

Navigating Friendship Formation in the Digital Era: The Role of Value Congruence in Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

Forming novel friendships is an important aspect of emerging adulthood, yet little is known about how emerging adults identify potential friends in contexts where behavioral information is limited. We propose that emerging adults use value congruence to guide friendship formation when observable behavioral cues are constrained. Using an experimental approach across two studies, we investigated whether friendship interest in an unfamiliar individual was dependent on value congruence. In Study 1 (N = 322 university students; $M_{age} = 20.70$, $SD = 1.62$; 50% female), we evaluated value-expressive self-descriptions of peers, while in Study 2 (N = 451 university students; $M_{age} = 19.88$, $SD = 1.64$; 52% female), we examined friendship interest in the context of meeting someone online for the first time. Across both studies, we found associations between value congruence and friendship interest for conservation, openness, and self-transcendence values, but not for self-enhancement values. Additionally, we found that vignettes expressing openness and self-transcendence values generated higher friendship interest overall compared to those expressing self-enhancement values. Study 2 also revealed evidence for value incongruence effects, with participants reporting lower friendship interest when exposed to opposing values. These findings suggest that value (in) congruence plays a meaningful role in friendship formation among emerging adults, particularly when observable behavioral information is limited, with effects being most pronounced for values emphasizing the contrast between novelty-seeking and self-restraint.

Keywords

personal values, emerging adults, friendship, value congruence, online friendships

Introduction

Friendship is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that plays a vital role in people's lives, offering a sense of belonging, emotional support, and companionship (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2019). It is especially significant during emerging adulthood (18–29 years), a period marked by psychosocial adjustment, social integration, and identity formation (Arnett, 2015). Unlike earlier life stages shaped largely by external influences, emerging adulthood is characterized by greater volition in decisions about work, living arrangements, and relationships (Arnett, 2000; Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Wood et al., 2018). These transitions often occur within new social contexts, such as university, the workforce, or independent living, that foster opportunities for forming new relationships (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). In this context, friendship plays a central role in supporting self-exploration, autonomy, and social integration (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). As individuals' social networks expand in both size and composition during this period (Wrzus et al.,

2013), determining with whom to form and maintain meaningful friendships becomes a foundational task, shaping adjustment and wellbeing in emerging adulthood (Branje et al., 2014).

People tend to be attracted to others with whom they share similar characteristics (Byrne, 1997; McPherson et al., 2001). Grounded in individuals' need for a coherent and consistent

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understanding of the world, similarity-attraction leads people to seek out others who reinforce their worldview and validate their experiences (which for example has been documented in political attitudes; Bahns, 2025). Thus, similarity plays a central role in friendships, motivating both selection and retention, as compatibility between similar individuals facilitates smoother, more cooperative, and rewarding interactions (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Laninga-Wijnen & Veenstra, 2021; Laursen, 2017). Increasing evidence suggests that these dynamics are particularly important during emerging adulthood, when individuals are actively forming new social relationships. Emerging adults tend to form friendships with others who share similar sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., gender, Kindschi et al., 2019), behaviors (e.g., alcohol use, Schaefer et al., 2021), and personality traits. Specifically, similarity in traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, and openness, has been associated with friendship selection (e.g., Selfhout et al., 2010). Collectively, these findings underscore the central role of similarity as a guiding mechanism in friendship formation during emerging adulthood.

While similarity in more observable characteristics (e.g., sociodemographics, behaviors) can influence initial friendship selection, research suggests that similarity in less immediately observable factors, such as personal values as guiding principles in life (Schwartz, 1992), becomes more influential as friendships develop. Studies have shown that value similarity was more evident in established friendships but less predictive of initial friendship selection (Duck & Craig, 1975, 1978; Kindschi et al., 2019; Urberg et al., 1998). However, observable characteristics that initially attract individuals to one another may themselves function as value-expressive cues, conveying information about the individual's values. For instance, Boer et al. (2011) found that value similarity mediated the relationship between shared music preferences and interpersonal attraction, suggesting that music preferences can serve as observable value-expressive information.

What constitutes observable, value-expressive information is likely to be contextual (Hanel et al., 2018). In online environments, where behavioral or demographic cues are limited, people's self-disclosures and self-descriptions (e.g., their social media profiles or who they follow online) may serve as the most observable expressions of their personal values. Examining value congruence in online friendship attraction is particularly important because congruence effects can differ between online and offline contexts. For instance, similarity in traits like openness predicts attraction more strongly in online contexts than in face-to-face interactions (Cemalcilar et al., 2018). Such differences may not only reflect the context but also how people acquire information about potential friends (i.e., indirectly through profiles versus directly through interactions; Eastwick et al., 2019). Supporting this, Huang et al. (2020) found that individuals were more likely to express interest in friendship with someone who matched their 'ideal' friend when evaluating online profiles, but these effects diminished after direct interaction. These findings suggest that

abstract ideals, such as personal values (Schwartz, 1992), may play a substantive role in friendship attraction in indirect and psychologically distant contexts. However, despite the growing importance of online contexts for friendship formation (Belentschikow et al., 2022; Hood et al., 2018), particularly during early adulthood (Manago & Vaughn, 2015; Yang & Brown, 2016), the role of value-expressive information in fostering attraction and perceived value congruence in these contexts remains underexplored.

Personal Values

Personal values (e.g., benevolence, hedonism) are defined as broad, desirable, trans-situational goals that function as guiding principles in peoples' lives (Schwartz, 1992). As a central component of an individual's self-concept (Hitlin, 2003), values motivate behavior and serve as benchmarks for evaluating both one's own actions and the actions of others (Sagiv & Roccas, 2021). Friendships represent an important social context in which individuals can express and reinforce their values (Kindschi et al., 2019; Solomon & Knafo, 2007), with shared values providing a basis for mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation.

The most widely accepted framework for understanding personal values is Schwartz's (1992) theory of human values. In this theory, values are organized around a circular continuum based on the motivational goals they express. The continuum is partitioned into ten conceptually distinct basic values, where adjacent values (e.g., benevolence, universalism) reflect compatible motivations, and opposing values (e.g., power, universalism) represent conflicting motivations (See Figure 1). These ten values can be grouped into four

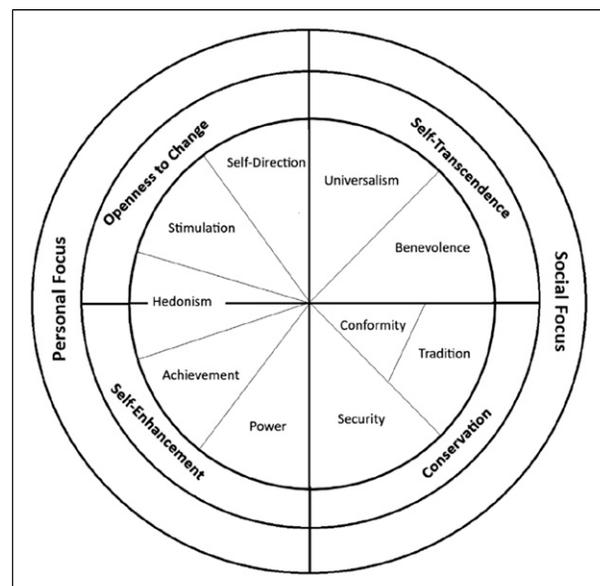


Figure 1. The Structure of Human Values. Note. Figure shows the basic, higher order, social and personal focus values, adapted from Schwartz (1992)

higher order values, reflecting two major motivational axes: (1) openness values (OC), which emphasize independence and readiness for change, oppose conservation (CO) values, which emphasize self-restraint and resistance to change, and (2) self-transcendence (ST) values, which emphasize care and concern for others, oppose self-enhancement (SE) values, which emphasize personal success and power. While the circular structure of values is near-universal, individuals differ in the degree to which they prioritize specific values (Schwartz, 1992).

Given the centrality of values in an individual's self-concept, their influence on judgements and behavior, and their structure of motivational conflicts and compatibilities, it is likely that individuals who prioritize similar values will share overlapping worldviews and behavioral tendencies. This alignment may foster greater satisfaction and compatibility in social relationships (Gaunt, 2006; Leikas et al., 2018). In contrast, as value disagreement can threaten one's ego by challenging personal beliefs about social reality (Coombs, 1966), individuals with opposing value priorities may experience interpersonal conflict.

The Current Study

Taken together, these insights suggest that examining value congruence in the early stages of friendship formation can offer a theoretically grounded lens through which to understand how individuals seek congruence between their own guiding principles and those of others. Yet several important gaps remain. First, most prior research has focused on offline contexts, leaving open the question of how value congruence operates in online friendship formation. Second, while values have been studied in the maintenance of more established friendships, few studies have examined their role in the initial stages of friendship selection when information is limited. Third, there is limited empirical work linking values to observable cues that emerging adults use to infer value congruence in novel relationships. To address these gaps, the present study examines whether value congruence predicts friendship formation among emerging adults in contexts where judgements about potential friends are made based on limited observable information, such as static online profiles. Extending the value congruence perspective to friendship formation in online contexts allows for an exploration of how values are expressed, inferred, and aligned through digital self-presentation, contributing to a deeper understanding of value expression and the social function of values in emerging adulthood. Based on the value framework, we expect that emerging adults will express greater friendship interest in an unfamiliar individual whose self-description primarily reflects congruent values. Specifically, we hypothesize that:

H1: Emerging adults will show greater friendship interest in an unfamiliar individual whose self-description reflects values that are congruent with their own.

Conversely, we expect emerging adults will express less friendship interest in an unfamiliar individual whose self-description expresses incongruent values. Specifically, we hypothesize that:

H2: Emerging adults will show lesser friendship interest in an unfamiliar individual whose self-description reflects values that are incongruent with their own.

In Study 1, we test these hypotheses by examining whether value congruence predicts friendship interest in response to the value-expressive self-description of an unfamiliar peer. In Study 2, we test these hypotheses by examining whether value congruence influences friendship interest in the context of an initial online interaction with a novel acquaintance.

Study 1

Participants. Young adults enrolled as undergraduate students at a large Australian university were recruited from a first-year organizational behavior unit in exchange for course credit. Of the 346 students who completed the online survey, 9 (2.6%) were excluded for being over the emerging adult age range (> 29 years), and 16 (4.6%) were removed due to survey speeding (< 10 minutes) or careless responding (e.g., straight-lining on scales). The final sample consisted of 322 participants ($M_{age} = 20.70$, $SD = 1.62$; 160 males, 160 females, 2 non-binary). Most participants (79%) were domestic students, and 59% were enrolled in a business degree, with the remainder studying psychology, science, engineering, or philosophy. As the current research was the first direct exploration into the topic of value congruence and online friendship interest in emerging adults, we relied on convenience samples of students. We did not specify *a-priori* sample sizes, as there were no comparable studies available. To provide some insight into the ability of our analysis to detect an interaction effect, we ran a post-hoc sensitivity analysis, using the InteractionPowerR package in R, based on our sample size under the three different assumptions of equal main effect of both predictors (value and condition) ranging from .10, .30, .50. We tested interaction effects in steps of .01 from .05 to .50 with 1000 iterations each. Aiming for a power of .80 to detect an effect with $\alpha = .05$, we found that the minimum detectable interaction effect for each of three main effect conditions would be .16, .14, and .11 respectively.

Procedures. After giving informed consent, participants completed an online survey in which they were first asked to report their age, gender, and personal values. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four higher order value-expressive conditions ($n_{Conservation} = 79$, $n_{Openness} = 80$, $n_{Self-enhancement} = 78$, $n_{Self-transcendence} = 85$) and presented with a single vignette, which they were told had been written by a peer (i.e., a student enrolled in the same unit). These value-expressive vignettes, generated by ChatGPT 3.5 based on

Schwartz's (1992) value theory, represented the four higher order value-expressive conditions. The prompts and full vignettes, along with analysis of the value-expression for each vignette, are provided in the [Supplemental Materials S1](#). After reading the vignette, participants were asked to imagine meeting the person who wrote it and to report their friendship interest in them. Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked, and awarded course credit for completing the survey.

Measures

Values. To assess participants' values, we used a gender neutral version of the PVQ-57RR (Schwartz, 2017) which has 57 items (e.g., "It is important to me to form my views independently"), with participants reporting agreement with each item on a 6-point scale (1 = *not like me at all* to 6 = *very much like me*). This scale has been widely validated as a reliable and robust measure of values across diverse populations and cultural contexts, demonstrating strong construct validity in capturing values at multiple levels of abstraction (Schwartz & Cieciuch, 2022).

Following the procedure recommended by Schwartz (2016), higher order values scores were calculated by averaging participants responses to individual value items within each higher order value domain (i.e., ST, SE, CO, OC).¹ Reliability of the higher order value scores was good to excellent with $\omega_{\text{ordinal}} = 0.894$ (ST), 0.825 (SE), 0.854 (OC), and 0.860 (CO).

Friendship. To assess participants friendship interest towards the hypothetical person described in the value-expressive vignette, we used a 4-item adapted version of the Hawthorne (2006) friendship scale (e.g., "I would find it easy to relate to them"; see [Supplemental Materials S2](#) for full scale) measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale has demonstrated good construct validity in capturing willingness to initiate and maintain friendships (Hawthorne, 2006), and reliability in the present study was acceptable ($\omega_{\text{ordinal}} = 0.722$).

Means, standard deviations, reliability, and intercorrelations among variables used in the analysis are reported in [Table 1](#). The data used in this study were collected in accordance with the guidelines and approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the The University of Western Australia. All materials used in this study are available via the Open Science Framework (OSF): osf.io/zup2f.

Analysis. We examined moderation between participants' value priorities² and the higher order value-expressive condition to which they were randomly assigned, in predicting their friendship interest in the person described in the vignette. We fitted the regression with the default `lm` function in R (4.5.1) and estimated standardized effects using the `sjPlot` package. To test our hypotheses, we examined interactions where participants' values and value-expressive vignettes were congruent (i.e., prioritizing the same values, H1) and incongruent (i.e., prioritizing opposing values, H2). Moderation was examined separately for self-transcendence and self-enhancement values and for openness and conservation values, to reflect the conflicts among these values in Schwartz's (1992) theory. In this analysis dummy variables were used to represent all value-expressive vignettes, except the target value (in)congruent vignette, and collapsed into reference categories. To allow for an easier comparison, participants' values scores were z-scored prior to the analysis. We ran moderation analysis for values along the higher order value axes as the simultaneous inclusion of all four higher order value dummy-codes in a single model would result in an under-identified model. This approach also allowed us to control for the effects of each value by their opposing value. Consistent with the exploratory nature of this research, we adopted the conventional α level of .05 as our threshold for statistical significance for all analyses, balancing discovery of effects with protection against Type I error. Given the exploratory aims of this study, we did not correct for multiple comparisons to avoid overly conservative Type II error rates that might mask effects deserving of future investigation.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations and Reliability of Variables (Study 1 & 2)

	Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Study 1 (N = 322)	1 Self-transcendence values	4.64	0.66	.894				
	2 Self-enhancement values	3.92	0.80	-.73***	.825			
	3 Openness values	4.66	0.62	.00	-.17**	.854		
	4 Conservation values	4.16	0.74	-.08	-.35***	-.62***	.860	
	5 Friendship interest	3.55	0.68	.05	-.04	-.01	.00	.722
Study 2 (N = 451)	1 Self-transcendence values	.14	.20					
	2 Self-enhancement values	-.14	.34	-.64***				
	3 Openness values	.13	.23	-.20***	-.04			
	4 Conservation values	-.06	.19	-.14**	-.21***	-.53***		
	5 Friendship interest	3.51	.70	-.03	.12**	-.04	-.04	.741

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. The values for Means and Standard Deviations in Study 1 are the raw scores. Values on the diagonal are the ω . As best-worst scaling was used to measure values in Study 2 we do not provide reliabilities as they cannot be meaningfully interpreted.

Results

We found significant differences in friendship interest between value-expressive vignettes ($F_{(3, 175.42)} = 6.29, p < .001, \omega_p^2 = .08$).³ Vignettes expressing openness and self-transcendence values were rated significantly higher in friendship interest than the vignette expressing self-enhancement values ($\Delta\mu_{OP-SE} = .05, p = .01, \Delta\mu_{ST-SE} = .38, p < .001$). The vignette expressing self-transcendence values was also rated higher in friendship interest than the vignette expressing conservation values ($\Delta\mu_{CO-ST} = -.29, p = .03$). Further, friendship interest in the peer described in each value-expressive condition was positively associated with participants' self-transcendence values across all vignettes ($\beta = 0.17 [0.03-0.32], p = .017$), but not with self-enhancement ($\beta = 0.08 [-0.05-0.21], p = .211$), openness ($\beta = 0.09 [-0.05-0.23], p = .223$), or conservation ($\beta = 0.06 [-0.07-0.19], p = .381$) values.

For the hypothesized expectation regarding value congruence effects on friendship interest, we found a moderation effect for participants' self-transcendence values ($\beta = 0.32 [0.07-0.57], p = .011$) but not for self-enhancement values ($\beta = 0.00 [-0.27-0.27], p = .999$). Similarly, we found a moderation effect for participants' conservation values ($\beta = 0.36 [0.10-0.62], p = .007$) but not for openness values ($\beta = 0.20 [-0.04-0.44], p = .103$). These results indicate that participants prioritizing conservation or self-transcendence values reported more interest in friendship with peers with congruent values than participants prioritizing self-enhancement or openness values. This finding lends partial support to **H1**, that emerging adults will show greater friendship interest in an unfamiliar other whose self-description reflects values that are congruent with their own value priorities. However, for **H2**, that emerging adults will show lesser friendship interest in an unfamiliar individual whose self-description reflects values that are incongruent with their own, while all observed effects were in the predicted direction, we found no significant effects for participants' values and value-expressive vignettes on friendship interest for self-transcendence ($\beta = -0.06 [-0.35-0.22], p = .662$), self-enhancement ($\beta = -0.10 [-0.36-0.16], p = .457$), and conservation ($\beta = -0.14 [-0.42-0.15], p = .347$) values. Openness, while in the expected direction ($\beta = -0.23 [-0.49-0.02], p = .071$) showed a non-significant effect. Thus, **H2** was not supported.

Study 2

Study 2 formed a conceptual replication of Study 1, in which we used the same procedures, higher order value-expressive vignettes, and measure of friendship interest. However, to emphasize the online context, we changed instructions to participants about the value-expressive vignette, stating, "Below you will find a description of someone you met online for the first time...". We also

changed the self-reported values measure to examine the robustness of effects found in Study 1.

Participants. An initial sample of 512 participants responded to the study of whom 4 (0.78%) were excluded for being over the emerging adult age range (> 29 years), and 57 (11.13%) were removed due to survey speeding (< 10 minutes) or careless responding (e.g., straight-lining on scales, leaving a final sample of 451 undergraduate students who were enrolled in a first-year organizational behavior unit at an Australian university ($M_{age} = 19.88, SD = 1.64$; 212 males, 233 females, 2 non-binary). The sample for Study 2 was drawn from the same student cohort as Study 1, albeit in different semesters, and shared similar characteristics, including the proportion of domestic vs. international students and distribution of degree programs. As in Study 1, we estimated the minimum detectable interaction effects to be .14, .13, and .10 for assumed main effects of .10, .30, and .50, respectively.

Procedure. As in Study 1, participants reported their age, gender and values, and were then randomly assigned to one of four higher order value-expressive conditions in which they were presented with a single value-expressive vignette that they were told was a self-description written by a person that they met online for the first time ($n_{Conservation} = 117, n_{Openness} = 104, n_{Self-enhancement} = 112, n_{Self-transcendence} = 118$). They were then asked to report their friendship interest in the person described.

Measures. Participants' values were measured using the Best-Worst Values Refined scale (BWV-R; Lee et al., 2019). In this measure, participants select the most and least important values from 21 subsets of five value items based on a Youden balanced incomplete block design. Value scores were calculated using the simple count method (Louiervie et al., 2015), in which the number of times each value item was selected as least important is subtracted from the number of times it was selected as most important. This produces scores ranging from -1 to +1, with higher scores reflecting greater value importance. As in Study 1, higher order value scores were calculated by averaging scores for individual value items within each domain (i.e., ST, SE, CO, OC), with hedonism included in the openness domain. As the BWV-R directly measures the relative importance of values through best-worst choices, the resulting scores do not require post-hoc ipsatization. This measure has demonstrated strong construct validity across multiple samples (e.g., Ballantyne et al., 2018; Sneddon et al., 2021).

Friendship Interest. Participants reported their friendship interest in the person described in the value-expressive vignette, using the same 4-item adapted version of the Hawthorne (2006) friendship scale used in Study 1. Reliability of the scale was acceptable, with an $\omega_{ordinal}$ of 0.741. Means,

standard deviations, reliability, and intercorrelations between variables used in the analysis are reported in Table 1.

Analysis. The analytical procedures were identical to Study 1.

Results

As in Study 1, we found significant differences in friendship interest between value-expressive vignettes ($F_{(3, 246.46)} = 9.28$, $p < .001$, $\omega_p^2 = .09$). Again, vignettes expressing openness ($\Delta\mu_{OP-SE} = 0.29$, $p = .02$) and self-transcendence ($\Delta\mu_{ST-SE} = 0.39$, $p < .001$) values were rated significantly higher in friendship interest than the vignette expressing self-enhancement values. Additionally, vignettes expressing openness ($\Delta\mu_{CO-SE} = 0.35$, $p < .001$) and self-transcendence ($\Delta\mu_{CO-SE} = 0.25$, $p = .03$) values were rated significantly higher in friendship interest than the vignette expressing conservation values. Unlike the pattern observed in Study 1, we found that friendship interest in the person described was not associated with participants' self-transcendence values across all value-expressive vignettes ($\beta = 0.07 [-0.10-0.24]$, $p = .433$), or with self-enhancement ($\beta = 0.16 [-0.00-0.33]$, $p = .057$), openness ($\beta = -0.03 [-0.17-0.12]$, $p = .773$), or conservation ($\beta = -0.01 [-0.17-0.12]$, $p = .933$) values.

Similar to Study 1, we found a significant congruence effect for conservation values ($\beta = 0.26 [0.05-0.47]$, $p = .016$), as well as a congruence effect for openness values ($\beta = 0.22 [0.00-0.44]$, $p = .047$). Friendship interest was also significantly higher for the self-transcendence vignette when participants reported higher self-transcendence values ($\beta = 0.24 [0.03-0.44]$, $p = .025$) but no congruence effects were found for self-enhancement values ($\beta = 0.14 [-0.05-0.24]$, $p = .185$). Thus, **H1** was partially supported. Taken together, the results from Study 2 show a similar pattern to Study 1, indicating that congruence between personal values and a value-expressive vignette predicts potentially greater friendship interest, but that this effect seems to be more robust for the conservation versus openness values axis than the self-transcendence versus self-enhancement values axis.

For our expectation that value incongruence would have a negative effect on friendship interest (**H2**), we found significant negative effects for conservation values and the openness value-expressive vignette ($\beta = -0.25 [-0.49$ to $-0.01]$, $p = .045$). We also found negative effects for openness values and the conservation vignette ($\beta = -0.21 [-0.42$ to $0.00]$, $p = .052$) and for self-enhancement values and the self-transcendence vignette ($\beta = -0.21 [-0.43$ to $0.00]$, $p = .052$). Although we found negative effects for self-transcendence values and the self-enhancement vignette, these effects did not reach statistical significance ($\beta = -0.18 [-0.39$ to $0.04]$, $p = .106$). Together, these results provide partial support for H2, indicating that value incongruence can reduce friendship interest for some personal value-value-expressive vignettes. These findings show a somewhat different pattern than Study 1, in which

we found no significant incongruence effects for personal values and friendship interest in value-expressive vignettes.

Discussion

We set out to examine whether, and to what extent, personal values shape friendship formation among emerging adults in contexts in which behavioural information is limited or not directly observable. Using an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to different value-expressive conditions, our two studies address a central gap in the literature by examining how value congruence operates in the initial stages of friendship formation when individuals rely on minimal, static cues rather than more observable traits and behaviours.

Across both studies, we found that value congruence plays a meaningful, but not uniform role in shaping emerging adults' friendship interest in low-information contexts. Broadly positive associations between value congruence and friendship interest were observed for openness, conservation, and self-transcendence values, but not for self-enhancement values, supporting our first hypothesis for most values. Possible explanations for this pattern of associations are grounded in both the relative importance and content of these values.

With respect to value importance, openness and self-transcendence values were rated as most important, and self-enhancement values as least important, across both samples. Prior work shows that value importance amplifies relations between values and behaviour (Lake et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2022), with highly important values having stronger effects on outcomes because they are likely to be more central to an individual's self-concept. It is therefore plausible that similarity with others on highly important values, in this case openness and self-transcendence, will exert a stronger influence on friendship interest. While we were unable to test this mechanism directly, future research should examine the role of value importance in friendship formation.

Considering value content, openness and conservation sit at opposing poles of the higher order values dimension that contrasts exploration with restraint (Schwartz, 1992). This tension between opposing motivational goals is particularly salient during emerging adulthood, a period characterized by identity exploration, autonomy, and experimentation (Arnett, 2015). As such, congruence along this dimension may be especially important when evaluating new friends, including in low information and online spaces where value-expressive cues may be subtle but meaningful. In contrast, self-transcendence values (emphasizing care and concern for others) may signal greater agreeableness in general (e.g., Vecchione et al., 2011), whereas self-enhancement values (emphasizing selfish interests) might be expressed in fewer polarizing situations that require a clearer separation between emerging adults in terms of their value priorities, helping explain the weaker congruence effects observed.

The pattern of value incongruence effects provides additional insight into how values influence emerging adults' friendship interest under conditions of limited information. Study 1 showed no significant incongruence effects (albeit effects were in the hypothesized direction for our second hypothesis), whereas Study 2, where participants evaluated a person, they met online for the first time, revealed significantly lower friendship interest where values were incongruent, providing some support for our second hypothesis. This potentially reflects the online friendship context described in the stimulus, suggesting that when forming impressions based on limited self-descriptive cues in this context, emerging adults may be particularly sensitive to the expression of opposing values. This finding addresses a second gap identified in the literature, that a deeper understanding of how emerging adults interpret value-expressive cues in online contexts is required, where individuals must often infer value priorities from limited textual or stylistic information. Our results suggest that even limited expressions of opposing values in an online 'self-description' can meaningfully diminish friendship interest, offering new evidence of how value incongruence functions in initial friendship judgments in early adulthood.

A third contribution concerns the perceived attractiveness of vignettes expressing different values. Across both studies, vignettes expressing openness and self-transcendence values elicited higher friendship interest than those expressing self-enhancement values. This pattern aligns with research showing that openness values are often prioritized in emerging adulthood (Schwaba et al., 2018) and may therefore be perceived as normative or socially desirable. Self-transcendence values, which emphasise empathy, care and concern for others, and are associated with more altruistic orientations (Gandullia et al., 2021), may also signal interpersonal warmth. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that people prefer relationships with individuals perceived to prioritize self-transcendence values (Amit et al., 2025). These results help fill the third gap noted in the introduction by linking specific value-expressive cues to friendship preferences and illustrating how emerging adults infer and evaluate value priorities in novel friendship contexts.

In addition to findings on value (in)congruence, the studies also showed differences in how personal values relate to friendship interest. In Study 1, self-transcendence values were positively associated with friendship interest across all value-expressive vignettes, consistent with prior research linking these values to empathy (Caprara et al., 2012) and openness to diversity (Sagiv & Schwartz, 1995). In Study 2, the pattern was reversed with self-enhancement values showing positive associations with friendship interest. This may reflect the online context of the 'interaction', as self-enhancement values are linked to online engagement and motives for social media use (Choden et al., 2019), and online friendships may involve fewer immediate expectations of reciprocity (Righetti et al., 2015). These findings suggest that relations between values

and friendship interest may vary depending on the context in which the friendship is formed.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with all research, our results should be considered in light of a number of limitations. First, our studies draw on young adult samples of university students enrolled in a business course, raising the question of whether the findings would generalize across other populations of emerging adults without university education or from a different course composition. While conceptually we would expect the results to generalize, the importance of specific values and strength of effects may vary, based on sociodemographic and cultural context. Second, while the value-expressive content of the vignettes was evaluated by a team of value experts, we did not measure participants' perceptions of the value priorities of the person described. Therefore, we cannot rule out that participants had different interpretations of the focal values expressed in the vignettes compared to the way they were intended. Future studies could address this issue by including measures of participant's perceptions of the values expressed in vignettes. Finally, Study 2 provided initial evidence that these value congruence effects extend to text-based contexts designed to simulate online interactions, yet some caution is warranted in generalizing these findings to actual online friendship platforms. The vignettes used in Study 2, though described as online profiles, were longer and more detailed than the brief biographical information typically available on social networking platforms. Additionally, while participants were instructed to imagine an online context, the manipulation relied on self-generated imagery rather than authentic platform interfaces (e.g., actual profile screenshots with platform-specific design features). Future research could strengthen the ecological validity of these findings by using stimuli that more closely mirror real-world online environments, such as mock profile screenshots that replicate the visual and informational constraints of actual platforms.

However, despite these potential limitations, our findings lend support to the proposition that value (in)congruence matters in friendship interest in emerging adulthood. Beyond extending our understanding of value (in)congruence in friendship formation in emerging adulthood, these studies have some practical implications. For example, by using information on user's values derived indirectly through their communication, AI-enabled technologies, such as chatbots, could offer interactions that are perceived as more friendly in order to increase engagement and retention rates. While we did not test these possibilities, studies have shown that personality trait congruence between users and AI-enabled technologies is associated with greater satisfaction and perceptions of the friendliness of chatbots (e.g., Jin & Eastin, 2022). It is conceivable that these effects would also be found for values, specifically openness, conservation, and self-transcendence, among emerging adults. Thus, future studies

could examine the role of value (in)congruence between users and AI-enabled technologies.

Conclusion

Taken together, our findings extend the value congruence and incongruence perspectives into online and low-information settings across two studies, demonstrating that values function not only as internal guiding principles but also as socially meaningful signals in the formation of novel friendships. By showing how values are inferred and aligned through digital self-presentation, the results contribute to a deeper understanding of the social function of values during emerging adulthood and offer new theoretical and empirical insights into friendship formation.

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The analysis code, study materials, sample size calculations, and robustness analyses used in this manuscript are openly available via the Open Science Framework: osf.io/zup2f. No aspects of the study were preregistered.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Hedonism was included in the openness higher order value based on its higher correlation with neighboring stimulation ($r = .52, p < .001$) than achievement ($r = .31, p < .001$). Face and Humility were not included in the analysis following recommendations by Schwartz (2016). However, on the OSF we provide code to replicate our analyses with humility and face included in the computation of the four higher order values. Incorporating these value facets does not substantively change any of the results.
2. For the moderation analysis, ipsatized value scores were used following Schwartz's (2016) recommended procedure for PVQ data. This approach involves subtracting each participant's mean rating across all value items from their score on each specific value. This procedure removes individual level scale use tendencies and produces relative value importance scores appropriate for testing interactions. As is standard practice, correlations

reported in the manuscript (see Table 1) are also based on ipsatized scores.

3. Comparisons of friendship interest across the four value-expressive vignettes were based on raw (non-ipsatized) value scores, as ipsatized PVQ-RR value scores are locally dependent (i.e., each value score is defined relative to all others), making simultaneous inclusion in the analysis non-interpretable (see Schwartz, 2016).

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