



## FACE, VOICE AND INTIMACY IN LONG-DISTANCE CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS



 Nur Hafeeza Ahmad Pazil<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Science, Malaysia, 11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
Email: [hafeezapazil@usm.my](mailto:hafeezapazil@usm.my)



### ABSTRACT

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Living temporarily abroad, as a student, changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy with family and close friends. Face-to-face interactions became impossible and social media was used as an alternative medium for interactions with close friends who live at-a-distance. Nevertheless, the students reported that interactions via social media lack of social cues and emotional impression. This qualitative study using friendship maps, diaries and in-depth interviews as research methods seeks to explore whether social media lead to less intimate interaction and friendship between the students who live temporarily abroad with their family members and close friends back home. This study shows that physical distance does affect the ways in which the students practise intimacy. However, infrequent contact does not change the intimacy level between the students with some of their long-distance close friends as intimate relationships are already established and are not affected by distance.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study adds to the debates on the intimacy practices by looking at how physical distance has enabled new forms of intimacy and does not inevitably equate to emotional distance particularly in close long-distance friendships.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It seems that it is a general assumption that when people move on to another geographical location, their personal relationships; friendships, in particular, might fade away. However, this study shows that physical distance, time and space should not only be seen as constraints as it also helps in strengthening and developing close friendships. This study acknowledges the changes concerning practices, media use and routines of intimate interactions due to the students' temporary mobility to the UK. This study highlights the intimacy practices via social media as one of the important platforms of interaction. Social media has become significant as living away from family and friends leads to fewer face-to-face meetings as it is too expensive for the students to go home frequently.

The researcher argues that physical distance has changed the ways in which Malaysian students interact with their long-distance close friends. The students use social media to replace as well as to initiate face-to-face interaction. Hence, physical distance has brought new practices of intimacy especially in the context of the online interaction. Accordingly, this study seeks to clarify how physical distance and social media have changed the ways

in which the students practise intimacy with their long-distance close friends. It is important to explore the intimacy practices through meetings, phone calls, messenger, emoticons as well as exchanging pictures during non-co-presence while the students are living in the UK.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has become embedded in people's routine and lifestyle, with young people being the most frequent users of emails, social media sites and instant messenger (Boyd, 2010; Chambers, 2013). The researcher argues that social media provide tools for networking especially for establishing new friendships and at the same time maintaining existing relationships. As a medium of social interaction and information sharing, this study draws the attention to how social media produce particular forms of intimacy in social interaction. According to Davies (2011) social media act as a supplement for existing ways of social interactions, such as face to face, letters, and conventional phone calls, for people to perceive and manage their contacts. The researcher found that social media allows new social practices in interaction. Moreover, social roles, status, and structural location do not have a significant impact on friendship formation and practices on social media. Social media allows people to form friendships, to interact and do friendships without the necessity of face-to-face contact or any social and physical boundaries. However, as Boyd (2010) and Davies (2011) point out, people need to be connected to the internet and mutually agree to become a friend, by accepting a friend request in social media.

It is important to highlight that social media have formed a new etiquette for how friendship is done, and at the same time show the ways in which people manage existing friendships or deal with unwanted friends (Holmes, 2011; McLaughlin and Vitak, 2011; Jamieson, 2013). As Boyd (2010) argues in her research, social media allows users to connect, build and manage their friends by a process of negotiating the social practices and norms. Social media users usually follow a set of shared social practices for 'friending' that are accepted by online communities. Moreover, people have differentiated relationships and respect these differences, as well as having some clear boundaries of obligations in their friendships as argued by Pahl (2000). People have separate friends for conversation on social media depending on particular interest and activities, and the closeness of friendship can be measured on the quality of content and frequency of interaction (Boyd, 2010).

However, Hall and Baym (2011) indicate that excessive contact with friends can increase expectations of relationship maintenance and dependence that also triggers dissatisfaction with friendships. Moreover, long-distance relationships have to deal with higher expectations and miscommunication. Cantó-Milà *et al.* (2016) argue that online interaction has become part of the 'imagined dreams' in which people imagine the reaction from a text message and they picture that the other person is ideally there for them, interested and caring about what they have to say. However, as social media allows daily interaction, it has changed the expectations of intimacy practices and created a certain pressure to communicate (Jurkane-Hobein, 2015). According to Jamieson (2013) new technologies bring new burdens of expectation within friendships as people are accused of not being interested in interacting if they do not an appropriate response to their friends' updates on social media. For that reason, people need to follow a set of social practices that are expected and accepted, to avoid dissatisfied relationships.

Holmes (2011) states that users need to reflect on their friends' feeling in a similar way as offline and manage their self-disclosure and behaviour appropriately within a particular interaction context, as online friends also include family members, colleagues and a variety of peers. The diversity of social relations on social media needs new emotional demands as users need to think, feel and act appropriately to keep the intimacy of relationships and at the same time to avoid embarrassment and defriending. Holmes (2011) also indicates that the rules of friendship on social media generally follow those of the offline context especially on how to behave and expectations on conducting a friendship.

Spencer and Pahl (2006) acknowledge that the focus of studies of friendships and new communication technologies is mainly on the strength of friendship. People usually use phone calls and SMS to get an immediate

responses from close friends regarding daily activities or personal matters (Taylor and Harper, 2003) use chat rooms and dating sites to find new friends and partners (Brickell, 2012) and use email for formal interaction and to keep in touch with long-distance friends (Lenhart *et al.*, 2007). People who live at a distance tend to use social media rather than calling to connect with their friends and family. The reason is that meeting up, sharing physical space and spending time together are some of the challenges in long-distance relationships (Cronin, 2014; Policarpo, 2016). With free voice call, video call and chats, people who are living away from each other can keep in touch with friends and family at any time as long as they are connected to the internet.

Furthermore, living away from home makes real-time or synchronous conversation as well as face-to-face meeting impossible. However, social media allow a new form of face-to-face meeting through video calls, whether on Facebook, Skype or any instant messenger that allow this function. Sandel (2014) indicates, in his study, that Skype and other video calls technologies fostered a sense of immediacy and shrank the sense of distance to alleviate pressure and feelings of homesickness that can arise when a student is alone and far from home. Moreover, Chambers (2013) argues that video calls give the illusion of co-presence as it allows participation in a family gathering, for example, since it is synchronous and dialogic. Social media give a chance for people to feel the sense of presence and social support even though they are separated.

In addition, social media offers affective richness due to their provision of colourful and graphic emoji and stickers. Lim and Pham (2016) claim that social media users can use the emoji and stickers to enliven their messages and to inject them with fun and feeling. According to Baym (2010) digital formats of social cues, such as emoticons, caps lock as well as photos and videos, enable the users to capture emotional nuance, convey friendliness, build intimacy, express strong emotions and recreate familiarity. Nevertheless, social media provides reduced social cues and cannot recreate physical touch. Although Skype and other video chat applications offer many social cues including voice and facial expression, Baym (2010) argues that there are limitations to intimacy practices through interaction via video call, including lack of ability to touch and smell.

From these points, this study raises a question of whether lack of social cues on social media leads to less intimate interaction and long-distance friendship. Baym (2010) argues that the lack of social cues and the asynchronicity of online interaction does not break close relationships. Instead, asynchronous interaction not only allows people to revise and to reply when they like, but it also has discouraged the 'sense of placelessness' (Baym, 2010). On the contrary, Stets and Turner (2014) argue that social emotions can be controlled and less visible in social media, people cannot convey their emotions through textual and visual content. Consequently, they will feel less intimate or emotionally connected with friends through their interaction. The researcher draws on these argument in this study and explores the significance of face and voice in the intimacy practices. □

### 3. 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 the background is to understand what is the expected and accepted behaviour based on one background culture (Uski and Lampinen, 2016).

#### 3.1. Data Collection

The goal of this study was to gain a broad perspective on close friendships and intimate interaction between the students with their family members and long-established close friends. The interviews were conducted in a private and informal setting. English and Malay's languages were used for the interviews. Upon reading the participant

information sheet and agreeing to participate, 8 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 illustrated 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 their experiences and impressions of close friendships, the details of names included as close friends and the reasons for this inclusion.

### 3.2. Participants

The participants were 8 Malaysian undergraduate students, 4 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 the study. The reason for choosing Malaysian students as the participants are 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, 2018). 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.

### 3.3. Face, Voice, and Intimacy

It is important to highlight that face-to-face meeting is essential for the development and maintenance of close relationships. Although the interaction via social media re-creates the ideas of proximity and distance, closeness and fairness as well as solidity and imagination (Urry, 2002) the researcher, argues that face, place and moment are necessary for the development of a sense of presence and immediacy. Meeting up, sharing physical space and spending time together in long-distance close friendships are the main concerns of this study and these issues have also been discussed in recent studies (Cronin, 2014; Policarpo, 2016). However, the respondents in these previous studies are 30 years of age and above, and the mobility took place due to education and employment.

Temporary residence abroad inevitably results in lack of face-to-face and physical contact, for example, hugging and kissing, which the researcher considers as essential elements in intimacy practices. This physical contact and social cues can be communicated and imagined by the help of social media; for example, through videos, photos and emoticons/emoji – mobile-phone-specific pictorial signs (Miyake, 2007). Nevertheless, the sense of presence and closeness through a face-to-face meeting and physical touch cannot be substituted by social media. Therefore, it is important to highlight face and voice as essential elements in intimate practices in close friendship.

Social media is used as a compliment for face-to-face interaction. There are strong associations between face-to-face interaction and social media as people use social media as part of their daily routine. Social media should be understood as a mixed modality that combines elements of face-to-face communication with elements of written communication. There is a general assumption that social cues are being reduced by both phone calls and the internet, making interaction less intimate. Nevertheless, Baym (2010) found that lack of social cues and the asynchronicity of online interaction did not lead to impoverished close relationships. There are social cues specific to digital formats, such as emoticons, caps lock as well as photos and videos, which enable us to capture emotional nuance and allow us to convey friendliness, build intimacy, express strong emotions and recreate familiarity (Baym, 2010).

Asynchronous interaction not only allows people to revise and to reply when they like, but it also discourages the “sense of placelessness” (Baym, 2010). The researcher argues that online interactions make the students feel more together when they are apart. However, the ‘sense of presence’ is the key reason why the students ideally prefer face-to-face meetings over online conversations. Video calls became an alternative for a face-to-face meeting as it enables the students to look at their friends’ face and hear their voices even though they are physically away from each other. Here, Alvin talked about how social media blurred the physical distance especially through his interactions with friends at-a-distance.

ALVIN: When I make a video call and see their faces, I can feel their presence although they are away. I feel closer to them, and it seems like they are here with me, physically. Social media helps me to keep in touch with those who are away and helps us to get connected. But, for me, face-to-face contact is still the best.

Seeing a face and hearing a voice, especially someone who is physically absent develops emotional connectedness and closeness in friendship. The students feel closer in terms of distance and emotions, and they can feel the presence of each other although the conversation takes place in virtual space (Chambers, 2013). Suggests that video calls give the illusion of co-presence as it has the quality of enabling individuals to participate in a family gathering, for example, since it is synchronous and dialogic. In this case, the researcher argues that seeing a face and hearing a voice is necessary for intimacy because it gives a sense of presence which is an essential element in developing and maintaining close friendships. Indeed, facial expression delivers emotions which is important in intimate interactions. Here, Lily talked about how facial expression affected her decision whether to share her personal problems with her close friends or not.

LILY: I always look at my friends’ facial expression every time I share my problems with them. I can capture their emotions when I look at their face. Through their expression, I know whether they are interested in listening to my story or not. When they show their sadness or sympathy, I feel like I have been comforted by that response and expression. This only can be done by looking at the face. I cannot capture that feelings and emotions when texting my friends.

This study indicates that social cues are not reduced in online communication, but the format is changed. Students get less contact through facial expression, body language, gesture and lack of proximity to some of their close friends. However, other formats of social cues, such as emoji, animated GIFs, photos, voices, and videos have changed the ways in which the students communicate with their close friends as well as their practices of intimacy. These social cues have enhanced the words and feelings that the students wanted to express to their close friends. Moreover, this study found that the students felt a greater sense of closeness to their close friends, especially those who are at-a-distance when they used social media for communication. While the physical distance between countries has not changed, the virtual and perceptual distance has decreased (Sandel, 2014). Social media offers affective richness due to their provision of colourful and evocative emoji and stickers that users can appropriate to enliven their messages, injecting them with fun and feeling (Lim and Pham, 2016). Here, Aina talked about how emoji has turned the boring text into a fun conversation.

AINA: Emoji has enhanced the feeling that we want to convey. When I use certain emoji in a right situation, it can clarify whether I want to show my angry, sad or happy face. For example, when I texted my sister to tell something funny, the use of emoji makes the conversation feel hilarious and makes me laugh so hard.

Although emoji helps people to convey their feelings and has face-like icons, the number of emoji that can be used on social media is limited. They cannot totally replace the facial expression, body language, gesture, and proximity, although they help to enhance the feelings. Social media allows asynchronous conversation and in a given situation, the words and emoji used are not enough to convey the sense of connectedness and intimacy. There are no specific emoji and words that can replace physical affection such as hugging and patting to console another

person who is physically distant. Here, Adam and Anis talked about why some emoji could convey incorrect feelings in the conversation and could lead to misunderstanding.

ADAM: Facial expression can express better than the emoji. Emoji is limited. There is only one emoji to show certain expression.

ANIS: There is no emoji that is really specific to show certain feelings. If I use the emoji that shows sarcastic face for joking, some people might take it in a wrong way.

Indeed, the students argued that online interactions are not intimate enough and unable to convey their specific affection toward certain situations compared to a face-to-face meeting. Although Skype and other video chat applications offer many social cues including voice and facial expression, they still lack critical intimacy including touch and smell (Baym, 2010). Here, Alif, who established and maintained his close friendships especially with same-gender friends through religious activities called *usrah*, talked about his experience of using Skype to conduct these sharing sessions once or twice a month. He argued that there are limitations in video calls as they are not as intimate as a face-to-face meeting. In addition, he talked about the importance of face-to-face interaction to maintain close relationships, although people are already connected via social media.

ALIF: I use Skype to replace face-to-face interaction, for *usrah* to be specific. But, it still cannot replace the impact of face-to-face. Before this, I think Skype is already enough for interaction. But, at one point, I feel like it is not enough and I cannot give a full emotion towards it. I give more focus on people when I see them face-to-face than on video call. I know that it is hard to meet people especially who live at-a-distance, but I think it is important to continue the meetings through social media. But, the relationship in social media is really vague and seems not real. To make it real, you have to meet.

Social media is a complement to face-to-face interactions, not as a substitute. It cannot stand alone.

Even though social media has become the alternative for face-to-face interaction due to physical distance, the interaction needs to be continued through face-to-face meetings. Lack of face-to-face contact in long-distance close friendships as well as distinct social and physical space have weakened the practices of intimacy. Skype and other video call technologies have fostered a sense of immediacy and have shrunk the sense of distance to alleviate pressure and feelings of homesickness that can arise when a student is alone and far from home (Sandel, 2014). However, synchronous interaction – to meet or even to make a video call is difficult due to physical distance, the different time zone and poor internet connections. Indeed, the students and close friends need to set up a specific date and time to interact with each other via social media. Intimate interaction requires effort from both parties to ensure that the scheduled interaction time is fruitful and continuous. In this case, Jason talked about the struggle with video calling due to the issues of convenient mutual time and internet connection.

JASON: A phone call is more intimate compared to texting. Sometimes I make a video call, but I prefer a voice call because of most of the time when I want to make a video call I need to set the time with my friends. The internet connection in Malaysia is not really good and we cannot do a video call while walking or doing some other stuff. The voice call is easier and less worry.

It is interesting to explore how the students define intimacy and its practices on social media. This study highlights that social cues on social media, for example, facial expression and emoji, are important in building intimacy, despite the risks of misinterpretation. Social media with minimal social cues such as chat messenger were reported as being less intimate compared to video and voice calls. The question arises here is what are the reasons that make Jason, as well as other Malaysian students, use WhatsApp Messenger frequently, especially texts and group chat, even though only minimal social cues are found in these features? In contrast to Baym (2010) findings that asynchronous interaction has weakened close relationships and makes people feel distant, the data in this study shows that Malaysian students prefer to use texts and group chats on WhatsApp Messenger because it is easy to use and at the same time it requires fewer expectations and obligations of immediacy. Here, Aina talked about how asynchronous conversation allows people to think before giving a reply.

AINA: In a face-to-face meeting, we need to think about what we want to say and if we do not like to talk about it, we still need to give a prompt reply. But, it is different in WhatsApp, for example. We can see a person typing for five minutes in a WhatsApp conversation, but only one word: OKAY, for instance, came out as a reply. If you meet people face-to-face, you cannot take back what you have already said.

Texting and group chatting allows asynchronous interaction which enables the users to have time to think, revise and reply to the messages. Indeed, the students talked about how texting and group chatting allows them to control their emotions due to a lack of facial expression and physical touch. The students can avoid worriedness and misunderstanding as their long-distance close friends cannot hear any changes in voice and facial expressions. In contrast to the ongoing conversation through phone calls, the students can send their friends a message and it does not matter when the other person reads and replies. They feel less obliged or disappointed to give or to get immediate replies especially from/to friends who live in another country with a different time zone. Different time zone, poor internet connection, as well as changes in personal commitment and routines, became barriers for real-time interactions when living abroad. The students talked about their disappointment about delays in answering calls and hassles in planning a meeting due to physical distance. Even though face-to-face meetings, as well as voice and video calls, are more intimate than texting, the situation changes the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy with their close friends, especially those who are at-a-distance.

Lack of social cues and emotional expression are also significant for maintenance of long-distance close friendships. Social cues and emotional expression through social media, especially video and voice call, not only give the illusion of co-presence, but also give the students a 'reminder' of separation. The researcher found that the feelings of not being able to 'be there' physically create more disappointment for the students who are living abroad. Social media helps to blur the distance and maintains the close friendships at-a-distance, but the social cues in social media are still not enough to deliver emotional expression especially in critical situations. To use Lily's case as an example, she experienced her uncle's death while living abroad and a few days before the interview, her father was admitted to the hospital. This situation made Lily feels homesick and anxious. She talked about how physical distance limits her intimacy practices with her loved ones although they can communicate through social media.

LILY: This week my dad is being admitted to the hospital. He fell off his motorbike, broke his ribs and cannot get up. He did not want to tell me about this, but my mom decides to broke this news to me. It was a shock to me. I feel like going home right now, but my mom does not allow me. But now I feel relieved because my brother who is studying in Cairo is going home. At least he is there to look after my dad and my mom.

Although smartphones and social media have given the students the ability to maintain close friendships across long distances, lack of physical proximity does affect the intimacy practices. [Cantó-Milà et al. \(2016\)](#) in their study, argue that although communication via smartphones is important in relationship maintenance, long-distance relationships had to deal with "higher expectations, verbal overshadowing, and individual facets". Online interaction became part of the imagined dreams in which people imagined the reaction from a text message and they pictured that the other person ideally was there for them, interested and caring for what they have to say ([Cantó-Milà et al., 2016](#)). However, this study indicates that physical distance limits the emotional connectedness as the students feel a lack of co-presence and immediacy in their intimacy practices. Lack of face-to-face and bodily contact as well as distinct social and physical space brought disappointment and weakened the practices of intimacy which become a major problem in maintaining long-distance close friendships. This study found that the temporary period of living abroad has changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise and maintain intimacy. Although the students long for and imagine intimacy especially physical contact, such as hugging and celebrating events together, this has not become a significant issue in some of their long-distance close friendships, especially with family members and childhood friends.

The students already established close bonds with some of their long-distance close friends and there are unwritten expectations of close friendship at-a-distance which allows them to maintain their close friendship despite infrequent contact. According to

Jurkane-Hobein (2015) as social media allows daily interaction, it has changed the expectations about intimacy practices and created a certain pressure to communicate. However, the researcher found that despite feelings of uncertainty due to the inability to interact every day and the consequent loss of daily intimacy, the students only wanted to get updated about their close friends' life occasionally and not as a daily routine. This study shows that the temporary period of living abroad has changed the need and expectations of intimate interactions, especially with long-distance close friends. Based on the friendship diaries, the researcher found that the students frequently interacted with their family members, partners and new friends, but they still talked about the close bonds and memories that they have with old friends despite having infrequent contact.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Geographical distance, different time zone, as well as physical space did not totally weaken the close friendships or became one of the factors of emotional disconnection. This study found that close friendships do not depend on the frequency of contact or the related variable of distance between friends, but it depends on the strength of the bond. Although face-to-face meeting and spending more time together are important relational currencies mainly during the initial phase of close friendships' development, the researcher argues that close friendships can endure long-distance and infrequent contacts. As undergraduate students, most of the participants go back to Malaysia for three months during the summer break. While for masters taught students, they stay in the UK for a year until graduation. Accordingly, the limitation of meetings and physical contact have changed the ways in which students are practising intimacy in close friendships.

This study concludes that physical distance does affect the ways in which the students practise intimacy. They use social media as the main medium of interaction with long-distance close friends as it is costly – in terms of finance and time, to travel to Malaysia to meet each other frequently. Lack of face-to-face meetings in long-distance close friendships as well as distinct social and physical space have weakened the practices of intimacy. The sense of presence and immediacy are limited as students that are friends live away from each other and this affects the ways in which the students perceived their closeness in long-distance friendships. However, infrequent contact does not change the intimacy level between the students with some of their long-distance close friends, especially family members and childhood friends as the intimate relationships are already established and are not affected by distance.

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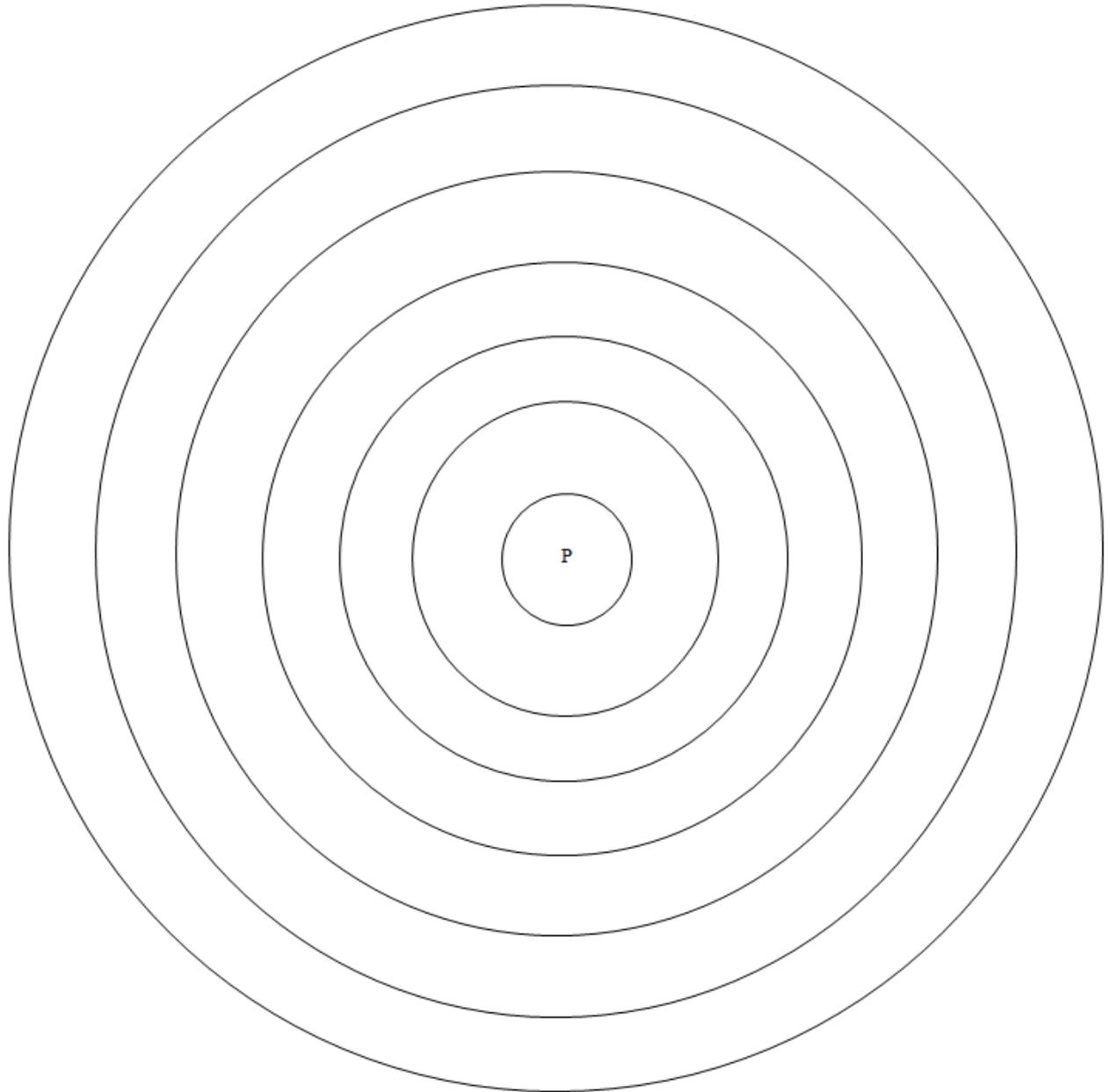
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Appendix-A. Friendship Map



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