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Original Article

The Association Between Personality Traits and Friendship Satisfaction among Undergraduates of Universities in Colombo District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Background: Humans aspire to establish fulfilling friendships because the overall quality of friendship predicts psychological well-being. The quality of friendships can predict happiness, yet it can also be linked to unpleasant situations like conflict and betrayal. Many people, however, find it difficult to establish lasting and fulfilling connections.

Objective: The main objective of the present study is to determine the relationship between personality traits and friendship satisfaction among undergraduates in the Colombo area.

Methodology: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among undergraduates in the Colombo area. A sample of 144 undergraduates completed an online questionnaire comprising the Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI) and McGill Friendship Satisfaction Questionnaire. The linear regression analysis was carried out using SPSS version 26.

Results: The sample included 93 females (64.6%), and 50 males (34.7%) aged between 20 to 40 years (Mean age - 24±2.7). The results revealed a significant correlation between extraversion (r = +0.336, p<0.001), agreeableness (r = +0.226, p=0.006), openness (r = +0.268, p=0.001), and friendship satisfaction. Out of the Big Five traits, neuroticism (r = +0.070, p = 0.404) and conscientiousness (r = +0.114, p =0.175) were not significantly correlated with friendship satisfaction.

Conclusion: Findings conclude that some personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, and openness) were correlated with friendship satisfaction.

Keywords: Personality, Big Five personality traits, Friendship satisfaction, Undergraduates

Introduction

People develop friendships throughout their lives which is crucial in all social interactions. Friendship is a voluntary, casual and enjoyable relationship that people establish and should be mutual (Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015). Almost everyone invests time, money, emotions, and energy in their friendships. Friendships tend to be closer or more intimate, particularly among people from collectivist cultures like Sri Lankan culture (French et al., 2006). It is even important from an evolutionary standpoint because it is crucial to human life and reproduction. However, many individuals find it challenging to build enduring and fulfilling friendships. Questions about how and who can develop and sustain fulfilling friendships arise, considering how vital friendships are on a broad scale. It has been shown that friendship quality predicts mental well-being, significantly impacting university lives and life satisfaction among undergraduates (Buote et al., 2007; Cheung & McBride-Chang, 2014; Gleckel, 2015; Amati et al., 2018; Pradhan et al., 2018;). University life is more like a rollercoaster ride for most undergraduates and maintaining psychological well-being is crucial. People make new friends in their undergraduate life and such satisfying peer relationships would be a great emotional and psychological support to adapt and cope with all academic and life challenges. Therefore, studying how personality traits correlate with friendship satisfaction among undergraduates would be useful for them to find satisfying friendships.

Unlike familial bonds, friendships are formed out of an individual's choice. Therefore, personality plays an important role when forming friendships, maintaining the quality of friendships, and even ending relationships (Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015). According to the PERSOC framework (framework of Personality and Social relationships) how people interact with others is a significant reflection of our personality. It impacts how many and what kind of social interactions an individual forms (Back, et al., 2011). The Big Five Personality Inventory is one of the most used personality assessing tools throughout the literature (Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015; Selfhout, et al., 2010).

The Big Five-factor theory proposes five major personality traits: neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, and extraversion, which can be identified through social interactions. Extraversion refers to a person's capacity for social interaction and ease in making new acquaintances in unfamiliar situations (Harris & Vazire, 2016; Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001). Agreeability is a gauge of how people interact with others; for example, those with high agreeableness are more likely to be benevolent and straightforward. It has been demonstrated that certain traits that support the agreeableness trait, like friendliness, warmth, and companionship, have a beneficial influence on interpersonal encounters (Harris & Vazire, 2016).

People's propensity or willingness to try novel things is referred to as openness to experience. People who are open to new experiences can sustain friendships without having to communicate all the time, and even a short period is sufficient to build a bond. People's capacity for self-control to exhibit the desired behaviour is defined by their degree of conscientiousness. Consequently, they act in a socially appropriate manner, improving social interactions. The Big Five-factor theory's description of neuroticism, which centers on people's emotional stability based on how they view the world, is the last one. These individuals frequently lack the necessary emotional support for their friends and are easily irritated, impulsive, and quick to hold grudges (Mund, Jeronimus, & Neyer, 2018).

Environmental factors like culture and internal variables like individual differences influence how friendship works (Hinde, 1987;Nelson, Thorne, & Shapiro, 2011; Hinde, 1987; Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998). In an individualistic society, individuality, freedom, and self-realisation are essential, and the community is prioritised over individual goals in collectivist

cultures. These principles are crucial to human interactions. Even though a person's social functioning and interactions with peers are greatly influenced by their cultural context, research on peer relationships has typically concentrated on Western culture, especially in North America (Chen, French, & Schneider, 2006). Therefore, the findings of those studies might not be entirely applicable to Sri Lankan society. The present study's topic has not been reported in previous studies in Sri Lanka, hence would fill the research gap.

Understanding how personality influences friendship formation, upkeep, and termination can offer fresh perspectives on the most crucial steps to avoid negative interpersonal phenomena and interventions from altering inappropriate behaviour of one's relationship. Another significance is that knowing these processes and using them to guide relationships can enhance people's lives without coercion and altering the personality traits that govern these processes (Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015). However, compared to romantic relationship satisfaction, which has been extensively researched in the past, friendship satisfaction has received less worldwide attention. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between personality traits and friendship satisfaction among undergraduates in the Colombo district.

Methodology

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 144 undergraduates in the Colombo district to find the association between personality traits and friendship satisfaction. The participants were recruited through convenient sampling with ethical approval (KIU/ERC/21/16) from the Ethics Review Committee of KIU. Inclusion criteria were volunteered undergraduates in Colombo who were free of psychological disorders and were in a friendship with someone from the same gender. The extension of this study would aim to find the personality combination that scores the highest friendship satisfaction. Hence, friends of similar

sex were chosen to avoid the effect of gender variants.

Before the main study, a pretest was conducted utilising 25 undergraduates to validate the questionnaire before using it to collect data. The reliability analysis on the responses of the pretest provided satisfactory results for two sections of the questionnaire; section 2 (items of BFI) and section 3 (friendship satisfaction measuring items) (Cronbach's α; 0.969 & 0.745). Each item of the questionnaire was presented in three languages (English, Sinhala, and Tamil). Therefore, the data validity and clarity of questions were established using the feedback and comments from the participants of the pretest and subject and language experts.

The data collected via an online questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic questions, BFI, and McGill Friendship Questionnaire. BFI is a self-report multidimensional personality assessing tool which consists of 44 items that have 1-5 likert phrases. The responses provided by participants would indicate where they fell on the spectrum for each personality trait; for instance, a score of a participant may indicate high extraversion but low conscientiousness (Fraga, 2018). Instead of framing a participant's personality into one category, this scale indicates where the individual stands in the spectrum of each personality trait. The median of each trait score was taken to identify whether participants are high or low in each trait. The median for each of the traits is as follows: extraversion (x~ 24), agreeableness (x~18), conscientiousness (x~18), openness (x~20), and neuroticism (x~16).

McGill Friendship Questionnaire consists of 4 subscales: affection, positive feelings, friendship satisfaction, and evaluation (Mendelson & Aboud, 2014). The subscale of the McGill Friendship Questionnaire that measures friendship satisfaction was used in the current study. This subscale contained ten liked items. Participants were advised to give their answers referring to one specific same-gender friendship.

The relationship between personality traits and friendship satisfaction was analysed using descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis using the SPSS 26 version.

Results

Participants were asked to select their gender under three categories; Male, Female, and Other (those who do not identify as male or female). The sample included 93 females (64.6%), 50 males (34.7%), and one other (0.7%) participant. The ages ranged from 20 to 40 years (Mean age = 24±2.7), and 104 (72.2%) represent non-state universities. According to the demographic data of the current study, 135 participants (93.8%) exhibited friendships that are longer than a year, and only 9 participants (6.3%) exhibited less than a year-long friendship.

Table 1: *Demographic details of the participants*

Variables	Frequency (n=144)	Percentage (%)
Age		
< 30 years	139	96.5
30+ years	5	3.5
Gender		
Male	50	34.7
Female	93	64.6
Other	1	0.7
Duration of the Friendship		
Less than a year	9	6.25
More than a year	135	93.75
Form of the University		
State University	40	27.8
Non-state University	104	72.2

Scores range from 8-40, 4-40, 4-40, 0-40, and 8-40, respectively, in each subscale; extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and neuroticism of the Big Five Inventory. According to the frequency analysis of data collected from BFI, 76%(n=109) of participants in the current study show higher levels of extraversion (>24), 81%(n=117) show high conscientiousness (>18), 92%(n=132) present high openness (>20), and 58%(n=83) are with high neuroticism (>16) while everyone scores high in agreeableness (>18).
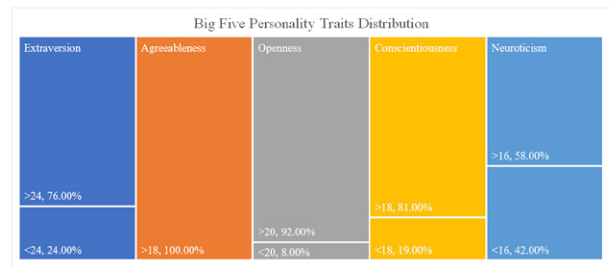

Figure 1 - Distribution of the Big Five personality traits

Linear regression has been carried out to understand the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and friendship satisfaction as well as the strength of each relationship. Extraversion (r = +0.336, p <0.01)), openness (r = +0.268, p = 0.001), and agreeableness (r = +0.226, p = 0.006) showed a weak positive significant relationship with friendship satisfaction (Figure 2, Figure 3 & Figure 4) while the relationship of conscientiousness (r = +0.114, p = 0.175) and neuroticism (r = +0.070, p = 0.404) with friendship satisfaction proved to be insignificant in the current study.
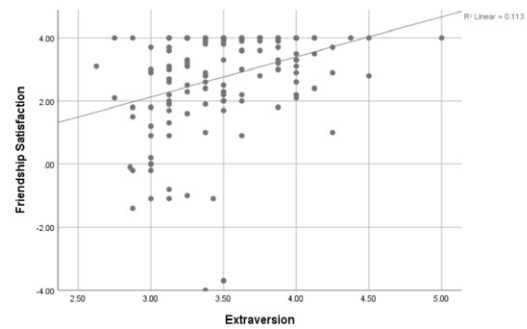

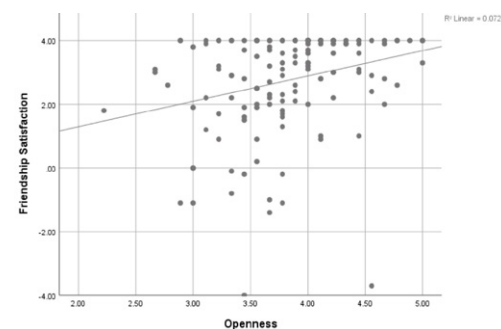*Figure 2 – Correlation between Extraversion and Friendship Satisfaction*

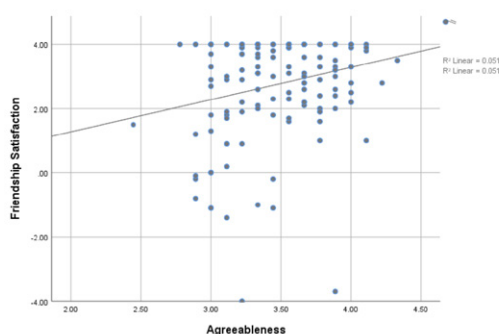*Figure 3 - Correlation between Openness and Friendship Satisfaction*

Figure 4 - Correlation between Agreeableness and Friendship Satisfaction

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between the big five personality traits and friendship satisfaction as well as the strength of the relationship. According to the data analysis of the current study, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness were positively correlated with friendship satisfaction. Even though the above correlations were significant, it was not as strong as many previous studies (Jensen-Campbell, et al., 2002; Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015). Although extraversion was found to be the strongest predictor of friendship satisfaction in earlier studies that used the same personality assessment instrument, the same tool has not been used to assess friendship satisfaction as in this study, which may account for the different results. Nevertheless, even in this research, extroversion showed the highest positive correlation out of all the other personality traits.

Asendorpf & Wilpers (1998) shows neuroticism is the strongest predictor of all subjective well-being indices. Even though neuroticism strongly correlates with friendship and romantic relationship satisfaction in literature (Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015; Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Demır & Weitekamp, 2006), it is not the case in friendship satisfaction according to the current study. That may be the case because personality might function differently in friendships and romantic relationships, even though both are interpersonal.

As same as the findings of the present study, consciousness showed a positive but insignificant correlation with friendship satisfaction in a previous study finding (Demır & Weitekamp, 2006). Moreover, findings have proven that the openness trait of personality significantly contributes to friendship satisfaction among undergraduates in Colombo, while most of the previous studies did not indicate any significant association between openness and friendship satisfaction (Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015; Selfhout, et al., 2010). However, this correlation is not strong enough to see a contrast between the findings of past studies and present studies' findings.

However, all previous literature that has been used to compare with the findings of the current study is not from Sri Lanka since most research on peer relations has traditionally focused on Western culture, particularly in North America (Chen, French, & Schneider, 2006) and there were no reported studies conducted in Sri Lanka to compare the findings. Therefore, the contextual or cultural differences may have caused the contrasting findings since those findings might not be 100% applicable to Sri Lankan culture. Moreover, only a few studies directly examine how individual differences affect friendship satisfaction; most studies are on romantic relationships (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010; Schaffhuser, Allemand, & Martin, 2014).

The small sample size of the present study might be another cause of these mismatches between findings. That leads to a limitation of the present study, which eliminates the generalizability and limits the results' utility. Also, non-probability sampling (convenient sampling) caused the imbalance between the main gender categories, male and female, state and non-state universities, which again questions the generalizability. Therefore, future research shoul investigate co rrelation and other protential mediators like friendship quality and the number of interactions with friendship satisfaction.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to novel experiences correlate with friendship satisfaction while the other two traits do not significantly contribute to friendship satisfaction. In Sri Lanka, the study of friendship satisfaction is relatively new. This research will be helpful in the field of psychology to highlight the significance of searching for mediators or factors influencing peer relationships that contribute to the development of satisfying friendships.

Conflicts of Interests

There are no conflicts of interest.

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