to avoid any further repercussions. When these participants were asked about the possible negative physical and psychosocial consequences of having such relationships, the majority of them did not demonstrate to have much knowledge on the matter.

“First I become friends and then I will find out if he is a good person or not. Nothing happens and if I don’t want him, then I leave him. (Participant # 5)”

Weak religious beliefs

Although we did not assess the participants’ internal religious beliefs, her explicit religious beliefs (such as prayer, fasting, going to a mosque, etc.) were noted. External religious practices were seen as a reflection of the community’s cultural beliefs rather than that of personally held religious convictions. These activities were performed by adolescents, however, but were not perceived to be a manifestation of deep inner beliefs. Interestingly, for some adolescents, it was found that the presence of religious practices and/or beliefs did not inhibit their entry into an OS friendship. They admitted to having religious beliefs but they did not see them as conflicting with their desires and motivations. These adolescents saw themselves as having a good balance between moderate religious beliefs and a strong desire to establish OS relationships.
Table 1: Demographic characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number (age)</th>
<th>Educational level (high school year)</th>
<th>Father's age</th>
<th>Father's education (job)</th>
<th>Mother's age</th>
<th>Mother's education (job)</th>
<th>Number of siblings</th>
<th>Access to Internet</th>
<th>Time spent alone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Diploma (driver)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>School (housewife)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3–4 h/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2(17)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Diploma (confectioner)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Diploma (housewife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3–4 h/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>No formal education (housewife)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(16)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Diploma (self-employment)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Collegiate (nurse)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Diploma (confectioner)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Collegiate (employee)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6(15)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Diploma (retired employee)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Diploma (housewife)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7(17)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Diploma (engineer)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Collegiate (housewife)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Primary (building painters)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Guidance (housewife)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 times/weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9(17)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Guidance (military colonel)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Collegiate (teacher)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2–3 times/weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10(16)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11(17)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Diploma (self-employment)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Diploma (housewife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12(17)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Diploma (employee)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Guidance (housewife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Diploma (retired employee)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Diploma (retired teacher)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Collegiate (cosmetic consultant)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15(15)</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Diploma (employee)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Diploma (housewife)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16(17)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Primary (self-employment)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Primary (housewife)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Is not usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17(15)</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Diploma (employee)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Collegiate (teacher)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18(16)</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Guidance (self-employment)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Diploma (housewife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2–3 times/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Diploma (self-employment)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Guidance (housewife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Usually alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20(18)</td>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Collegiate (employee)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Collegiate (housewife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Usually alone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Factors that promote and impede entry into other-sex friendships among Iranian female adolescents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry into other-sex friendships</th>
<th>Frequencies of each of the themes across the participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Promoting factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– A poor understanding of perceived risks</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Weak religious beliefs</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Processes of identity formation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Low self-esteem</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impeding factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Self-confidence</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Prioritizing education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Maintaining particular entertainment preferences</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Awareness of prior unpleasant experiences with boys</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Having strong religious convictions</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Shaming from significant others</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I pray on time. My beliefs are the same as before but with a deep sense of guilt. (Participant #8)”

“Islam is right, these relationships are rubbish but I have no choice, I can’t help it. (Participant #7)”

“Religious beliefs are important but not so much that I stop doing things that I like. At least for me it is like this. (Participant #3)”

**Processes of identity formation**

Another factor among adolescents that was observed to promote participation in OS friendship was identity formation. During adolescence, boys and girls develop as independent persons and begin to see themselves as being distinct from others. Having an OS friend during this time contributes to a greater sense of self and autonomy. The participants in this study expressed that interacting with OS peers provided them with a unique context in which they could express their inner thoughts and beliefs, without the fear of being judged. They also emphasized that these experiences were unlike any other that they have experienced within their other relationships.

“In an age some people especially a girl thinks that she is matured and so she can do anything she likes. She is not a child and maybe because of this I thought I can do anything that I like. (Participant #2)”

**Low self-esteem**

The last factor that was observed to facilitate an adolescent’s entry into an OS friendship was low self-esteem, especially within the context of peer pressure. During this time period, peers replace parents as the primary source of social support; thus, peer influence exerts a lot of pressure on young adolescents. Youth use information about how they feel they are perceived by others in order to form the basis of the self; therefore, negative evaluations by others may be manifested in a child’s beliefs about him or herself. Consequently, these internalizations may contribute to low self-esteem. Some participants made comments indicating that adolescents who had low self-esteem were more likely to be influenced by the beliefs, behaviors, and thoughts of their peers. In many cases, these individuals said that being in OS friendships was a way of proving oneself to the peer group and a way to increase one’s status within it. As a result of having low self-esteem, some adolescents are unable to cope with the pressures placed on them by their peer group to engage in a relationship with a member of the OS. As a way to avoid rejection, victimization, and isolation from their peers, several adolescents enter OS friendships anyways as a way to satisfy the expectations of others, instead of their own. These adolescents with low self-esteem were unable to gather the courage to stand up to their peers and to communicate their true feelings to an OS friend.

“If a girl has high self-esteem, she doesn’t need to fill her time with anybody else who pays her compliments. (Participant #13)”

**Factors that impede entry into OS friendship**

Factors that impede entry into OS friendships among adolescents include self-confidence, prioritizing education, engaging in healthy extracurricular activities, knowing about the negative experiences of other peers, implicit religious beliefs, and being shamed by significant others. The number and intensity of these impeding factors in adolescents was observed to affect entry into an OS friendship during different stages of adolescence. Each of these factors is discussed in the following sections.

**Self-confidence**

One important factor that was found to prevent one from entering into an OS friendship was self-confidence. Most of the participants stated that having a low degree of self-confidence made it very challenging for them to engage in an OS friendship. Self-confidence refers to the belief in one’s abilities or judgment, and knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses. The participants believed
that an adolescent without any self-confidence cannot enter into an OS friendship successfully. Also, they stated that adolescents who have a higher level of self-confidence do not seem to be affected by the pressures placed on them by their peers to engage in OS friendships. When compared to their peers who have a low self-esteem, adolescents who are self-assured were perceived to be individuals who were able to resist peer pressure to join an unwanted relationship. These adolescents believed that they are not only unaffected by pressure from peers, but also able to control their relationships with others.

“Mostly, I influence my friends rather than the other way round. That’s why I don’t make friends with just anyone, because of them. I try to have a positive influence on my friends as much as I can. There have been instances when my relatives have told me: “You don’t make the best of your youth and you will regret that later on in life”. However, as Dale Carnegie says: “Remember that unjust criticism is often a disguised compliment.” So I don’t care. Even those who say things to me, try to be like me because I said that not having a boyfriend is not a weakness but having it is weakness. (Participant #9)”

“If conditions are provided that we have a better perspective of ourselves and get to know our personality barriers and have a stronger character, then we have less dependence and more control in our relationships. (Participant #13)”

Prioritizing education

Another factor that minimizes the likelihood that adolescent girls will become part of an OS friendship is giving priority to education. In Iran, in order to be admitted into a university, adolescent students must participate in a demanding national competition (named konkoor) that requires each student to write a standardized test. Most Iranian adolescents start to prepare for this test at the beginning of their second year of secondary school. During the last year of secondary school, each student strives for success in this critical competition. Adolescents who are in the later stages of secondary school perceive this final year as an opportunity to determine what they are truly passionate about and what career they aspire to pursue. Consequently, several adolescents devote a lot of their time to school work in order to prepare for this important and intense competitive process. Although this desire to achieve academic success is important, other interests that emerge during this time period are pushed to the side. Adolescents who have experienced OS friendships tend to assume that those who do not engage in OS friendships are more likely to be successful in the konkoor compared to their peers who do engage in these types of friendship, because they simply have more time to dedicate to preparing for the test.

“I think it is better that it’s over because if it had gone on, my laziness for studying would be continued. For example, now all my stress is for lack of time and that I have to go home and study. But surely if he was still around, laziness would still be in me. (Participant #1)”

Maintaining particular entertainment preferences

Adolescents have different hobbies and different activity preferences. Some prefer productive activities, such as reading, extracurricular classes, English lessons, music lessons, playing sports, etc. However, others tend to be drawn to unhealthy pastimes such as prolonged and uncontrolled engagement in virtual environments, prolonged use of computer games, and roaming the streets and parks. It was found that adolescents who engaged in healthy activities to fill their leisure time were less likely to establish OS friendships compared to their peers. For teens who did not have a clear life plan, having an OS friend was a priority. Interactions with OS friends tend to be numerous and without commitment, due to the fact that their sole purpose is to pass the time.

“I am not idle; I have a lot of things I have to do…. I prefer to fill my spare time by listening to my favorite singer and daydreaming rather than doing something which is against my ethics and beliefs. This issue is not important enough for me to even think about, never mind actually doing it. (Participant #14)”

“I am a footballer now and I have no spare time. I have many friends there too, but I don’t call that friendship because I don’t have any emotional relationship with them. (Participant #13)”

Awareness of prior unpleasant experiences with boys

The fourth factor that impedes entry into an OS friendship is being aware of the negative experiences that certain peers have had in these types of relationships. For adolescent girls, much of their time is spent socializing with one another. They enjoy talking to each other and tend to engage in high levels of self-disclosure. As a result of this communication and co-rumination, girls learn a lot from each other and take the experiences of others as a lesson that they will carry with them into their own friendships. When a close friend has had a negative experience with an OS friend, she will most likely tell her girlfriends. As a result, the other girls in the group become aware of the situation and everything
they learned vicariously may very well impact their own decision to enter into an OS friendship or not. The following excerpt is an example of a participant who illustrates this point clearly.

“My friends and their experiences have caused me not to want such a thing. Things I have heard or seen. My mom talks to me about this subject and she has clarified it for me. I really saw with my own eyes. I saw a lot of their experiences. (Participant #10)"

“There is nothing in these kinds of relationships. Even if they end up in a marriage, later on many problems will occur in their life. I think boys have this idea that they are very smart in their friendships and they are free and they can be friends with all girls but when their time of marriage comes, they want to marry the holiest virgin in town. (Focus group of girls???)”

Having strong religious convictions

A commonly cited reason for not entering into a friendship with an OS peer was having strong religious beliefs. Iran is an Islamic country where adolescents are subjected to strict religious beliefs. Beyond their general presence throughout Iranian society, strong religious beliefs are, to varying degrees, seen in many families. However, these familial and societal conditions affect some adolescents more than others. For some adolescents, religious beliefs are strong and, therefore, affect the way in which they see the world. It was found that adolescents who had strong, implicit religious beliefs were less likely than others to enter into an OS friendship. However, if they had already entered into an OS friendship, they tended to demonstrate a great deal of control. Even though having rigid religious beliefs alone was not enough to prevent one from engaging in OS friendships, it did have an effect on one’s progression through the stages of a relationship, in terms of delaying sexual experience.

“I think about death a lot and it is not as if I am only after having fun. Because I think about God, I think about death, too. This is one of the reasons for it; because I am afraid of death so I am also afraid of doing this. (Participant #6)"

“I have such a strong will and stand by my beliefs so much that I am never shaken when I see them. No one can force me to do anything. (Participant #11)"

Shaming from significant others

The last factor that prevented entry into an OS friendship was the fear of being shamed and rejected by a family member or by the community. For girls in general, disclosing personal information about a relationship with a boy is not always easy. However, for girls in Iran, simply speaking about such things can be very risky due to the culture’s views and beliefs about adolescent heterosexual relationships. All participants in this study made it clear that they were reluctant to disclose such information with at least one person in their life. These persons included family members, teachers, relatives, or even the general public. Even in cases where the adolescent felt that she had a good relationship with her parents, she was still uncomfortable with the idea of her parents knowing every detail about her OS relationship.

“I am afraid of family and I will be ashamed if others see me. I will be ashamed even when I see people in street that they don’t know me. And then I don’t like people think about me as a bad person. So this caused me not to go out with her. (Participant #1)”

“I do not like that have this kind of relationship, for example, go to the streets, take someone’s hand, walk with him, and others look at me. (Participant #12)”

Discussion

The current findings, based on a nationally representative sample of Iranian adolescent girls, provide direct information about the motives that promote and impede participation in OS friendships for adolescent girls in a strict Islamic society. This study aimed to identify the factors that increase and decrease the likelihood that an Iranian adolescent girl will have a friendship with a boy. The study’s findings revealed that factors including a lack of perceived risk, possessing weak religious beliefs, identity formation, and having a low self-esteem could promote one’s entry into OS friendships. Moreover, factors such as self-confidence, giving priority to education, engaging in healthy hobbies, being aware of the unpleasant experiences of others, having strong religious beliefs, and the fear of being shamed by others could impede entry into OS friendships among female adolescents. It is important to note that the factors that lead to OS friendships are not the mirror opposite of the factors that deter them. Instead, the facilitating and deterring factors tend to represent different constructs.

These findings need to be considered within the context of a few critical points. In the Iranian society, OS friendships are forbidden by religious, cultural, and legal conventions. Although these relationships are, as in other countries, becoming more frequent for adolescents in Iran, they remain officially proscribed. When such relationships occur, they need to be hidden from others. Teenagers are unable to discuss anything about it openly with
others including parents and teachers. As adolescents do not have access to any formal training from reputable sources, such as schools and parents, about heterosexual relationships, opportunities for risky behavior in the context of such relationships are more frequent than in other societies. This represents a potentially serious health issue for large numbers of Iranian adolescents.

Considering this circumstance, it is not surprising that one of the more widely observed factors that facilitate an adolescent’s entry into OS friendships was having a poor understanding of the perceived risks in this age group. As adolescents move toward independence, they tend to experiment and test limits, which include engaging in risky behaviors. Thus, the decisions adolescents make are deeply embedded in their view of the self, of the relationships to others, and of the society and the world (39). It seems that different adolescents make different estimates about the gravity of risks so they will each develop different responses to their risky behavior. Although entering into an OS friendship in itself is not a risky behavior, it can, as mentioned earlier, provide a context in which the probability of engaging in high-risk behaviors, such as unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies, and drug abuse, is increased. Consequently, these behaviors may lead to negative psychological outcomes including depression and suicide.

Possessing weak religious beliefs was another factor that promotes entry into OS friendships for female adolescents. According to Islamic beliefs, a relationship with the OS is to blame for engaging in high-risk behaviors such as premature or unprotected sexual interaction. Although the majority of adolescents in this study practiced various religious activities, none of these activities inhibited communication with the OS. This may be due to the absence or decreased intensity of one’s religious beliefs among adolescents in this age group. Age greatly affects the incidence of religious behavior and religious experiences. It has been demonstrated that during adolescence, there is an overall fall in religious activities and beliefs (40). Typically, there is a drop of 25% in the number of people who go to services or report religious affiliation (41). Part of the reason for this decline in religiosity is that around 16 years of age, adolescents increasingly begin to question their faith (42). Another reason may be the result of conflict with parents (40).

The third factor affecting one’s entry into an OS friendship was the processes of identity formation. Based on Erikson’s theory, identity formation is the most important activity in adolescence (43, 44). The process of identity development involves the integration of various self-beliefs into a unified whole, enabling adolescents to perceive themselves as distinctive individuals (45). The identity formation process involves an interplay between external and internal factors (that is social as well as biological and psychological factors). The current literature is increasingly recognizing external influences on identity, such as cultural and social factors, and the impact these have on an individual’s sense of identity (46). According to Erikson, adolescence is a time when beliefs about oneself and the beliefs of others become important contributors to developing a sense of identity. During this stage, issues of identity are either successfully resolved by reaching a balance between commitment and confusion about one’s beliefs, goals, values, and roles in society, or alternatively, the adolescent remains in a state of “identity diffusion” characterized by an absence of integration and a lack of commitment (47).

In this study, one of the most important and influential social factors on identity formation is having relationships with the OS. Adolescents feel that their OS friendship plays a crucial role in helping them identify themselves within the community. They want to highlight themselves in their community in this way and are eager to know the opinions that OS individuals have about them. Adolescents are able to learn how to negotiate with one another, usually without any parental guidance (48). Additionally, adolescents are able to validate their attractiveness to the OS and see the world around them in the eyes of their OS friends (49).

The last factor that promoted adolescent friendships with the OS was low self-esteem. Factors such as gender, race, social competition, parental behavior, and attachment styles are influential on the self-esteem of adolescents (50). Low self-esteem in adolescence leads to negative consequences such as depression and other mental health problems, substance abuse, school dropout, teen pregnancy and risky sexual behavior, desire for having children, lower satisfaction with relationships, and delinquent behavior (44, 51–54). Adolescents who have been given less value in society may seek to raise their self-esteem via finding OS friends (55), whereas girls with higher self-esteem or sense of value may refuse to engage in such risky behaviors (56).

Prior research indicated that the association between self-esteem and its expected consequences was mixed, insignificant, or absent (57). With regard to self-esteem and social outcomes, self-esteem has been positively and negatively correlated with aggression. Some researchers have provided qualified support for the contention that delinquent behavior might actually serve to enhance self-esteem. Some studies have even shown that high self-esteem correlates positively with increased sexual activity in teens (58, 59). Adolescents’ close friendships and
romantic pairings have been observed to have positive effects on self-esteem.

We found that self-confidence was one of the factors impeding entry into OS friendships. In general, it was expected that individuals who are highly committed to a particular set of beliefs, values, and goals would experience lower levels of self-belief conflicts (47). It was shown that adolescents who have more self-confidence were less likely to enter into OS friendships. If, however, they were previously engaged in a heterosexual relationship, having a greater degree of self-confidence made them less likely to give in to peer pressure and more likely to take control of the relationship.

Another factor that prevented entry into OS friendships was prioritizing education for both adolescents and their family members. For some adolescents, academic achievement was a priority, and therefore, they spent more time studying and less time engaging in other recreational activities. Refraining from OS friendships resulted in a decreased occurrence of high-risk behaviors and the consequences associated with them. Although we were unable to locate studies that specifically discuss the impact that valuing education has on preventing an adolescent from entering into an OS friendship, Belgrave et al. (63) predicted that girls with a higher interest in school would endorse less risky sexual attitudes. A study of premarital sex using the YAFS2 data from 1994 found that boys who planned to go to college were less likely to be sexually active (60). In summary, being in school seems to prevent adolescents from engaging in risky behaviors (61).

In addition, the results of this study demonstrated that adolescents who took part in healthy recreational activities were less likely to establish OS friendships. According to the social bond theory, by increasing an 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), he or she tends to engage in appropriate social behaviors (62). Adolescents tend to perceive spending time with friends as a waste of time and therefore prefer to participate in activities that may benefit them now or later on in life. Engaging in healthy activities, such as playing sports, learning a new language, and learning to play an instrument, may help adolescents develop certain skills that may prove to be useful later on in life. Adolescents who participate in such activities consider themselves to be more successful than those who prefer to spend their time chatting, roaming the streets, and engaging in sexual acts.

For female adolescents, being aware of the negative experiences that others have had with boys during this time can prevent one from entering into an OS friendship herself. Adolescents, especially girls, have strong relationships with their peers and tend to share their experiences with each other. Due to the high levels of self-disclosure, girls become aware of both the positive and negative consequences that have been associated with heterosexual relationships. In a way, they become “warned” of the possible outcomes that they may experience if they enter into such a relationship. Adolescents compare positive and negative consequences of these relationships and make decisions about whether they want to have an OS friend. Concerns about whether the potential benefits of having a same-sex friend will outweigh the costs can activate well-known approach and avoidance gradients whose values cross adolescents. The girls in our study who were not willing to see the value of the positive provisions of having an OS friend such as companionship or intimacy, as greater than the negative consequences such as being known as a person who was sexually active prior to marriage, avoided these relationships. The knowledge of what could happen if certain behaviors are chosen can be enough to keep us from acting in certain ways.

As mentioned before, in Iran, OS friendships before marriage are religiously and culturally forbidden. The results showed that having strong religious convictions was one of the important factors that could restrict entry into OS friendships. Religious belief is distinct from religious practice or religious behaviors with some believers not practicing religion and some practitioners not believing religion. Donahue and Benson (64) concluded that girls are more religious than boys. Some studies found that girls with religiosity would endorse less risky sexual attitudes (63), and those who are more religiously active are less likely to be sexually active before marriage (60). Indeed, religiousness is positively associated with prosocial values and behavior, and negatively related to other risky behaviors in adolescence such as suicide ideation and attempts, substance abuse, premature sexual involvement, and/or delinquency (64).

Shaming from “significant others,” such as one’s mother, father, best same-sex friend, sibling, and teacher, etc., was the last factor identified as an impediment to OS friendship. Because communicating freely with the OS in the Iranian community is not a normative behavior, relationships with OS peers are not acceptable. Adolescents thought that if others knew they had an OS friend, they would lose the respect of others and they would be shamed by them. In adolescence, females generally have stronger feelings of shame than do males (65, 66). It may be that Iranian society is a shame-based culture and that the potential for shame may impede the formation of OS friendships.
Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be discussed before its implications. First, OS friendship is a complex construct that may be defined in numerous ways. For adolescent Iranian girls in particular, their OS friendships may be inextricably tied to culture and gender. Another weakness 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-sex interviewer who was trained to establish rapport and conduct the interview in a non-judgmental manner), we cannot establish the validity of 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 the 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. We have a reason to believe that these individuals, who are unaccounted for in our study, may possess different opinions compared to those who attend school on a regular basis (39, 67). 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 males, girls of other countries, or adolescents of different ages.

Conclusion

Factors from different levels of social complexity were observed to promote and impede engagement in OS friendships for Iranian adolescent girls. Whereas participation in friendships with boys was observed to be largely due to factors at the level of the individual (e.g. religious beliefs and self-esteem), abstaining from relationships with boys was observed to be due to a combination of individual-level factors and social factors (e.g. shaming and prior negative experiences). A multilevel approach is needed to understand why some Iranian girls enter into friendships with boys while others do not. Future researchers can focus on identifying and understanding the factors that influence male adolescents to enter into OG friendships.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their gratitude to the adolescents who bravely participated in this study. The project was supported by the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. The fourth author’s work on this paper was supported by a grant from The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by a University Research Chair in Early Adolescent Development.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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