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Familiarity as a Family: Close Friendships Between Malaysian Students and their Co-National Friends in the UK

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore close friendships and intimacy practices of Malaysian students in the context of living abroad. Some of the new close friends, specifically co-national friends in the UK, are perceived as “family” although some of them have not yet acquired family-like qualities in their relationships. Due to the situation of living abroad, the students acquired the “familiarity as a family” relationship—a new concept introduced in this study to explain this complicated relationship, with co-national friends in the Malaysian community in the UK. A sense of belonging and homophily, and shared physical space and activities are two key factors that influenced these practices of intimacy, which will foreground the discussion in this paper.

Keywords: close friendships, co-national friends, familiarity, homophily, Malaysian students, sense of belonging, space

Studying abroad represents a phase of life when a student who has chosen to earn a degree in another country needs to adapt to a new environment and to choose whether they want to maintain their long-established friendships or to develop new close friendships abroad. It is interesting to find that new friends formed abroad—when the Malaysian students are studying in the UK—are listed as close friends although the friendships are still new. It is intriguing to explore how students’ mobilities abroad transform new friendships into close ties within a short period. However, it seems that the new close friends are not being valued as meaningful and intimate as their families and long-established close friends, although almost all the students listed at least one new friend abroad as a close friend. When the researcher took into consideration that these students may have a need for geographically close friends, it

raises a question of whether new friends abroad are equally important as family and long-established friends.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jamieson (2011, p. 1) referred to intimacy as “the quality of the close connection between people and the process of building this quality.” She argued that close relationships are a type of subjectively experienced personal relationship and may also be socially recognised as close. The quality of “closeness” portrayed as intimacy can be emotional and cognitive, with individual experiences, including a feeling of mutual love, like-mindedness, and specialness to each other. Jamieson conceptualized intimacy as a specific kind of association characterized by openness, the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feelings, and used the term “disclosing intimacy” to speak about the quality rather than the structure or status of relationships (Jamieson 1999, 2005, 2011).

Based on previous studies (Budgeon 2006; Chambers 2013; Forstie 2017; Jamieson, 2011), intimacy might also refer to non-familial and non-sexual relationships, such as friendship, in this context. Closeness may also be physical, but intimacy practices in relationships need not be sexual. Indeed, bodily and sexual contact can occur without intimacy. Jamieson (2011, p. 1) argued that “the cultural celebration and use of the term ‘intimacy’ are not universal, but practices of intimacy are present in all cultures.” Therefore, it is important to highlight that this study draws on Malaysian cultural and religious practices.

This study highlights the context of students and living temporarily abroad, in which it shows the changes in the ways Malaysian students practice intimacy in a different context, that are certainly different from the West. The researcher’s argument is in line with Holmes (2010), who indicated that people act out emotions in interaction with context and that context helps to shape intimate relationships. The international students felt the sense of “home” when they acquired familiarity with the language, people, and situations. The students who live abroad intend to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity in their daily life abroad not only to gain a sense of local belonging but also to form a new “home” (Prazeres, 2016, p. 13). Prazeres (2016) suggested that the feelings and ideas of comfort, familiarity, and home are transformed through students’ mobility abroad. However, she argued that it is challenging to make the unfamiliar become familiar and the uncomfortable become comfortable in order to fit in with the local environment. Indeed, Lim and Pham (2016, p. 2184) argued that the international students may not feel completely welcome in their host countries but may also start to grow feelings of estrangement from their home countries.

It is clear that one of the ways to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity is to form new friendships abroad. Accordingly, Bilecen (2014) and Nielsen (2014) found that international students prefer to befriend those who share a similar nationality, and then, to make friends with other international students and have limited interaction with host students. Consistent with these findings, Maundeni (2001) in her research in the UK found that international students have little and “formal” contact with British students because they are reluctant to initiate contact with them on the

assumption that host students are reserved and prefer to socialize with each other. Indeed, British students played a minimal role in the adjustment process for international students (Maundeni, 2001), compared to co-national contact, which becomes more influential over time as co-nationals are important for promoting cultural adjustment and managing stress (Geeraert, Demoulin, & Demes, 2014).

Coleman (2015) described international students' friendships as being within a concentric circle. He found that the international students begin by socializing with co-nationals and they add other international students to their social circles over time. The students then include host students depending on particular circumstances, including duration of study abroad as well as their motivations, attitudes, actions, and initiatives (Coleman, 2015, p. 44). Moreover, Coleman (2015) claimed that each circle does not replace another. Instead the process is additive. The circle broadens across time and shows the progression of friendship. Indeed, Nielsen (2014) discovered that shared social space, such as accommodation, classes, services, and societies on campus that develop activities for international students foster intercultural interaction. However, she pointed out that local students rarely participate in those activities. Therefore, the international students have fewer opportunities to develop close contact with local students compared to co-national and other international friends.

In their study of Malaysian and Indonesian students in Jordan, Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016) claimed that leaving family responsibilities, expectations of academic performance, as well as unfamiliar cultural norms, language, friends, and food lead to stress and anxiety of living away from home. They indicated that personal, academic, sociocultural, and problem-solving strategies are four main concerns encountered by Malaysian and Indonesian students while living in Jordan (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016, pp. 735–737). The students not only faced challenges of time management and academic achievement, but they also reported feelings of loneliness and homesickness as they did not fit in with the norms, languages, and food. However, Weiss and Ford (2011) in their study of Malaysian, Indonesian, and Singaporean students in Australia claimed that living temporarily abroad seems likely to strengthen rather than weaken national identity. The students tend to take part in country-specific students' society, as there is a Malaysian Student Association in each Australian university.

Although co-national friends are important for international students, it is surprising that Malay students have fewer interactions and close ties with Malaysians from different ethnic backgrounds while studying abroad as discussed in the previous studies (Ahmad, Mirza, Mohd, Pawanteh, & Salman, 2014; Weiss & Ford 2011). Weiss and Ford (2011) found that although Malay students formed more friendships with Chinese and Indian friends than they had in Malaysia, friends from other ethnic backgrounds remained a relatively small part of their close friendships as Malays tend to speak Malay among themselves and tend to speak in English with Chinese and Indian friends. In this case, language use is the main problem as Weiss and Ford (2011) argued that speaking English underpinned the sense of "otherness" of non-Malays, leading to less intimate interaction between Malay students and other Malaysian students from the different ethnic background, while abroad. Similar to findings from the West, Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016) pointed out that the Malaysian

students in Jordan preferred to interact with co-national friends or other international students who had the same language, culture, and beliefs. They found that the students sought emotional support from co-national and Southeast Asian friends rather than local students. From the debates above, it is clear to highlight that familiarity and a sense of home seem significant for students abroad.

METHOD

This study focuses on Malaysian students in the UK, their experiences of living abroad and their practices of intimacy in close friendships. It is essential to explain the process of data collection and the background of this study, including the demographic profile of the students who participated. One group of international students, specifically Malaysian students in the North West of England, United Kingdom, aged between 20 to 25 years old were chosen in this study. The purpose of focusing on one group of participants who share a similar age group and background is to understand what is the expected and accepted behavior based on one background culture (Uski & Lampinen, 2016). Besides that, it is essential to identify whether Malaysian cultural and religious practices have a significant impact on the close friendship practices for this particular group.

Data Collection

The goal of this study was to gain a broad perspective on close friendships and intimate interaction between the students with their geographically close friends. The interviews were conducted in a private and informal setting. English and Malay languages were used for the interviews. Upon reading the participant information sheet and agreeing to participate, 18 students completed a consent form, and the researcher asked brief questions about their demographic information and close friendships. Before the first meeting, the students were asked to prepare a list of friends up to 20 names, who were considered as close and important in their life. The meaning of “close friends” in this study was open to participants’ considerations about close friendship, which include family members and other personal networks as reported in the findings. Preparation of the list of close friends before the meeting was to give time and space for the students to think and choose which friends would be included or excluded in their list.

One A4 size friendship map with concentric circles as shown in Figure 1 was given out to each student during the meeting. Based on the list of close friends prepared, the students were asked to write a code name for each one, for example, F1 through F20, and arrange the code names in order of importance on the map before the interview. From the arrangement of the names, the nearer to the center of the concentric circle is the closest friendship (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). The purpose of using the friendship map in this study was to identify the friendship network, to focus on the details of friends who are close and important for the students, and to explore the meaning of friendship based on the students’ experiences. All names reported in this study, including the students and their friends, have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The students used the code name in the friendship maps and

interviews to refer to their friends, instead of using the real names. The researcher also asked the students about their experiences and impressions of close friendships, the style of interaction with close friends, as well as the general use of the Internet and social media, including evaluations of the types of social media use, duration, frequency, and weekly amount of use. The resulting maps formed the basis for the interviews.

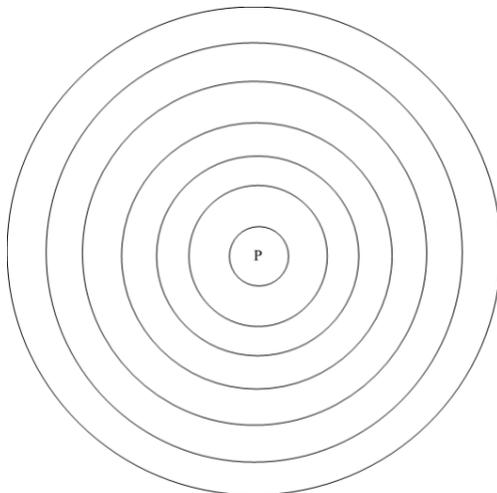


Figure 1: Friendship Map

Participants

This study intended to gain deeper understanding of the intimacy practices in close friendship of young people who live temporarily abroad for the purposes of higher education. For that reason, the researcher focused on small sample size of international students, specifically Malaysian students in the North West of England aged between 20 and 25 years old. Although the age of the subjects will make the results have limited generalizability, this age group was chosen because most of the young people at this age are undergraduate and master students in the United Kingdom (Universities UK and Higher Education Statistics Agency 2013). The participants were 18 Malaysian undergraduate and master's students, nine male and female students respectively, in three universities in the North West of England. All were unmarried and came to the UK without family members. Almost all the students came to the UK for the first time for the purposes of study.

The reason for choosing Malaysian students as the participants is not only because the researcher is a Malaysian but also because the Malaysian community living in the UK is approximately 60,000 people as reported in the UK census (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Moreover, Malaysia is one of the top non-EU sending countries for higher education in the UK (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2015). As Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multicultural country, the researcher

determined the diverseness of the students and chose from various ethnicities and religious beliefs. For that reason, 10 Malay students, five Chinese students, two Indian students, and one Siamese-Chinese student were chosen as participants in this study. All Malay students are Muslim, Indian students are Hindus, and the Siamese-Chinese student and all Chinese students are Buddhist, except one who was Christian.

Table 1: Demographic Background of Participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Period of mobilities (years)	Co-national close friends		
					Malay	Chinese	Indian
Male							
James	21	Siamese-Chinese	Buddhist	4	—	—	—
Jason	22	Indian	Hindu	1	—	2	2
Ken	21	Chinese	Buddhist	1	5	11	—
Alvin	21	Chinese	Buddhist	2	1	—	1
Adam	20	Malay	Islam	2	—	—	—
Izhan	23	Malay	Islam	1	8	—	—
Alif	22	Malay	Islam	1	12	—	—
Zain	25	Malay	Islam	1	7	—	—
Saiful	23	Malay	Islam	2	8	—	—
Female							
Yana	22	Indian	Hindu	1	—	2	—
Jenny	22	Chinese	Buddhist	1	—	1	—
Sweeli	25	Chinese	Buddhist	1	—	—	—
Tiffany	23	Chinese	Christian	2	—	2	1
Aina	25	Malay	Islam	4	1	1	—
Lily	22	Malay	Islam	1	2	—	—
Nora	24	Malay	Islam	1	—	—	—
Fira	25	Malay	Islam	1	2	—	—
Mila	22	Malay	Islam	1	—	—	—

By using snowball sampling technique, the participants who fit the specific purpose of this study were identified and they were asked for assistance to introduce the researcher to other students who share similar characteristics and interests. As living temporarily abroad is the main focus in this study, it is important to highlight that the students who participated were those who had lived in the UK for more than a year, but not more than 5 years. The demographic background of participants is illustrated in more details in Table 1 above. The researcher used pseudonyms for the names of participants and universities to maintain the confidentiality of the data provided by the participants.

FAMILIARITY AS A FAMILY

A significant aspect of the theories of intimacy is that they show how it might also be produced and practiced through sharing similar spaces, situations, experiences, familiarity, and sensibilities in living abroad. The ways in which Malaysian students define and practice intimacy in new close friendships are different from the way they define and practice intimacy with families and long-established close friendships. This study shows that 74% of new close friendships are co-national friends in the UK, which is categorized by three different ethnicities: Malay, Chinese, and Indian, as illustrated in Table 1. These results are consistent with those of other recent studies (Coleman 2015; Geeraert et al. 2014; Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014; Lim & Pham 2016; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). which suggested that the international students socialize more with co-national friends.

Table 1 above shows that there are gender response differences in co-national close friendships. Male students were reported to have more co-national close friends than female students. The researcher found that the female students prefer to have a small number of close friends compared with male students. They are more selective in choosing their close friends compared with the male students. The female students perceived someone as close and intimate not only in terms of openness, intimate talk, and mentality but also in terms of shared activities and the length of the friendship. These are some criteria of ideal qualities of intimacy that the students expected in close friendships. The qualities of close friendships are not only built on expressiveness, intimate talk, and self-disclosure but also through activity-based friendship practices and instrumental support. However, the practices of intimacy with new friends are not similar to family members and long-established friends. Although new friends formed abroad are needed for face-to-face and physical activities, long-distance close friends are still important to discuss and share about personal and non-urgent matters. Hence, it leads to the paucity of the female students' co-national close friendships.

It is important to highlight that some of the Malaysian students in this study used the word “family” to describe Malaysian people in the UK—particularly in the same university, even though they stated that they did not have close relationships with all those people. In this context, physical distance and sense of belonging change the intimacy practices between the students with their new friends in the UK transforming them from strangers to close friends. Nevertheless, the students use of the term “family” focuses on the sense of familiarity rather than family practices. Thus, as previously mentioned, the term “familiarity as a family” was introduced to describe students' close friendships when they are far from home. The concept of familiarity as a family offers some valuable insight into the concept of familiarity discussed in the studies of students living abroad (see Ahmad et al., 2014; Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016; Prazeres, 2016; Weiss & Ford, 2011) as well the studies of family and friendship.

The sense of familiarity formed some new practices of intimacy that are different from the practices of family and friendships. This kind of intimacy practice seems different to the friend-like or family-like intimacy qualities in the family and close friendships as discussed by Spencer and Pahl (2006). Instead, this is a new form of

intimacy achieved in specific relationships in the specific situation of living temporarily abroad. Even though these kinds of relationship did not yet establish intimate bonds and achieve the ideal qualities of intimacy as in family and childhood friendship, the Malaysian students feel emotionally connected with their co-national friends abroad as they share a similar nationality and cultural background as well as their shared experiences as sojourners. Certainly, there are two key factors that influence the practices of intimacy between the students and new close friends formed in the UK: a sense of belonging and homophily, and shared physical space and activities, which will foreground the discussion in this paper.

A Sense of Belonging and Homophily

Sharing similar nationality is one of the significant factors in creating intimacy in friendships. Previous studies (see Bilecen, 2014; Brown, 2009a) also noted the importance of new friendships for international students and these studies indicated that co-national friendship networks could be developed very quickly prior to arrival of the students in the host countries. In agreement with Beech's (2014), the researcher found that the students were actively searching for new contacts who could offer them advice and support related to studying abroad before they arrived in the country. It is also interesting to note that some students formed new friendships before they arrived in the UK through friends of friends. Here, Jenny talked about the only new close friend that she had in the UK. She got to know Lee who was initially a friend, and then a boyfriend, through her long-established close friends in Malaysia.

Jenny: I met my boyfriend, Lee, in Manchester last year. He is a third-year student and my senior in accounting and finance. Actually, he is my friend of a friend. I never met him in Malaysia but one of my close friends in the list [friendship map], knew him since in Malaysia. He helped me and my friend to settle down, and we become friends since then, and we got together this year.

Although Jenny and Lee had never met each other in Malaysia, Lee was really helpful to provide information and support, especially in arranging accommodation and helping Jenny to settle down. For that reason, co-national friends abroad seem to be important in providing instrumental support about practical aspects of living and studying in the UK. These findings are consistent with those of Lim and Pham (2016) who claimed that the readiness to give support to the newly arrived students during their initial difficult phase of adaptation cemented the feelings of friendship and goodwill among co-nationals. As Jenny came alone to further her study and came to the UK for the first time, the support received from Lee during initial arrival and settling in period in the UK was meaningful. Thus, it has developed high levels of intimacy in their friendship. Indeed, the early adaptation stage of living abroad is an important time for the Malaysian students to strengthen the bond with their new friends.

However, status homophily also became a barrier to intercultural contact, which resulted in fewer close friendships between the Malaysian students and the host students as well as with other international students. This study, as well as other recent research (Beech, 2016) found that the reality of living and studying in the UK could

have very different results than the belief that studying overseas will help the students to engage with the British student community. In this context, the concept of “cultural cliques” used by Beech (2016) represents the formation of Malaysian students’ co-national close friendships. The formation of cultural cliques is because the students felt that it was easier to interact with people from their home country or to those from a similar cultural background who would be able to understand better the emotions experienced and the struggle faced from leaving home. Here, Ken and Tiffany shared their feelings about their new Malaysian friendships formed abroad.

Researcher: Based on your friendship map, most of your close friends are Malaysian who live here in the UK. Why they are included as your close friends?

Ken: My Malaysian friends here make me feel the hometown feeling. It is hard to mingle with other people, although they came from Chinese backgrounds like the students from China, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Although the appearance is almost the same, our mindset and the ways of thinking are different. The Malaysian population here is quite big and active. Malaysian student’s society is quite active, and every time they organize an event, I can meet a lot of Indian, Malays, and Chinese and I can make a lot of new friends.

National and cultural bonds are important in recreating family and home abroad. Familiarity makes sense of family-type connections between new friends, and this familiarity provides ontological security by making a new context feel more secure or homely. Similar to Brown (2009a), the researcher found that interacting with co-nationals too, frequently led the students to sometimes feel that they had not left their home countries at all. The feeling of oneness generated by shared national culture has created a sense of intimacy between the Malaysian students and their co-national friends abroad. Indeed, this study found that the students considered all Malaysians that they know as friends and the Malaysian community as a family. Here, Tiffany talked about how she perceived all Malaysian students in her university as her friend.

Tiffany: Even though we did not really keep in touch, but as long as I know that you are a Malaysian, you are considered as my friend. I try to be close to other Malaysian students because I am a Malaysian and I have a mindset that we are in a foreign country, so we need to help each other.

It is interesting to highlight how students’ mobility has transformed the way in which they perceive intimacy and close friendship. The researcher found that mobility to the UK has transformed the co-national students from strangers into friends and surprisingly into close friends in a short period. The sense of belonging and connectedness as well as understanding the struggle of living alone in the UK are the reasons why the students believe that they need to help each other. This study shows that co-national friends create a sense of belonging or fitting in as they share common beliefs, values, and social norms that can help them to cope with their diverse setting.

Moreover, this study found that different ethnic groups, as well as religious beliefs, did not restrain the feeling of oneness in the co-national friendships. Indeed,

Malaysian interethnic close friendships are notable in this study. Although recent students' mobility studies (see Bilecen, 2014; Brown, 2009a; Gu & Maley, 2008) discussed the relationship between international students and co-national as well as transnational friendships, they omitted to discuss further these aspects from a multi-ethnic and religious perspective. As Malaysia is a multicultural country where the people come from different ethnicities and practice a different religion, the debate about interethnic friendships has gained fresh prominence with many showing that Malaysian students abroad (see Ahmad et al., 2014) reported having close ties with people from similar ethnicity and religion.

On the contrary, this study shows that one-third of the Malaysian students had listed new co-national friends abroad from a different ethnicity and religion as close friends. Here, Aina, who only listed two new friends formed abroad as close friends, claimed that sharing a house and common interest has helped her develop closer ties with her new Malaysian Chinese friend, Zaza. She listed Zaza as a new close friend as they shared the same house and course of study. They share a similar interest in movies and food, and they always talk about work placement in the hospital as well as the upcoming exams as they are both studying medicine. However, as a Malay and a Muslim, Aina talked about the difficulties that she needs to face due to a different culture and religious beliefs.

Researcher: Most of your close friends are Malays and Zaza is the only Chinese friend that you considered as a close friend. Can you share with me your experiences of close friendship with Zaza who came from different ethnic and religion?

Aina: Our religions are different, and sometimes I found it is hard to explain about our culture and I am afraid that the topic is too sensitive to talk about. Our friendship is still new, so I still carefully choose the topic to talk with her. We do not have any problems especially related to food because Zaza does not really like to eat pork and she rarely cooks in our house. I do not mind if Zaza bought and ate pork in our house because she will wrap it and used the different compartment in the fridge to store it. I am okay with that as long as I did not touch it.

Although living with a Muslim guaranteed the avoidance of non-halal meat as Muslims friends offered the reassurance of shared values and practices, Aina argued that she never sees the culture and religious difference as a barrier in her friendship with Zaza as they both respect each other's beliefs. In Aina's case, intimacy was created through the act of respect and acceptance of different cultural and religious beliefs. The researcher found that Aina's claim is different from Brown's (2009b) findings, which stated that feeling understood brought a sense of ease that would not be found with a non-Muslim friend. Indeed, living together as housemates has strengthened the friendships between Aina and Zaza. Moreover, some of the Malaysian students claimed that living together as housemates or flatmates makes them feel like a family. It is important to highlight that the concept of family, in this context, is different from family-like relationships, but it is more related to the notion of familiarity as a family. In this regard, I found that sharing similar physical space

as well as participating in physical activities has developed the idea of family in new close friendships, which will be discussed next.

Shared Physical Space and Activities

Besides homophily in terms of social background and identity—nationality, ethnicity, and religion to be specific—sharing similar social space, such as housing, academic courses, and personal interests, as well as physical activities and social events also influenced the way in which Malaysian students define close friendships and intimacy. This study argues that new co-national friends in the UK provide academic, material, and emotional support. It is important to highlight that the different time zone and physical space limits the students from asking for practical help from friends at-a-distance and new close friends can give immediate response and support. Indeed, similar to Brown's (2009) finding, the researcher found that access to practical help in everyday life is the main reason for the formation of co-national close friendships or cultural cliques (Beech, 2016). These non-kin ties are treated as part of the family due to weakly bounded family practices, which are notable in the situation of living abroad (Morgan, 2011).

Sharing similar physical and social space is significant in creating intimate relationships between Malaysian students and new friends formed abroad. People are more likely to have contact with those who are closer to them in geographic location rather than those who are distant (Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Although sharing the same nationality reaffirms the sense of belonging, which is significant in emotional connectedness, the researcher argues that sharing physical and social spaces became the key reasons for the production of intimacy in new friendships. Most of the new close friends went to the same university and some of them shared the same accommodation, tutorials, and lectures. Sharing accommodations with other co-national students resulted in close friendships. Here, Tiffany talked about her experiences of living together with other Malaysian students and she described how they feel like a family as the result.

Researcher: Why did you consider Malaysian students here as friends and some of them as a family?

Tiffany: I feel quite warm when I meet Malaysian people because, at my university, the Malaysian population is small compared to other universities. Some of them even stay in the same flat as mine. So, the time that we meet with one another is quite a lot. I feel like we are a family because we live under the same roof for almost three years. I think that we became closer because we cook and eat together, and spend time together in our flat.

Sharing similar space, doing daily routines, as well as spending time together has strengthened the friendships between the students and co-national new friends. The students perceived co-national friends, especially their housemates/flatmates as a family as they practice the “love, care, and share” qualities in their friendships that are associated with family. Sharing accommodation creates the sense of familiarity as a family among students. Indeed, the intimacy qualities of family and friends remind the students of being in a family and consequently, they start acting like a

family. This is similar to Morgan's (2011) argument that these family practices create some activities, spaces, and times as family. Although their friendships were still new and admittedly not as intimate as family and long-established friends, sharing a similar physical and social space triggered more social interactions and participation that are vital in the development of close friendships. Indeed, sharing similar physical and social space has changed the way in which Malaysian students define and practice intimacy.

Besides sharing accommodation, universities' Malaysian societies events are also opportunities for the students to socialize and form new close friendships. The students talked about how these societies help the new students to adjust to their lives in the UK as well as connect to all Malaysians through various cultural events and festivals. Izhan, the president of the Malaysian society in his university, claimed that Malaysian students are supportive and involved in most of the Malaysian societies' events. Indeed, during the interview, Izhan was busy organizing a Deepavali celebration for Malaysian students in his university, and the researcher found that a lot of Malaysian, as well as British and other international students, participated in that event.

Izhan: Malaysian students here are really supportive. When we want to organize an event, other Malaysian societies, like UMNO Club are willing to help us and work together to make our event a huge success. I think it is maybe because our Malaysian community here is small compared to other universities. That is what makes us feel like home and strengthens our relationships as a Malaysian.

As previously mentioned, the students considered all Malaysians that they know as friends because the Malaysian community is small in some universities. Most of the students talked about their participation in most of the cultural events organized by the Malaysian society in their university and made new friends through those events. However, the researcher argues that the students did not find a suitable word to describe their relationships with their co-national friends. The students use the word "family" because they practice the similar routines, such as cooking and playing games as well as celebrating cultural events and festivals together just like a family. For that reason, this study shows that physical contact, immediacy, and co-presence are essential in sustaining as well as producing intimacy in friendships. Physical proximity and touch often indicate and complement other demonstrations of intimacy, including other ways of showing and giving care (Jamieson, 2013). Similar to Weiner and Hannum (2012), the researcher found that due to the inability to convey social support over distance, family members and long-established friends in Malaysia cannot be as directly supportive as new friends in the UK. Geographically close friends could provide more social and instrumental support than long-distance close friends. Thus, long-distance close friends were being asked for less support than geographically close friends because the students already acquired spatial sensibilities and mutual understanding in long-distance close friendships.

CONCLUSION

Familiarity as a family as a concept shows how Malaysian students perceived intimacy in their new close friendships formed abroad and act upon it based on their notions of the ideal family. This study contends that the roles of family and friends are not changed or suffused, but the relationships became closer and special due to the choices, commitment, as well as the high levels of intimacy gained within the relationships. The students use the word “family” and “friend” to highlight the strong feeling and bond as there is insufficient vocabulary to describe it otherwise. The sense of familiarity of being in a family and family practices brought the qualities of the family into close friendships. In the context of living temporarily abroad, some new friends are perceived as family members as they share more similarity or homophily in terms of nationality, physical space, and activities. Familiarity makes sense of family connection between new friends, and this familiarity provides ontological security which makes the students feel more secure—as if they are still living in Malaysia. For that reason, it is not surprising that the Malaysian community in the UK is perceived as a “Malaysian family” as claimed by all participants in this study. This study shows that the limitation of co-presence and immediacy due to physical distance has strengthened the geographically close friends and new close friendships. New friends who live near to the students replace family members and long-established friends who live at a distance especially in gaining physical and emotional support. The routines, such as cooking, eating, and celebrating Malaysian cultural events and festivals together have created some activities, spaces, and times that remind the students of being in a family. Consequently, familiarity makes a sense of family connection. The students started to act like a family and feel emotionally connected with their close friends.

Contribution

The concept of familiarity as a family in the context of living abroad contributes to the wider debates on friendship, intimacy, and family practices. This concept illustrates new forms of close friendships and intimacy practices of Malaysian students living abroad. It is interesting to show how they can inform debates more broadly especially in family studies. Past studies have explored the concept of familiarity and the adaptation of living overseas. However, the concept of familiarity as a family was used in this study to explain a new form of relationship as a result of living alone and temporarily abroad. The common aspect of doing family life—e.g., sharing a house and cooking—has created a sense of family between the students and their co-national friends abroad without a need to acquire the family-like intimacy qualities in their relationships. The concept of familiarity as a family in this study is different from the concept of families of choice in non-heterosexual relationships in previous studies (Gillespie, Frederick, Harari, & Grov, 2015; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). The researcher argues that intimacy has been viewed ethnocentrically so it is important for western studies to explore whether the western view of intimacy is relevant and applicable in other situations or cultural practices.

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