

## GENDERED PATTERNS OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS' CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS

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**Abstract:** *This paper seeks to clarify the gendered patterns of Malaysian students' close friendships and the ways in which the students practise intimacy with their close friends while living temporarily abroad. Men's and women's friendships patterns, in general, are different as there is a general assumption that men's friendships are less intimate than women's friendships, and this has been discussed in western studies. This qualitative study using friendship maps, diaries and in-depth interviews as research methods seeks to explore whether the male and female students practise close friendships differently in terms of the number of and hierarchy of friends and intimacy. Although the male students listed larger number of close friends compared to the female students in general, only small number of close friends were perceived for both students as important and intimate. This study shows that the practices of friendships are complicated around gender. Gendered patterns were reported in the hierarchy of friendship and intimacy but the level of closeness in friendship has more impact on how male and female students practise instrumental and expressive friendships.*

**Keywords:** *Gender Practices, Close Friendship, Living Abroad, Malaysian Students, Mobility*

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### Introduction

This study underlines emotional closeness and connectedness from a Malaysian students' perspective of studying overseas. In contrast to psychological approaches that focus on affection and shared knowledge, sociological studies emphasise mutual action and social norms by examining social change and the role of intimacy within it (Forstie, 2017). In the West, previous studies frame intimacy in the context of family, gender and sexuality (Blatterer, 2016; Clayton, 2014; Gabb, 2011; Giddens, 1992; Morgan, 2011) as well as emotions, distance and technology (Jamieson, 2013; Lambert, 2015; Miguel, 2016). However, this study consists of a more finely grained analysis of intimacy practices and close friendship, rather than a broad-scale account of social change in personal life. Jamieson's reference of intimacy as "the quality of the close connection between people and the process of building this quality" (2011, p.1) seems relevant to this study. Jamieson (2011) argues 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 conceptualises intimacy as a specific kind of association characterised by openness, the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feelings, and uses the term ‘disclosing intimacy’ to speak about the quality rather than the structure or status of relationships (Jamieson, 1999, 2005, 2011). Consistent with previous studies (Budgeon, 2006; Chambers, 2013; Forstie, 2017; Jamieson, 2011), this study highlights that intimacy might also refer to non-familial and non-sexual relationships, such as friendship, in this context. Jamieson (2011) argues in her study that closeness may also be physical, but intimacy practices in relationships need not be sexual. Indeed, bodily and sexual contact can occur without intimacy. The researcher paid attention to Jamieson's (2011, p.1) argument that “the cultural celebration and use of the term 'intimacy' are not universal, but practices of intimacy are present in all cultures”. It is important to highlight that this study draws on Malaysian cultural and religious practices that are certainly different from the West. 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.

Numerous studies have attempted to explain the differences in men’s and women’s friendship. It is generally acknowledged that both men and women have different patterns of friendships. Previous findings (Lindsey 2016; Marshall 2008) indicate that gender role ideology builds the impression that men are associated with activity-based friendships and instrumental roles, while women are associated with intimate conversation based friendships and expressive roles. This paper highlights that close friendships do show some gendered patterns. As men’s and women’s friendships are different according to the gender role ideology, the patterns of friendship are somehow different in terms of the number of and hierarchy of friends and intimacy. The male students listed more close friends than the female students but they claimed that their friendship practices are not as intimate as female students’ friendships. Therefore, it is essential to explore the ways in which the students conceptualise intimacy and to identify whether close friendship practices reproduce normative gendered practices and/or also destabilise them. Hence, the objective of this paper is to explore whether friendship practices are different for men and women but are not strictly gendered, and how gender roles ideology as well as cultural norms and religious obligations shape their close friendship practices when they are living abroad.

## **Literature Review**

A study by Fischer and Oliner (1983) found that the number of friends for both men and women are different at different stages of life. Young single men and women named a similar number of friends, while adult men listed more friends than adult women, and conversely in elderly. Married women were more involved with families, thus, named a lesser number of friends. They also found that gender inequalities associated with career, housework and childbearing and other structural constraints that are faced by people at other stages of life influenced the number of friends. However, previous studies suggest that marriage is either a benefit or barrier for close friendships for both men and women at different stages of life (Allan 1989; Fischer and Oliner 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O’Connor 1992).

By using the identical research method in Fischer and Oliner’s (1983) study, Gillespie et al.'s (2014; 2015) studies in the US challenge the claims that men and women have distinct styles of friendship and avoids the stereotypes of intimate talk and self-disclosure in women’s friendships. They argue that friendship quality is important for heterosexual, gay, lesbian, as well as bisexual men’s and women’s life satisfaction. In their study of close adult friendships, Gillespie et al.

(2014) indicate that women's and men's friendship patterns as exceptionally similar and not fundamentally gendered, not only regarding number and gender of friends but also in the types of instrumental and expressive support they receive from close friends. Men and women reported having a particular number of close friends who are socially and emotionally available to them and can be depended on. Their study challenges the expectation of same-gender and cross-gender friendships, and found that women did not explicitly depend on other women for intimate disclosure or exclusively upon men for instrumental help, and men did not rely only on women friends for intimate disclosure. Indeed, Gillespie et al. (2014) suggest that same-gender friendships are available to provide a variety types of expressive and instrumental support for both men and women. Therefore, they suggest that the general idea that men and women have different styles of friendship is exaggerated.

Although the differences in the number of friends are not notable for all groups, heterosexual men and women in Gillespie et al.'s (2015) study reported more same-gender than cross-gender friends in contrast to gay, lesbian as well as bisexual men and women. This finding is consistent with O'Meara's (1989) argument that heterosexual men and women feel the need to engage in strategies to demonstrate to others that their friendship with cross-gender friends is not sexual. In contrast to their prior study, Gillespie et al. (2015) indicate men's friendships are usually associated with the availability of tangible help, for example, a call or text if they are in trouble late at night, while women's friendships revolve around emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure. Indeed, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women show greater homophily than men for talking about sex life and in celebrating a birthday, in particular. Gillespie et al. (2015) also argued that the discussion of personal matters with friends is one of the characteristics of close and emotionally intimate friendships. Consequently, men's friendships are less intimate than women's friendships, and this has also been discussed in some previous studies (Bank and Hansford 2000; Felmlee et al. 2012; Migliaccio 2014; Morimoto and Yang 2013).

However, the researcher considers that social norms influence the ways in which men and women seek intimacy in friendship. This study supports Migliaccio's (2009) claim that although men are longing for expressiveness in friendships, they avoided expressive interactions with friends and engaged in more instrumental activities and support due to masculine expectations about men's friendships. Men are certain of the expectation that they should display emotional strength, toughness and inexpressiveness in social situations. For that reason, Migliaccio (2009) argues that the ways in which men are practicing their friendships reflect the ways in which they 'do gender'. In his recent study, Migliaccio (2014) found that there are limitations to the amount of sharing that is allowed in men's friendships, as well as the ways in which it is characterised. Even though most of the male participants perceived the ideal form of intimacy in a more feminine way, they avoided sharing their personal stories and problems with their friends. They still portrayed their friendships as being based on shared interests and activities.

Migliaccio (2014) indicates that all of the men in his study were influenced by masculine expectations in practising their friendships. The reactions from other male friends, usually through the use of humour, restrained the male participants in their study from being too expressive in their interactions. Although the male participants in their study wanted to have more expressive friendships, they were restricted by the unspoken expectations of hegemonic masculinity as discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Donaldson (1993), which notably, avoids any association with femininity. They feared a feminine form of friendship and thus evaded any actions that equated with being female, which in this case are sharing and being expressive. For that reason, Migliaccio (2014) argued that friendships were a reflection of

masculine acts and men drew a distinction between their friendships with men and women's friendships.

Gendered expectations in doing friendships are portrayed in the ways in which men and women engaged and interacted with their close friends. Although Walker's (1994) account is quite dated, her ideas on the gendered behaviour of men and women in friendship are still relevant. She claims that as gender is an ongoing social construction, men and women do friendship in various ways, and some friendship practices do not conform to gender norms and stereotypes. Despite the fact that men are expected to perform masculine and instrumental gender roles while women play expressive and feminine roles, people actually do something a little bit different from this in doing friendship. In her study she found that some men share feelings more than some women and this varies according to social class. However, she indicates that men and women accept the gender roles ideology of women's openness and men's activities for two reasons: disapproval by peers of inappropriate gendered behaviour and people not realising the differences between ideologies and behaviour, as they do not reflect on their behaviour. The question of whether close friendships practices are gendered is answered in paper.

## **Methods**

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 behaviour based on one background culture (Uski and Lampinen 2014), which is Malaysian cultural norms and religious beliefs in this context.

### ***Data Collection***

The goal of this study was to explore Malaysian students' gendered pattern of close friendships. 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. The students were asked to list down a maximum twenty names of their close friends, to be arranged on the concentric circle of the friendship map, as illustrate in Appendix A. All names reported in this study, including the students and their friends have been changed to maintain the confidentiality. The students use the code, for example, F1 and F2, in the friendship maps and interviews to refer to their friends, instead of using the real names. The researcher also asked the students about the details of names included as close friends and the reasons for this inclusion.

### ***Participants***

The participants were 18 Malaysian undergraduate students, 9 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 (UKCISA, 2015). 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 five years.

The researcher asked the students to list people who are close and important to them and these included family members, friends, neighbours, a partner or housemate. When they came to the interview, they had decided who they wanted to include and were asked to arrange those names on the first friendship maps. It is important to highlight that the numbers of close friends shown in the table are capped at 20 names. The details gathered provide a better understanding of close friendship patterns and practices, particularly from a gender perspective and is illustrated in more details in Table 1 below. The number of close friends ranged widely, from 9 to 20 people. The average number of friends was 16. It is apparent from the table below that 4 out of 9 male students listed 20 close friends, while the others listed 17 and 18 close friends, and 12 close friends as the lowest number. This is different from the female students, who listed fewer close friends, with 14 names on average.

**Table 1: The Pattern of Close Friendship Based on Gender**

Gender	Name	No. of close friends	Friends Gender		No. of close friends in the Inner Circle						Close friends in certain situations (Based on Inner Circle)						
			Male	Female	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Fun	Sharing News/ Stories	Study	R/ship	Financial	Lost/ Grieve	Sick/ Ill
MALE	<i>James</i>	12	7	5	5	3	2	1	1	-	I, II	I, II	-	-	-	-	I, II
	<i>Jason</i>	20	13	7	4	5	2	6	1	2	I, II	I, II	I, II	I, II	-	-	I, II
	<i>Ken</i>	20	7	13	8	9	-	-	3	-	I	I, II	-	I	-	-	I, II
	<i>Alvin</i>	20	16	4	8	4	3	2	3	-	I, II, III	I	I	I	I	-	I
	<i>Adam</i>	18	13	5	6	5	7	-	-	-	I	I, II, III	I, II	III	-	-	I
	<i>Izhan</i>	18	12	6	8	6	2	2	-	-	II	I	II	-	I	-	II
	<i>Alif</i>	17	14	3	6	8	3	-	-	-	I	I, II	II, III	I, II	I	I, II	-
	<i>Zain</i>	17	14	3	5	11	1	-	-	-	I, II	II	I, II	II	-	II	II
	<i>Saiful</i>	20	19	1	10	6	2	-	2	-	I, II	I	I	I	-	-	I
	<i>Yana</i>	13	3	10	4	3	4	2	-	-	I, II, III	I, II	II	II, III	I	I, II	-
FEMALE	<i>Jenny</i>	10	4	6	5	2	3	-	-	-	I	I	I, II	I, II	I	I	I
	<i>Sweeli</i>	13	5	8	4	9	-	-	-	-	I	I	I	I	-	I	I
	<i>Tiffany</i>	12	6	6	1	5	2	2	2	-	II, III	I, II	I, II	II	-	-	II
	<i>Aina</i>	20	6	14	1	6	11	2	-	-	III, IV	I, II, III	I, II, III, IV	III, IV	I, II, III, IV	-	-
	<i>Lily</i>	14	1	13	3	2	2	4	3	-	I, II	I	I, II	I	-	I, II, III	-
	<i>Nora</i>	9	2	7	1	1	4	1	2	-	I, III	I, II, III, V	III	I, II, III, IV	V	IV	-
	<i>Fira</i>	15	1	14	4	4	7	-	-	-	III	I, II	I	I, II	-	I, II	I
	<i>Mila</i>	20	4	16	4	6	4	2	4	0	II, IV	I, II	I, II, III	I	-	-	-

## Quality over Quantity: “I Keep My Circle Small”

Although Gillespie et al. (2014) claim that there are no significant gender differences in the number of friends, it is interesting to highlight in this paper that Malaysian male students listed more close friends than the female students. In this study, marriage as one of the structural advantages or constraints for men and women, as discussed in previous studies (Allan 1989; Fischer and Oliner 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O’Connor 1992), is not significant. This is because all of the students are young and unmarried, although some of them had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. In this study, the male and female students had similar opportunities and constraints around doing friendship without the gender inequalities associated with career, housework and childbearing, and other structural constraints that are faced by people at other stages of life, as Fischer and Oliner (1983) and Gillespie et al. (2014) mention.

In the arrangement of the names on the friendship map, nearer to the centre of the concentric circle or the inner circle are the close and important friendships. The researcher found that half of the male students listed more names of their close friends in the first inner circle of the friendship map compared with the female students. From these findings, the researcher argues that the female students prefer to have a small number of close friends compared with male students. In this case, the female students only listed 1 to 5 names in the first inner circle of the friendship maps, compared with the male students, who listed 4 to 10 names. Yana and Sweeli talked about their reasons for having a small number of close friends in the quotes below.

*YANA: I prefer to have a small group of friends because it is easier to keep in touch and be there for each other. If there are many people, I tend to not have a very close relationship with each and every one of them. It is also quite hard to meet up and to plan activities together. I am also very choosy when it comes to friends. It is difficult for me to open up to people. So, a small group of friends works for me.*

*SWEELI: I only used two circles on this map because I prefer to have a smaller network of friends. The first circle is for friends whom I have felt closer to recently and the second circle is my high school friends whom I meet once a year. I feel closer to friends in the first circle because we share similar ways of thinking and they can understand me more than other friends.*

Yana and Sweeli’s quotes above represent the view of the majority of the female students regarding the inclination towards having a small number of close friendships. The female students are more selective in choosing their close friends compared to the male students. They perceive 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. Accordingly, the researcher argues that the definition of ‘close’ and ‘intimate’ friendship for female students does not follow the gender stereotype of expressive friendship. This is because 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.

In addition, it is significant to highlight that the male and female students in this study had a small number of close friends that were listed on the first inner circle compared with the other circles of the friendship maps. However, the researcher found that the female students had fewer close friends than the male students. For that reason, the researcher argues that gender differences

are notable in this study. However, the researcher did not find any impact of gender on the female students' preferences in terms of having a smaller network. Gender is not a significant factor in having a small circle of close friends because it is mainly influenced by personality. Here, Mila talked about her introvert personality, which makes her prefer to have a smaller group of close friends. She did not have frequent contact with her friends and this was the reason for having less intimate talk.

*MILA: When I meet new people for the first time, I will take some time to talk to them. It is maybe because I am a little bit introverted. I only have a few best friends. Although I think that I am close to them, I actually do not contact them frequently. I prefer not to tell every single thing about my personal life to everyone.*

In this case, the researcher argues that lack of contact as well as distinct social and physical space have weakened the practices of intimacy. Mila and other students have fewer opportunities to practice the ideal qualities of intimacy with their friends as they had infrequent contact, either via face-to-face or online. Gender is not the main reason for having a small circle of close friends. The researcher argues that these findings slightly contradict the typical gender analysis in previous friendship studies, which claimed that men have more friends than women but fewer intimate and affectionate friendships (Fischer and Oliker 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O'Connor 1992). It is vital to highlight that the male students in this study not only listed more friends than the female students but also claimed that these friends were important close friends. Although there are no gender differences in describing the ideal intimacy qualities of close friendships, the hierarchy of friends and intimacy show a significant difference in terms of gendered behaviour.

### **Close or Best Friends: The Hierarchy of Intimacy**

Gender role ideology of masculinity and femininity is not the only factor that shapes men's and women's close friendships. The researcher considers that the level of closeness in friendship has more impact on how male and female students practise instrumental and expressive friendships. Based on Table 1 aforementioned, the male students not only listed a larger number of close friends but they also arranged most of their friends' names in the first and second inner circles of their friendship maps. In contrast, the female students listed fewer close friends as well as arranging fewer names in those inner circles on the friendship maps. Therefore, gendered patterns were reported in the hierarchy of friendship and intimacy in this study, which shows that female students not only prefer to have small groups of close friends, but they also prefer to distinguish their friendships based on the hierarchy of intimacy, which is illustrated by the different inner circles on the friendship maps.

In addition, the female students in this study repeatedly used the term 'best friend' and 'close friend' to describe their friendship hierarchy. Best friends in this case mostly refer to friends listed in the first and second inner circles, while close friends refer to friends listed in other circles of the friendship maps. However, some male students in this study claimed that intimacy in friendships is not determined by using those terms. The male students acknowledged that they are close to some groups of friends, but this does not mean that they treat their friends differently. The researcher found that some of the male students claimed that they have some close friends but never acknowledge them as best friends. In this case, Izhan and Alvin shared a similar view that using the term 'best friend' to differentiate their friendships was a practice of favouritism, as they do not really disclose their problems intimately, only to some best friends.



*IZHAN: I never label anyone as my best friend or just a friend. Because for me everyone is the same. I can differentiate who I am closer to, and who I am not. But I never give labels like “he is my best friend”, and “he is my friend”.*

*ALVIN: I don't have best friends actually. I don't choose my best friends. Everyone has the opportunity to be my close friend. There is nothing you can do that can make me treat you differently. I will treat you the same; it's just the things I tell you will be different.*

From the quotes above, it can be seen that Izhan and Alvin felt that it was inappropriate to treat friends differently by using specific terms to distinguish their closeness and intimacy. The matter of favouritism in friendship addresses the issue of hierarchy in friendship and intimacy. Like Migliaccio (2014), the researcher considers that the language of friendships and intimacy are female-biased. This could be associated with Saiful's claim that 'best friend sounds gay'. In this case, Saiful, who listed 19 male friends out of 20 close friends in his friendship map, claimed that giving a 'best friend' label in friendship is not properly masculine for him. Even though Saiful listed more friends compared to the female students in this study and had different expectations of his close friends, the researcher found that to some extent the 'sense of femininity' in the language and practices of friendship had a significant influence on the practices of homosociality – social bonds between persons of the same sex, for Saiful and other male students. The concept of a best friend had 'feminine' connotations and almost all male students did not use it to describe their close friendship.

The researcher argues that a man's practices of masculinity are used to convince others that he is not others of his masculinity. Using 'best friend' sounds childish or feminine to Saiful and some male students. However, Saiful's mocking remark of 'it sounds gay' is a quick gender generalisation. The researcher found that Saiful used the term 'gay' to describe his perception of the unmasculine behaviour of having a best friend. Moreover, the negative connotation of gay and the anxiety around sexuality could be related to Saiful's cultural and religion socialisation. This is because homosexuality is not widely accepted in Malaysia especially in Malay culture and is forbidden in Islam (Goh 2014; Stevens 2006). Hence, the researcher argues that male students prefer not to use the term 'best friend' to describe their friendships, as they think it is effeminate. The presence of boundaries in disclosing intimacy influences how people treat others as 'close' and 'special' (Jamieson, 2005). This concurs with these findings as the male students in this study did not perceive their close friends as their 'best friends' and limit their intimate interaction with male friends.

Self-disclosure is a part of the process of building the qualities of intimacy in which disclosing self and intimacy are associated with high levels of trust, and people usually relate intimacy by keeping 'others' at a distance. According to Alvin's and Saiful's level of friendship map, the researcher found that they did not treat their friends differently but they have different expectations towards friends based on their level of trustworthiness. This finding shows conflicting ideas of the hierarchy of intimacy.

In contrast to Bank and Hansford's (2000) study in the US, the researcher found that men's same-gender friendships are intimate and supportive, similar to women's. However, this study confirms their findings that although men idealise intimate and supportive friendships as more enjoyable, masculine identity, homophobia as well as limitations in expressing emotions impact on the level of intimacy and support in friendships. Masculinity influences the level of affection and concern, but there are no significant impacts on support in same-gender friendships. Men

tend to avoid self-disclosure as well as being intimate and supportive, as they are avoiding what they view as effeminate behaviour.

Nevertheless, Table 1 shows that the male and female students in this study prefer to confide their personal stories and problems to their close friends listed in the first and second inner circles on the friendship map. Although the male students listed a higher number of close friends compared to the female students, all of them said that they only share their problems and happiness with certain friends. Alif shared his problems with most of his friends. However, the friends in the first inner circle of the friendship map are the only friends that know the exact problems that he has.

*ALIF: Friends listed here are people who know my true self, someone whom I feel comfortable with and someone whom I tell my problems to. Friends in the first inner circle are people who know the whole picture of my stories or problems. They will consult me when I need their opinion. It does not mean that I will accept their opinion. I just want someone to hear my stories. And maybe because we share the same mentality, they understand me and my situation.*

Alif mentioned that his close friends listed in the first circle share a similar way of thinking and personality. He feels comfortable talking about personal matters and disclosing his intimacy with those close friends as they are trustworthy and good listeners. Similar to Alif, Saiful added that similarity in terms of humour and jokes, as well as the length of time they have known each other are other reasons for the inclusion of his male friends in the first inner circle. This is similar to Spencer and Pahl's (2006) arguments that a close friend can be someone who is emotionally close, the most reliable, fun and trustworthy, as well as someone with whom you have most in common and have known for the longest time.

*SAIFUL: Honestly, I group my friendships by looking at how I interact and share my personal things with them, and how we make jokes with each other. I have known all of my friends in the first inner circle since high school. We are very close until now. And I included some of my friends in the UK because we lived in the same hall last year. We got close to each other and I can share my personal problems with them.*

However, Saiful's claim aforementioned that 'best friend sounds gay' appears to contradict his quote above. Throughout the interview, the researcher found that he was selective in arranging the names of his close friends according to the different levels on the friendship map and the way he practises his friendships does not totally follow the masculine ideologies in which he believes. The researcher argues that the male students in this study believe in gender stereotypes with regard to women's friendships and they avoid feminine practices, such as using the term best friend, as they are more intimate and expressive. However, as Walker (1994) found in her study, the researcher also found that the male students had different expectations towards friends on different levels of the friendship maps, as mentioned by Alvin below.

*ALVIN: I set the first criteria for friendship as trustworthiness. If I can trust you, I will tell you my problems and my secrets. And I expect you to keep my stories secret. I expect you to be there when I need you. The level of trust might decrease for friends in the outer circle. I have fewer expectations of them as well.*

It is important to highlight that the male students have a set of expectations or ideal qualities of intimacy in close friendships especially to close friends listed on the first inner circle of the friendship maps. The researcher found these ideal qualities of intimacy challenge the 'masculine qualities' in friendships claimed by the male students. For that reason, the researcher contends that people actually do something a little bit different from gender role ideology in doing friendship. Throughout the interviews, the researcher found that male students wanted to show the 'masculine' side of their close friendships. However, they are longing for 'feminine' acts in close friendships especially when they talked about their expectations of loyalty, trust, reciprocity and support.

Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that the students tend to keep their personal problems to themselves, especially issues related to finance, grief and illness, although they are more open to sharing problems related to study and relationships. Besides the trust issue, both male and female students tried to avoid sharing personal problems in order to avoid misunderstandings, conflicts and judgement. Here, James talked said it was easier to share with his western friends about his parents' divorce and his illness compared to his Malaysian friends. He remarked that his western friends are more open to discussing sensitive issues.

*JAMES: It's hard for me to have close friendships with them compared to my Malaysian friends. But they are more open to discussing sensitive issues. Even though we are not close to each other, it is easy to talk about my parents' divorce and to tell them that I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia. My Malaysian friends are not judgmental, but it is uncommon to talk about these issues if you are not really close to each other.*

However, there are slight gender differences in terms of choosing friends for fun activities. All of the male students listed their friends from the first and second inner circles, but some of the female students only listed friends from the second, third and fourth circles for fun activities. The researcher found that the main reason for this gendered pattern is physical distance. Aina and Mila, who listed more long-distance friends as close friends, said that they choose to have fun with close-distance friends, especially their housemates because they cannot do activities that require physical contact with long-distance close friends.

*AINA: Having fun here is different from having fun in Malaysia. I have my parents and my sister to have fun with. But here, it depends on my friends' availability. Usually, I have fun with my housemate. This year, I hang out more with my new housemate, Zaza, and last year with my ex-housemate, Fatin. We went out together to eat, watch films and shop.*

*MILA: Most of my friends are in Malaysia, so it is quite difficult to meet them. I try to meet all of them during the summer break and we have fun together. But here, I do not think that I have really close friends. So, usually, I have fun with my housemates. We go out to eat, shop and travel together.*

Closeness, is not specifically linked to physical distance, as Aina and Mila did not yet perceive close-distance friends as close friends but as an alternative to long-distance close friends especially for physical activities such as shopping and travelling which required face-to-face contact. For that reason, the researcher argues that physical distance does impact the ways in which the students practise close friendship. Even though some of the male students did not agree with the usage of the term 'best friend' to explain close friendships, activity-based and intimate talk in friendships were not particularly distinguished by gender at this stage of the

students' lives. It is not evident at this particular time and at this age, but it might be distinguished by gender later when people have children and talk about their children or partners, as indicated by Cronin (2015). Indeed, it depends on the hierarchy of intimacy between the students and their friends. The highlight of this paper is that both the male and female students in this study preferred to turn to close friends in the first and second inner circles on the friendship map whether to share happy news and have fun together or to share their problems and sadness. These findings also concur with Gillespie et al.'s (2014) research, which found that there are no significant gender differences in instrumental and expressive friendships. This is because both the male and female students in this study perceived close friends as people they trust to share their personal matters as well as people with whom they could have fun with in certain activities.

## Conclusion

This paper draw on the conclusion that friendships are complicated around gender. There are some gendered patterns in close friendships that are based on a number of friends, while the hierarchy of intimacy are influenced by religion and cultural expectations as well as gender socialisation. This paper shows that the male students listed more close friends than the female students in total, and they also listed more names of close friends in the first inner circle of their friendship maps. The generalisation that men have fewer close friendships and are less emotive than women appear not to be the case. However, the male students claimed that their friendship practices are not as intimate as female students' friendships. Although the male and female students in this study shared diverse views on the hierarchy of friendship and the meaning behind each circle of friendship as illustrated on their friendship maps, the researcher did not find any significant gender differences in describing close friendships.

The students perceive friendships as important relationships and idealise a close friend as a person whom they love unconditionally, feel comfortable with, trust, and show their real self to. Close friends also accept their strengths and weaknesses, are available when needed and share a similar attitude, mentality and interest. Friendship practices are different for men and women but are not strictly gendered even though the researcher found that the language of friendship and the practices of intimacy to be gendered in this study. The male and female students constructed their interactions in a masculine or feminine based on societal expectations and friends' reactions towards them. Intimacy practices in close friendships are not entirely determined by the gender role ideologies of masculinity or femininity that are embedded in Malaysian culture but the ideal intimacy qualities achieved in the relationships. Hence, it is crucial for future research to focus on the definition, language and practices of intimacy as well as the negative connotation of intimacy practices in close friendships in other cultural settings.

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