

How Strong are our Weak Ties? Examining the Usefulness of Facebook Friendship in Youths' Life from the Social Penetration Theory

Saurabh Maheshwari^{1*} and Tuheena Mukherjee²

¹Department of Psychology, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim, India

²Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, India

*Corresponding Author: smaheshwari@cus.ac.in

Studies show the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook friendship, however, few have compared Facebook friends with real-life friends. The present study follows the social penetration theory in exploring the differences in the formation of Facebook and face-to-face friendships and their patterns of support access. An offline survey was done on 253 undergraduate students. Results show that formations of these two are very different in terms of demographics, like- gender, socio-economic status, and siblings. Further, it is found that Facebook friends are counted at the time of emergency and

financial need but not considered useful when it comes to emotional support. The present work suggests that though Facebook friendship has few traits of friendship, it not an extension of friendship. From the formation to the outcome there are differences in both kinds of friendship, however, it seems that Facebook friends can serve some purpose of friendship.

Keywords: Facebook friendship, social support, Facebook, social penetration theory

According to the data, India has 290 million Facebook users and ranks first (The Times of India, 2019). The growing popularity of Facebook friendships globally and the massive number of Indian users intrigues us to explore the prime function that it serves. Ellison et al. wrote “Facebook... accumulate ‘friends’ who can post comments on each other’s pages, and view each other’s profiles” (2007, p.1143). Facebook also enables users to know others’ interests, hobbies, and relationship status (Ellison et al., 2007) and provides a source for maintaining and extending interpersonal relations. Research has focused on issues like Facebook friendships and social capital (e.g., Brandtzæg, 2012; Brandtzæg et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2007; Stefanone et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2015), identity and disclosure (e.g. Debatin, et al. 2009; Waters & Ackerman, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008), psychological benefits (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Hargittai 2008;

Valenzuela et al., 2009), and online impression management (e.g. Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). These studies indicated several positive and negative outcomes of Facebook friendships, but surprisingly none of the above studies have attempted to explain any distinction between Facebook and close friendships. Exploration of similarities/ dissimilarities between Facebook friendship and close friendships needs attention because both are likely to have different explanations for their underlying processes. The present paper, therefore, attempts to study similarities/ dissimilarities in the process of friendship i.e. Facebook and intimate/close friendships at two levels- i.e. at the level of formation and in their outcomes.

Friendship and Social Penetration Theory

Friendship is an integral part of humans' social and personal life and a much-needed phenomenon especially for the youth (Berndt 1982; Sullivan 1953). Social penetration theory states that for friendships, self-disclosure between friends is an important criterion (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Friendship starts with sharing impersonal information which gradually moves towards more intimate and personal information sharing. Sharing personal information is a gradual progression of information that happens only with the people with whom one feels psychologically comfortable. Laurenceau et al. (1998) stated that along with self-disclosure, the phenomenon of intimacy also increases between friends over-time. The basic imperative for an increase in self-disclosure is the reciprocal behavior on disclosure. If one does not receive a reciprocal response then the progress in self-disclosure also becomes limited. Studies state that self-disclosure of emotion is more accountable for the development of intimacy rather than disclosure of facts and information (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Hays's (1985) longitudinal study on friendship development was conducted to "identify characteristic behavioral and attitudinal changes that occurred within interpersonal relationships as they progressed from initial acquaintance to close friendship" (p.910). Results of the study indicate that as a relationship matures, intimacy develops in a dyadic relationship and the resulting benefits also increase. Comparison of close and non-close friendships shows that, in close friendships, benefits such as companionship, consideration, affection, communication, and the dependency on the quality of behavior are much higher than in non-close friendships (Hays 1985). Hays (1984) found that dyads that turned into close friends have different

behavioral and attitudinal exchanges as compared to those which did not turn into close friends. Though several researchers assumed that intimacy is a part of close friendship, some attempts have been made to understand closeness and intimacy – independently. Parks and Floyd (1998) found at least 13 meanings for intimacy and closeness in friendship including self-disclosure, support, and shared interests. Three different kinds of relationships were found between closeness and intimacy: firstly, both terms were equivalent; secondly, both were quantitatively different, i.e. closeness is a highly labeled term that included intimate friendships; and, thirdly, both were qualitatively different, indicating that closeness is used in case of non-romantic friendships and intimacy comes in romantic and sex-oriented relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1998). The closeness of any friendship is determined by the amount of sharing and helping between friends (Berndt, 1986). Oden et al. (1984) also stated that the sharing of intimate feelings differentiates close friendships from just friendships. Researches on friendship show that friendship in intimate and close relationships are mainly based on reciprocal disclosures.

Facebook Friendship

Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013) have examined the change in patterns of friendship due to changes in the digital world. That showed the necessity to define online and offline friendships because these are mutually exclusive categories (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). They stated that the definition of friendship has not changed over the period of time and remains as a dyadic co-constructed aspect based on reciprocity, closeness, and intimacy. The idea of reciprocity, closeness, and intimacy are different for physically and non-physically present people. The above studies on social penetration theory and friendships have been subject to exploration only in the context of physically present friendships and not for virtual friendships like on Facebook. A range of studies has explored the benefits of Facebook usage, with reference to social capital (e.g., Brandtzæg 2012; Jiang & de Bruijn, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2009); psychological benefits (Ellison et al., 2007; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Hargittai 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Some other important themes have also been associated with Facebook, like social inclusion (Notley 2009), digital inequality (Wei 2012), online impression management/self-presentation (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Tufekci 2008). Previous works have also explored and exploring differences among users and non-users in personality, socio-economic

status, and other traits (Hargittai 2008; Ross et al., 2009). Buote et al. (2009) explored the similarities and differences between online and offline friendships with reference to attachment styles, which indicated that the context of friendship plays a crucial role in linking attachment style with online-offline friendships. Researchers have also shown that Facebook users are different and/or similar in various aspects to non-users, however, the difference between virtual Facebook friendships and real-life close friendships have received limited attention. Moreover linking social penetration theory with Facebook friendships will provide new light in defining the idea of friendship and locating similarities/dissimilarities between Facebook friendships and offline close friendships.

Present Study

Literature shows that close friendships have some basic components like- intimacy, self-disclosure, and reciprocity. Facebook is a platform wherein one of the prime activities is self-disclosure. They do this extensively with both present and past information in the form of photos, videos, and other artifacts. However, these self-disclosures are made with numerous people, and are rarely emotional (mostly facts and happy memories). This type of impersonal self-disclosure makes it different from what is stated in the Social Penetration theory.

Two functions that are most widely used in Facebook are ‘Like’ and ‘Share’. We like others’ updates and up-loads and others also do the same for our updates and uploads. This social exchange is based on social reciprocity “I like and share your stuff and in exchange you like and share mine,” therefore, providing immense scope for reciprocation. The third feature, that is, intimacy, is difficult to locate in Facebook friendships. With these basic differences between Facebook friendships and close friendships, the following research questions are formulated.

RQ1: Are Facebook friendships and close friendships similar in their process of formation?

RQ2 Are Facebook friendships and close friendships similar in providing support at the time of need?

Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013) mention that it is necessary to define what we mean by various kinds of friendships, such as offline and online friendships before doing research in this field. In the present research, Facebook friendship includes all those friends who are listed on Facebook friends list, irrespective of whether the friendship is

totally online or offline to online. It is neither feasible nor rational to pick only 'friends' from a Facebook friends list. Lewis and West (2009) believed that 'friend' on Facebook includes a variety of relationships and not just friends. Similarly friends in real life range from close friends to acquaintances. However close and Facebook friendships are not exclusive categories and some overlaps exist. Friends on Facebook include not only close friends but many others and not all close friends might have Facebook accounts. The present paper, therefore, attempts to explore the overlaps between Facebook friendships and close friendships.

H1: There would be a significant positive relationship between Facebook friendships and Close friendships.

Previous research shows that Facebook usage depends on psychological variables such as personality, need for cognition (Gangadharbatla 2008; Ross et al., 2009), as well as on socio-demographic factors, such as gender, age, and socio-economic conditions (e.g. Brandtzæg et al., 2010; Hargittai 2008). Wei (2012) found that females' engagement in multi-model internet use was significantly lesser than that of males, but on the contrary, female involvement was much higher when it came to the usage of SNS as compared to males. Hargittai (2008) showed that females not only use more SNS as compared to males but also, showed significantly high Facebook usage. Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) found that females differ from males not only in the amount of Facebook usage but also in the purpose. Though few previous research has demonstrated gender differences in Facebook usage, limited work has been done to explore the influence of gender on Facebook friendships. Contrary to Facebook friendship, in the case of offline close friendships, societal norms may play an important role. The study is primarily contextualized in India. In the masculine society of India, in general, girls get limited freedom and autonomy to spend time outside their homes. Patriarchal kinship and economic systems in India have limited provisions for women's autonomy (Caldwell, 1986). The autonomy though has been researched with reference to control over financial resources, decision-making power, but it has also significantly focused on limited freedom of movement (Bloom et al., 2001). Therefore these factors restrict the socialization of females, thereby contributing to having a shorter list of close friends. It is also possible that females may compensate for their lower offline density with higher online contacts. Hence it is hypothesized that

H2a: Female participants will have more Facebook friends and less close friends as compared to their male counterparts.

Similarly, previous researches have demonstrated the role of socioeconomic status or annual family income in internet use (Wei 2012). Hargittai (2008) showed that socioeconomic status influences Facebook usage. However, he considered parental education as an indicator of socio-economic status rather than annual family income. The present study uses the more widely accepted measure of socio-economic status i.e. annual family income. Therefore it is hypothesized that

H2b: Economic prosperity will have a positive impact on Facebook friendship, but not on close offline friendship.

Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) showed that the need to belong was one of the prime motives behind Facebook usage. The impact of Facebook in satisfying the belongingness or social connectedness need have also been found (e.g. Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Sheldon et al., 2011). Lee and colleagues' (2012) work on 'social compensatory friending' demonstrates that people make friends in order to compensate for their lower self-esteem. The present study argues that people will make more friends compensate for fewer offline friends. High-density families, i.e. those having a greater number of siblings, will show lesser Facebook engagements, as their belongingness needs are amply satisfied offline. However, if there are no or few siblings, individuals might compensate for their belongingness needs through Facebook friends. Hence we hypothesize:

H2c. Participants with more siblings will have lesser Facebook friends as well as close friends.

Several psychological, social, economical, and educational benefits of Facebook on its users have been found (Ellison et al., 2007; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Hargittai 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Facebook friendships serve as weak ties and relations with low commitment (Lewis & West, 2009) and work as social capital (e.g., Brandtzæg 2012; Brandtzæg et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 2003; Stefanone et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009). However, these weak ties serve purposes that are very different from those served by strong ties. For example, having very strong ties is not a prerequisite for asking help in the case of emergencies. In fact, even approaching strangers in such conditions is not viewed unfavorably. However personal needs such as 'emotional support'

cannot be gratified by anyone, but only from those one feels emotionally secure (Cook et al., 2012). Though previous researches show various utilities of Facebook, they have refrained from shedding light on two points- first, how the benefits of Facebook friendship differ from those of close friendship and secondly, how Facebook friendships prove useful in times when personal needs require gratification. Based on Lewis and West's (2009) idea of Facebook friends serving as weak ties, we hypothesized that

H3a: There will be no difference in seeking help from close friends and Facebook friends in times of emergency.

H3b: There will be no difference in seeking help from close friends and Facebook friends during financial need.

H3c: Close friendships will be more useful in times of emotional need than Facebook friendships.

METHOD

In the review of more than 400 articles on Facebook research, Wilson et al., (2012) found three primarily three ways of data collection, namely: "recruitment of participants in offline contexts, recruitment of participants via Facebook applications, and data crawling" (p.214). They believe that every method has its pros and cons, but, offline data collection is more effective when the researcher compares online and offline behavior or when the researcher compares users and non-users (Wilson et al., 2012). The present study focuses on, understanding close offline friendship and Facebook friendship. Since offline recruitment of participants was found to be preferable, an offline survey was carried out.

Sample

The participants of the study were undergraduate students from 3 different institutions based in Delhi, India. Overall, 289 questionnaires were distributed among students, enrolled in arts, science, and technology courses. A total of 253 students filled and returned the questionnaire with an 87.54 response rate. Out of which 159 were male and 94 were female. The age range varied from 17 to 23 years, with a mean = 20.10 and SD = 2.04.

Study variables

Friends on Facebook. Participants were asked to provide the total number of friends in their Facebook friend list. The maximum friends on Facebook account were 759 and the minimum was 6. The mean number of friends on Facebook was 215.78 and the standard deviation was 156.76.

Close friends. To measure the number of close friends, respondents were asked how many close friends they had. Spencer and Pahl (2006) found that the number of close friends varies from 5 to 41. In the present sample, it ranges from 0 close friends to a maximum of 50 close friends. The mean number of friends was 10.35, with 10.91 SD.

Perception of the helpfulness of friends. Participants were asked to write the number of friends from whom they could seek help in times of 1) emergency; 2) financial need and; 3) emotional need.

Demographic information. Gender, age, number of siblings, and annual family income were collected.

Procedure

Data were collected in 3 colleges and was an anonymous voluntary survey. With the help of class instructors, the survey was carried out in the classroom setting. Students were asked to volunteer for the study. They were briefly explained about the purpose of the study and were given instructions regarding the process of filling the questionnaire. The questionnaire was self-explanatory as it included brief statements regarding the purpose of study, instructions, and questions. The instruction section of the questionnaire also briefly mentioned the meaning of close friendship, Facebook friendship, and types of support. On average, it took 10 minutes to fill the questionnaire. In the end, the participants were thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of age, number of siblings, and family annual income. Demographic data suggests, while for sample average family annual income is US\$ 8914, female participants' average family annual income is US\$ 12,849 in comparison males US\$ 6,588.

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation of Demographic Data

	Male (N=159)		Female (N=94)		Total (N=253)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age	20.151	(1.962)	20.011	2.133	20.099	(2.024)
Number of siblings	1.80	(1.054)	1.65	.981	1.74	(1.028)
Family annual income ^a	6588	(4334)	12849	11505	8914	(8356)

Notes. ^aFamily annual income is reported in US\$.

Table 2
Mean, SD, and Bivariate Analysis

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Number of siblings	1.72	1.028	1						
2. Family annual income ^a	8914	8356	-.154*	1					
3. Support on financial need	6.23	7.373	-.032	-.010	1				
4. Support on emotional need	5.23	6.365	-.107	-.017	.315***	1			
5. Support on emergency need	7.23	7.797	-.002	.025	.565***	.465***	1		
6. Number of Facebook friends	218.34	155.91	-.175**	.295***	.356***	.212**	.298***	1	
7. Number of close friends	10.29	10.90	-.059	-.034	.355***	.512***	.352***	.276***	1

Notes. ^aFamily annual income is reported in US\$.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 2 shows descriptive and correlational analysis. As expected, correlation analysis shows a significant correlation between these two kinds of friendships ($r = .276$, $p < .001$). The result shows a positive correlation between the number of Facebook friends and the number of close friends. Though the correlation is significant it is not very high that shows that there is some overlap in these two modes of friendships.

Table 3
Partial Correlation of Facebook and Close Friends with Various Study Variables

Variable	Facebook friends ^a	Close friends ^b
Number of siblings	-.169**	-.010
Family annual income ^c	.317***	-.126
Friend's support in financial need	.287***	.284***
Friend's support in emotional need	.086	.482***
Friend's support in emergency	.223**	.294***

Notes. ^a Relationship is calculated while keeping close friends as control. ^b Relationship is calculated while keeping Facebook friends as control. ^c Family annual income is reported in US\$.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 3 shows the results of partial correlation between Facebook friends and study variables, and between close friends and study variables; since Facebook and close friends have significant overlaps, hence partial correlation is calculated to control this overlapping. An interesting finding can be traced to the relationship with the number of siblings. Facebook friendship shows a significant inverse relationship with the number of siblings, indicating that the lesser the number of siblings more is the more engagement with Facebook. However, no relation between close friends and the number of siblings is found. Family income is also found to be positively related to Facebook friendship but not with close friendship. Table 5 further shows that both Facebook friendship and close friendship show a similar relationship with support in financial need and at the time of emergency, but shows a different relational pattern with support in emotional need. While close friendship shows a strong positive relationship with support in emotional need, Facebook friendship shows weak relation. This shows that though in both financial need and emergency, participants seek both close friendship and Facebook friendship, in case of emotional need, they prefer close friends rather than Facebook friends.

Table 4 indicates a regression analysis between demographic variables on its influence on the number of Facebook friends and close friends. Though the results show that female participants have more Facebook friends (mean 245.46) than male participants (mean 202.13), but the difference is not statistically significant. Contrary to that male participants have a significantly higher number of close friends in comparison to females participants (male mean = 11.51 and female mean= 8.77, t= 2.202, p<.01). The

number of siblings and family annual income significantly predicts the number of Facebook friends. Results also show that the number of siblings negatively influences the number of Facebook friends, family annual income influence positively. However, none of these is significantly predicting the number of close friends. This shows these variables have a significant influence on the formation of Facebook friendship but not for close friendship.

Table 4
Effect of Demographic Variables of Two Kinds of Friendship

Variable	Facebook friends		Close friends	
	β	t	β	t
Gender ^a	.006	.096	-.153	2.202*
Number of siblings	-.136	2.243*	-.066	1.020
Family annual income ^b	.271	4.177***	.013	.183
R ²	.105		.025	
F	9.728***		2.032	

Notes. ^a Female = 1, male = 0. ^b

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 5
Regression Analysis Showing the Role of Friendships at Various Time of Need

Variable	Friend's support in emergency				Friend's support in financial need				Friend's support in emotional need			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
Gender	-.137	1.884	-.092	1.360	-.173	2.378*	-.132	1.992*	.021	.231	.104	1.648
Number of siblings	.006	.093	.059	.916	-.007	.095	-.052	.830	-.112	1.628	-.076	1.275
Family annual income	.067	.918	.010	.152	.037	.500	-.039	.572	-.038	.521	-.053	.820
Facebook friends			.239	3.468**			.313	4.620***			.067	1.049
Close friends			.272	4.089***			.242	3.678***			.504	8.135***
R ²	.017		.179		.027		.258		.013		.283	
F	1.215		9.137***		1.918		11.462***		.935		16.636***	

Notes. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The access to support from the two modes of friendship is given in table 5. Three kinds of need were taken to understand the support access pattern- support in financial need, support at the time of emergency, and support in emotional need. Results show, though, both Facebook and close friends are useful during an emergency and financial needs, but for emotional needs, Facebook friends do not have a significant role.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that Facebook friendships and close friendships overlap in some areas but differ in their formation and outcomes. The results support hypothesis (H1), i.e. Facebook friendship shows a significant relation with close friendships. The correlation between Facebook friendship and a close relationship is not very high, but significant. It reflects that both types of friendship are not mutually exclusive categories and there are significant overlaps, that is, Facebook friends include a number of close friends and vice-versa. The result supports Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013) statement that before doing research in friendship on Facebook, it is important to define Facebook and close friendships because they might overlap. The results also support that SNS is used for both, i.e. maintenance of existing social ties and the creation of new connections (Ellison et al., 2007). The relationship is not very strong which might be because 'friend' on Facebook includes a variety of relationships (Lewis & West, 2009). Similarly, friends in real life have a range too. Both types of friendships have an array of relations, but it is not necessary that all close friends are using Facebook and not all 'friends' on Facebook are really close friends. Social penetration theory also explains why Facebook friends are different from close friends. Facebook though provides one-to-one self-disclosure but for emotional disclosures, people do not always prefer to express through Facebook uploads and updates. Moreover, emotional self-disclosure can be categorized into two types- one, which is very personal and only done with selected few in private settings, and another public emotional display- wherein one share it with plenty and also uses Facebook for sharing. Social penetration theory is inclined toward very personal disclosure and is absent on Facebook, therefore Facebook friendships are limited in scope for building strong friendships.

Results show that female participants have significantly fewer close friends, but have a higher number of Facebook friends, though not significant, in comparison to the male participants. This result partly supports hypothesis 2a. Result confirms that female participants have lesser close friends, which may be attributed to socio-cultural norms shared in India. As already discussed, in masculine societies like India, females do not have equal freedom as males. Therefore female students might have lesser physical and social friends. Similar to the previous studies (Hargittai, 2008; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012; Wei, 2012), the present research also shows that female participants have more Facebook friends, though not significantly more than males. One possible explanation can be understood by “social compensatory friending” (Lee et al., 2012). Since females have lesser close friends, therefore it is possible to compensate for this they make more virtual friends. Another line of possible explanation is- for Facebook activity, internet access is a prime requirement. This is possible for those who have computers, laptops, or smartphones, and internet access either at home, hostels, or on their mobiles. Given the huge population size of India, there is also inequitable access to resources. Since families with poor economic conditions cannot afford continuous internet access or even have a computer at home, it is less likely that students from economically weaker backgrounds have many acquaintances on Facebook. Moreover, the female students come from nearly twice over a well off economic background as male participants. It supports previous researches (e.g., Wei 2012) that economic condition is an important factor for using the internet and applies to Facebook users as well.

The present research shows that economic resources play a significant role in the use of Facebook. However, as expected family annual income does not play any role in close friendships. The result confirms the previous research in the same line which shows family income influences internet use (Wei 2012) and socio-economic status influence Facebook use (Hargittai 2008). This result can easily be interpreted- those who have more money have access to laptops, computers, or a smartphone, and have internet connectivity, which enables them to be active on Facebook. Though, using the internet is not a costly affair neither having a smartphone, but still in a country like India where roughly one-third of the population lives below one dollar per day, using Facebook on mobile or computer is relatively costlier than any other developed country. As Maslow’s need for

hierarchy shows, social need or esteem need comes later when one fulfills his/her biological and safety need (Maslow, 1958). Where the majority of the population is struggling for basic survival- like food, drinking water, shelter, and safety, people do not have time to connect with others. There are three basic elements which are important for Facebook use- basic resources- like internet connectivity and smartphone/laptop/desktop, free time, and motivation/interest. If any of these are absent then people will not be inclined to Facebook. Those who come from lower strata suffer at all the three levels- firstly they do not have enough basic resource, secondly, they do not have spare time, and finally, lack of motivation or interest as they struggle to meet their ends, and they do not find any utility in knowing what is going on in others' lives.

One of the striking results is the significant negative correlation between Facebook friendship and the number of siblings in the family. Results indicate that number of siblings has a negative impact on Facebook friendship but not on close friendships. It is indicative that those who have siblings at home spend more time with them and need fewer Facebook friends in comparison to those who have no or fewer siblings. The reasons can be traced with two possible explanations- first, with fewer or no siblings they have more spare time to get involved in other activities wherein Facebook could be one of them, and, second, they compensate low density of people of the same age group at home with a high density of friends by making more friends on Facebook.

It was hypothesized (H3) that close friendships would be more useful in emotional needs but there will be no difference between two modes of friendship when it comes to financial needs, or help at the time of emergency. Results support the hypotheses. While it was found that at the time of financial needs and in emergencies Facebook friends are useful as close friends. At the time of emotional needs, Facebook friends are not found to be useful, rather people have to rely mostly on close friendships. The possible reasons can be traced in Lewis and West's (2009) work which shows that Facebook friendships serve the purpose of weak ties and relations with low commitment. Since financial assistance and help in emergencies can easily be asked from acquaintances therefore one does not need a strong bond. In this case, Facebook friends emerge as good support. The case of emotional needs is different. Laurenceau et al. (1998) explained that self-disclosure is important in the development of close friendships, intimacy, and disclosure of emotion is

more important than disclosure of facts and information. In other words, for close friendships, emotional disclosure is important, which means we do not share our emotions with all but very close friends. Hence Facebook friendship does not result to be as useful as close friends in the time of emotional needs.

Theoretical Contributions, Future Directions, and Limitations

The present study contributes to a theoretical understanding of socio-economic inequalities and Facebook usage. The study shows that Facebook usage is not free from socio-economic inequalities, such as family economic condition, gender, and the number of siblings. The study opens the scope for understanding usage patterns of social media with a range of demographic indicators. The second contribution is in understanding Facebook friendship and psychological indicators. The study shows significant overlap with close friends but is far from the true inclusion of close friendship. Though Facebook has emerged as a good platform for the help of various kinds of social and other needs, it cannot be useful at the time of very personal need such as emotional support. It is clear from the study that the nature of friendship has undergone a transformation and has emerged differently from traditional definitions. The third contribution is the scope for the understanding of national cultures and Facebook usage. The study indicates that masculine societies like India have an impact on the gender pattern of Facebook friendships. The study opens immense scope in understanding national cultures and Facebook dynamics. Finally, the present study contributes to understanding Facebook friendships through social penetration theory. To the best of our review, Facebook studies have not been studied through the angle of social penetration theory. More studies may be done to validate the relationship between the two concepts.

The present study is not free from limitations. Facebook friends and close friends could not be exclusively separated in the present study. The study deals only with the perceived availability of support, which may be very different from actual support available to the participants. The second limitation of the study pertains to the frequency of Facebook usage. The study did not tap the frequency of Facebook usage, which might have an impact on the study variables.

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