

Challenges in Practicing Intimacy and Maintaining Close Friendships Across Geographical Boundaries: A Study of International Students at Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Abstract

As friendship is a significant aspect of human nature, international students who study abroad are bound to experience a different social setting and might encounter changes in their friendship practices, especially with their close ones. Hence, the characteristics or qualities for maintaining close friendships despite being geographically separated and having limitations on practising intimacy were explored in this study. By using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 postgraduate international students from various countries studying at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the findings revealed several key elements that contribute to the formation of close friendships. These include trust, similarity, dependability, and support. Through a sociological lens, the study delved deeper into how these characteristics emerge from the participants' friendship experiences. This study also highlights the challenges of intimacy practices among international students in their long-distance close friendships. By examining how intimacy is understood and cultivated in these relationships across different cultures, the research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of maintaining close friendships during temporary periods of mobility abroad, as well as throughout one's lifetime.

Keywords: International Students, Characteristics, Intimacy Practices, Close Friendships, Geographically Separated

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Introduction

International students are defined as those who have crossed the borders and are not citizens of the country in which they are studying or who have received prior education in another country (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2013). Over the last decade, the influx of international mobility students has shaped the agendas of numerous higher education institutions, reflecting the global expansion of tertiary education systems (OCED, 2013). According to Padlee et al. (2010), the number of foreign students choosing Malaysia as their educational destination grows year after year. Moreover, in recent years, Malaysia has been chosen as the top study destination choice for international students furthering their studies based on several factors, such as a safe and secure environment, perceived cultural compatibility, a low cost of living, and low fees within the higher education system (Singh et al., 2014). Also, studying abroad enriches both students' academic and personal lives. Since the students come from different countries, they will have difficulties and struggle with many things, such as their studies, cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment, and maintaining their close friendship that has existed despite being geographically separated.

Moreover, the importance of having close friends, especially close co-national contact, become more influential over time as co-nationals are important for promoting cultural adjustment and managing stress (Geeraert et al., 2014), as well as providing emotional and practical assistance from people who have gone through similar transitions (Brown, 2009). This study will provide significant insights into friendship development among international students living overseas with their long-distance close friends and highlight the main characteristics of what makes the best friendship, hence making this study imperative. In addition, the purpose of this research is to investigate the importance of maintaining close friendships while temporarily residing in a foreign country, given that friendship depth and levels of commitment fluctuate over time (Becker et al., 2009). Thus, this study has highlighted some significant characteristics that lead to these complex friendships, which also help in retaining a good, close friendship while being far away from each other. Furthermore, Canary and Yum (2015) stated that friendships are typically thought of as 'weak ties,' which means that to maintain and preserve closeness, people engage in maintenance behaviours to keep their relationships stable. Thus, based on the previous statement, if people are unable to maintain friendship through communication, they will be at risk of losing that friendship, especially when they are geographically separated. Thus, this study also explores how international students perceive and practise intimacy, especially in their long-distance close friendships.

Method

Study Area

This qualitative study utilises semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect crucial data. 14 postgraduate international students, including both master's and Ph.D. students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), have participated in the study. According to Fernandez (2010), the reasons why students choose to attend USM are due to USM's strong business connections, good reputation, adequate facilities, and the availability of courses that meet the needs of its students. The researchers examine each participant's experiences, perspectives, values, and way of life to gain a deeper understanding of the study and its sociological implications.

Participants

This study included 14 international sojourners, seven males and seven females, all of whom were students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Participants must be between the ages of 20 and 33, as this is the average age for international students enrolling in universities. This study requires participants to study at USM for at least six months due to their experience adjusting to an unfamiliar environment, which would provide the researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the study. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants' demographic characteristics. To maintain the participants' anonymity, they were also assigned pseudonyms.

Table 1: Demographic Background of Participants

Name	Age	Sex	School	Home Country
Freya	25	Female	Pharmacy	Bangladesh
Bella	25	Female	Engineering	Iran
Lidya	32	Female	Accounting	Saudi Arabia
Maria	26	Female	Sustainability	Iran
Ursula	33	Female	Social Science	Pakistan
Maya	31	Female	Social Science	Indonesia
Rose	23	Female	Language	Indonesia
Ali	24	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabia
Adam	24	Male	Accounting	Jordan
Jabbar	29	Male	Humanities	Iran
Tahar	32	Male	Physics	Yemen
Rizqi	27	Male	Social Science	Indonesia
Haamid	32	Male	Translation	Algeria
Arif	26	Male	Computer Science	Egypt

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling and snowball sampling are two sampling techniques used in this research study. Purposive sampling is based on the researcher's discretion in selecting the units to be studied (Rai & Thapa, 2015), while snowball sampling is used to generate a pool of participants by referring individuals who share a specific research interest characteristic with the target population (Crouse & Lowe, 2018). These methods have assisted researchers in identifying the required sample size for this study.

Research Instrument

This qualitative study used two research instruments to investigate the experiences of international students living temporarily abroad: friendship maps and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The friendship maps by Spencer and Pahl (2006) are used to gain a better understanding of the strength of close co-national friendship and the different types of interaction that occur between friends. Students will be asked to prepare a list of up to twenty names of co-national friends whom they consider to be close and important in their lives. The resulting maps serve as the foundation for the interviews. Furthermore, according to Holmes et al. (2015), interviews may provide more insights into emotional reflexivity because a researcher will gain a better understanding of emotions than through textual or document analysis. Several questions related to the topic and objectives of this study will be prepared in advance, and the students will be asked these questions in an unstructured semi-formal

interview. Open questions allow for the greatest amount of flexibility in acquiring new information and topics raised by students. The goals of the study are to identify close friendships, focus on the details of the close friends, and explore the meaning of close friendships based on the student's experiences.

Data Collection

This study used a friendship map and semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data. 14 people were recruited via direct message and filled out an ethical consent form before the interview. Data collection took an hour and a half to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. Questions were developed to address the research objectives and additional inquiries were made during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique for organizing data based on shared properties or characteristics by identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. This study utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis guide, which provides a straightforward and practical structure for conducting this type of analysis. Following data collection, all recorded interviews were manually transcribed and analyzed to identify and emphasize the initial themes. The recurring themes were identified and reviewed to ensure that the data had not been misinterpreted or that vital information had not been omitted. The findings are then presented and described in detail using direct quotes from interviews so that the researchers can relate them to sociological concepts and perspectives.

Results and Discussion

a) Characteristics or Qualities for Maintaining Close and Best Friendships

The major qualities that were crucial in maintaining close friendships include trust, dependability, and support as well as similarity which we will discuss further:

Trust

Nearly all of the major theories of interpersonal relationships are built on the concept of trust. Moreover, the concepts of trust and friendship are intertwined as developing a positive and well-maintained friendship requires trust. According to Simpson (2007), trust can be interpreted in several ways, and its relevance may change depending on the stage of relationship growth. As trust evolves as the result of disclosure (Fehr 2000), one must be comfortable with the person to disclose personal things. For example, one of the participants, Maria mentioned that trust is what makes her bond with her close friend:

The most personal things, I will always tell him. Even when I fight with my boyfriend, I will tell him. He will say whatever he wants to say because he knows the real me.
(MARIA)

Friendships appeared to become more intimate as the people involved became more open and comfortable with one another. Individuals discussed showing their 'true' selves to one another and engaging in more self-disclosure as time passed. This correlates with the study made by Wieselquist (2007) as the individual's perception of the friend's commitment would

mediate the relationship between a friend's report of commitment and an individual's trust in the friend. Thus, as trust develops and by sharing things reciprocally, they make their friendship intimate. Other participants, like Adam, classified all of his close friends based on their level of trust in him; that is, the more he trusted the person, the closer they were:

Actually, it is just about trust. The one that I feel comfortable with. The difference in the friendship circles is that I classified them based on trust. Like I do trust F1 more than the others. (ADAM)

A study by Waris and Rafiq (2009) found that male same-sex friendships have less trust than women which is also supported by Faturochman et al. (2020) study on gender that revealed females were more trustworthy than males. However, in this study, it has been found that there is a positive correlation between friendship and trust for both genders. Prior to the study by Waris and Rafiq (2009), when it comes to same-sex friendships, male students learn to trust that they can rely on them for catharsis, emotional support, and relationship satisfaction during the most demanding developmental and career-building stages of their lives. Additionally, although Adam stated that he has only a small circle of close friends, for him the quality of friendship over its quantity matters, as Akin et al. (2016) stated a positive and significant relationship was found between friendship quality and subjective happiness. Another participant, Ali, also shed light on how trust is the main foundation that determined his current close friendships:

The first thing would be how trusting you are, how much you are trusting the person. Like some other friends when they are considered close, I had surgery one and half a year ago, two surgeries due to football injuries, and some people disappeared. Literally disappeared. So why we are thinking we are close? So, this situation shows you how you can trust people. Everyone on this list, I know that anytime or no matter what I go through even if we are not in contact, nothing is happening, you can trust him, depend on him, ask something so yeah. So, the first thing is trust. (ALI)

All of Ali's close friends are someone that he puts his whole trust on as his friendships evolve. Furthermore, the persons' shared experiences provide accumulated proof that the other may be relied on, resulting in a sense of trust (Allan, 2011). Rebughini's (2011) astute understanding of the importance of friends being 'witnesses' to each other's emotions indicates a new dynamic in the creation of trust. Trust contributes to the emotional state of feeling valued and loved which in turn gives this particular relationship depth and significance. Hence, we believe that trust acts as the basis of friendship and plays a huge role in building close relationships with each other.

Dependability and Support

Having a close friend during tough times would undoubtedly help people cope because of the many roles that friends play as well as the support and well-being they provide. According to Sherbourne and Stewart (1991), social support can be classified into five categories: emotional (positive affect, empathic understanding); affectionate (display of love); informational (advice, guidance, feedback); tangible (practical aid); and good social contact (availability of others to do fun things together). Moreover, in a past study by Bakalım and Karçkay (2016), there is a positive correlation in the relationship between friendship quality and well-being through perceived social support as it contributes to psychological well-being as well as acts as a protective effect on mental health. This is clarified by the participants:

He is my support, he is everything so whatever it comes to me like difficulties or everything, I will contact him. (HAAMID)

Haamid has emphasised that one of his close friendships is reliable enough that he can depend on him through the thick and thin of life. According to Almaatouq et al. (2016), reciprocated friendships are significantly more intimate and distinct from those that are not. Moreover, being able to physically comfort each other subtly through a remote but shared experience whenever a problem or feeling occurs (Octavia et al., 2007) has also been mentioned by some participants as how their close friends are dependable:

When you go to different countries, you will feel so many things, sometimes you feel disappointed and lifeless, and he was there. We always talk to each other, and we can talk from 10 pm to 3 am about what has happened in previous semesters, etc. (ALI)

F2 is a good listener. He always gives good solutions for me when I tell my problems to him. (RIZQI)

Well to have a close friend means you have shared interest, shared values, and yeah showing up when he/she needs helps. I guess that's how it is for me. It's like when you form friendships, that is your support system. So yeah, it's like, sometimes you need to depend on those people to get things through. (ARIF)

Dependability can come in various ways, such as one can be dependable by giving help and support physically and emotionally. Hence, whenever problems arise or they need someone to listen to Rizqi and Ali will turn to their close friends as they will attentively listen and come up with good solutions. Meanwhile, Arif has disclosed that his friendships are his support system, and he can depend on them when things get rough. Eker, Arkar, and Yaldz (2001) mentioned that social support networks may provide emotional comfort, assist with problem-solving by offering advice, provide vital feedback that improves performance, encourage personal growth, and shield individuals from the adverse consequences of stress. Additionally, throughout this study, it is found that when dealing with stress, the majority of research participants seek help from their social network or their close ones. This shows that social connection is associated with the support that people give and receive from one another, which also has a positive impact on one's health, mood, and sense of belonging (Doroszuk et al., 2019). Ali has also further enlightened the researchers about how his friendship arose with another good friend:

He is the guy who has lost his father in a very long time so most of the time he depends on himself so when he needs something, I will be there for him back then. For example, when he is involved in a car accident, I will be the one he calls and if I am facing some financial issues back there, he will be the one I call. If he was facing something at one time back then, he was not with his identification card and the police took him so I was the first one that he would call and go get him, settle the things so yeah. So, when he was in trouble, finding something I would be there for him, and when I was in trouble he would be there. (ALI)

Close friends continue to be important companions and sources of support for older adults, despite the fact that friendships vary in terms of quality and stability. (Carstensen, 2006). This was demonstrated by Ali's friendship with his close ones, on which they could rely and

provide instrumental as well as emotional support for one another, as providing and receiving support strengthens and extends relationships (Doroszuk et al., 2019).

Similarity

A notable study on homophily and friendship by Kandel (1978) indicates that homogenous behaviors and attitudes influence interpersonal attraction that sustains friendship ties. Moreover, the increasing social isolation in which independent adults with high levels of homophily are unlikely to form an intimate relationship (McPherson et. al. 2006). One of the excerpts taken from the recording demonstrated how sharing sameness for each other bonds them to be closer:

We go out, we are so similar to each other like you know, we would like to do activities together. I share the same interest, same character, with her as we are born in the same month too. (MARIA)

Maria elaborated that this close friend of hers is similar to her as they share the same interests and often do activities together. This is supported by Lawrence and Shah (2020), as their individual preferences explanation of homophilous behavior suggests that, given options, individuals will choose people who are similar to them. Moreover, as mentioned above, individual characteristics also play a role in the frequency with whom they form friendships by facilitating subsequent interactions and the development of the friendship. Hence, homophily in friend selection is said to reinforce an individual's personal identity through a shared "sameness" (Allan, 2010). Both participants, Haamid and Tahar, mentioned how their similarity has grown their friendship to be more intimate:

Actually, for F1 he is someone who understands me, and I understand him. It is like we are the same. We have the same perspectives, the same personality, and the same thinking. Although of course, it is not the same 100% but similar. (HAAMID)

I think because we have the same interest, and I don't know but I think I have this interest towards these IT people because he also does IT like F1. Also, we have so many things in common like he likes to think he is a thinker. He is a smart guy although people don't like the way he thinks but I think he has logic, and it makes sense to me. So, I like to discuss things I love people who discuss things with me and do negotiations until we reach a conclusion. I love stuff like that. Critical thinkers. (TAHAR)

According to Haamid, his close friend (F1) is like a nearly perfect reflection of him. Meanwhile, according to Tahar, the same interest connects him with his close friend. This is intricately related to the concept of Kandel's (1978) study of homophily and friendship, which indicates that the interpersonal attraction that sustains the friendship tie influences homophilous behavior and attitudes. Other participants, like Rose and Jabbar, also share the same highly participative interest with their close friends.

We came across with the same interest and we also kind of bonded through our school days. Back in the day, there were group projects and those kinds of things so at first, we kind of bonded through that and later both of us found out that we share the same interest, particularly in music. We shared the same idols and also played the same game. I am very comfortable with her. (ROSE)

Additionally, homophily also occurs more in similar people who share the same interests rather than dissimilar people. As such, according to Mcpherson (2001), the patterns of homophily tend to get stronger as more types of relationships exist between two people, indicating that homophily in each type of relationship cumulates to generate greater homophily for multiplex than simplex ties. International students thus encounter a variety of difficulties in maintaining their co-national friends while temporarily residing abroad. However, by contacting each other and having the main qualities that make the friendship close, long-distance close friendships can be maintained. Based on the result above, some of the reasons that can be highlighted on why some people are considered special and close to a particular person is due to the trust gained, dependability, and similarity as well as the memories that they have shared with these people have which make them close.

b) Practicing Close Friendship

Throughout the interview, all of the participants, still seek and connect with their close established friends who are not in Malaysia. The established close friends of theirs are majorly co-national and live in their country. People's interaction patterns have shifted as a result of modern (communication) technologies as they have made it easier to maintain relationships across long distances (Utz, 2007). Moreover, the frequency of them keeping in touch depends on how they practice their intimacy. Since they are geographically distant, their ways of contacting each other are mostly through the use of media, including calls, video calls, texting, and a variety of social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). Research by Huq (2020) has unveiled that the most popular digital technology used to keep connected to long-distance childhood friends was social media such as Facebook, and instant messaging such as WhatsApp. For instance, we can see that one of the participants, Haamid mentioned that he frequently contacts his close friend through texting, and it has been a daily habit for them:

When it comes to me and him, it is just us. We do not care. Like now in Malaysia, we are talking daily. 1 hour ago, he was texting me and whenever he woke up, he would text me first. Like it is a daily thing. (HAAMID)

According to Carbonaro and Workman (2013), the amount of shared social interaction between friends determines the closeness of friendship since the more time friends spend interacting with one another, the more information is received and maintained in the 'relationship system'. Also, sharing problems and feelings between friends who live far away from each other is crucial in maintaining the relationship (Octavia et al., 2007). Furthermore, when being asked about the things they talk about, Lidya mentioned that she usually talks about normal things, being concerned about each other:

When I use social media to contact them, it is just to ask about each other because I am living alone here so they always like you know, think about me like if I need anything or if I am sick. Most of the time, to be honest, we just share some famous videos, TikTok videos and yeah sometimes we just share it between us and talk about that. Not really to have like something to talk about but just sharing and like "Have you seen this" and just like that. More like remembering them when I saw the video. (LIDYA)

Additionally, with the rise in usage of social media such as TikTok, Lidya and her close friends customarily share videos. For Lidya, sharing those videos is how she conveys her

remembrance of them. Although some might view it as a simple act those simple acts are considered as little things that help the relationship (which in this case, friendship) grow fonder for each other. LifeWork (2020) stated that sharing photos or videos with friends and others on sites and committing to having regular phone chats with the people who care about them can help maintain long-distance friendships. Furthermore, Haamid also mentioned that social media helps him enrich his communication when he is far away:

In social media, recently we have been talking about the pandemic situation and the work. They will be asking "When you will come back?" or "When you will get married?". For my brother (F2) he will want to gossip and what am I doing in Malaysia like do I have a girlfriend or do I meet with girls, these things. He is just crazy (laughs). If I meet face to face with my close friends, we will share a lot of experiences like the struggle. For example, when I sit with F3, he will start sharing the problems and we will find the solution. It is like random topics, that suddenly happen. Just go with the flow. (HAAMID)

Haamid also stated that his communication with his close friends started with random topics and flowed into something deeper where he would listen and find solutions to the problems and the things that have shared. Additionally, although it has been reported by Strikwerda and May (2012) that due to the social construct, most males have less complex emotional responses to situations than females, this study however found that males can also be emotionally open to finding comfort which has been expressed by Haamid and his close friend. On the other hand, some participants like Rose and Maria do feel relieved with the existence of social media but they do not feel fully satisfied and feel the full presence when contacting with each other:

When I contact them using social media, it feels a bit sad because I cannot do physical interaction but at the same time, I also feel relieved that I live in a generation that has social media as it is kind of like a platform to stay connected to those who are far away from you. So, I would say that I rely on social media to contact them a lot especially the ones who are not studying in Malaysia, long-distance friends. But I do not think social media is enough for me, I like being face to face, and enjoying each other presence, I like that kind of interaction. I would choose face-to-face more. (ROSE)

For social media, sometimes I feel that they should be closer to me and not in social media. Like come, be here. When face-to-face with them I feel very happy. Very, very satisfied. (MARIA)

Rose and Maria have highlighted the inability to perceive the other person's 'true' presence as one of the major drawbacks of online interactions. Online communication has a negative impact on the perceived quality of life due to the lack of nonverbal cues, a lack of warmth, and a lower demand for engagement (Lee et al., 2011). Due to insufficient nonverbal cues, a lack of physical interaction, and insufficient time spent together, their friendship is not as fulfilling as it once was. Face-to-face communication has been cited by each participant as the most effective method for maintaining intimacy and fostering connection. Most of them are geographically separated, so they acknowledge that social media helps them strengthen their social connections with their closest co-national friends. Therefore, we can conclude that social media plays a significant role in connecting long-distance friendships, but nothing beats face-to-face interaction. This study provides insight into the intimacy practises between

co-national friendships, which assist individuals in feeling at home and connected, as well as in adjusting to their new surroundings.

Conclusion

This study examines the importance of friendship and life satisfaction for international students living temporarily abroad. It conducted online in-depth case interviews with fourteen international students (seven males and seven females) to examine the significance of instrumental and emotional support required, particularly the support from their close co-national friends when living abroad. The study highlighted the overall and main qualities that make up a good friendship, which include trust, similarity, and dependability, as well as support. The study also found that there are some other characteristics and qualities that make up a good friendship, such as trust, similarity, and dependability, as well as support. This study found that there are no significant differences between males' and females' main characteristics in what makes a good and close friendship.

Support is also necessary for the lives of international students to maintain close friendships with their co-national friends back home. This study also highlights that communication technologies have been demonstrated to be the primary means by which long-distance friends maintain relationships with one another. The participants emphasised that they were grateful to be able to connect through mediated communication, but they preferred face-to-face communication the most as they felt a sense of 'presence.' The study was able to identify the important characteristics that play important roles in overcoming friendship distance. It can be useful for international students to improve their lives while studying temporarily abroad by preventing friendships from dissolving in education as it encompasses shifts in both physical and mental health. As with every study, this one also has several limitations. The study was carried out only in the context of Universiti Sains Malaysia. In the future, this research must be replicated with a different and larger sample area that encompasses the whole of Malaysia. More research is recommended and needed to determine whether there are differences in the major qualities of friendship—trust, dependability, and support as well as similarities between both sexes.

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