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# **Determining Factors in Friendship Group Formation: A Mixed Method Study on Undergraduates in London**

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## **Abstract**

This research paper aims to investigate the factors involved in the formation of undergraduate friendship groups. There are previous studies which expand upon the process of social grouping, but our data set is specific to the investigation of undergraduate groups. Students in higher education represent a distinct category: the representation of factors involved are not so dependent on proximity or age, as is the case for working adults or school children. This allows for a suitable demographic from which a standardised pool of primary data may be compiled. Though the presence of “cliques” and social grouping in university is a widely observed phenomenon, the exact cause of their formation remains relatively uninvestigated. Furthermore, most past research focuses on isolated research techniques. To address this theoretical gap, we have developed a mixed method in order to reach a more nuanced conclusion. Our data collection procedure employed an intuitive batch process. By engaging with pilot interviews supported with other academic readings, a base list of factors supported by methodology could be construed. These initial factors were adopted as core terminology within a survey collating over 100 responses. We found that a multitude of factors such as proximity have been verified as recurrently linked. There is ultimately a spectrum as to which factors are likely to see higher levels of contribution.

**Key words:** Friendship groups, Social grouping, Factors, Formation, Undergraduate

# Introduction

This paper investigates multiple factors involved in the formation of a friendship group within undergraduate students. Although previous studies have attempted to investigate the phenomenon of social grouping, rarely has the sample been exclusive to an undergraduate sample. The study builds upon previous research conducted by Socha (1997) who provided a definition of a 'friendship group.' For the purpose of this project, we draw on this definition: a friendship group can be identified as three or more people who a) consider themselves as a group, b) rely on each other, and c) communicate with one another. Our hypothesis is that there will be distinct groups of characteristics which are recurring and comparable to other traits (Frey, 2005).

# Literature Review

Understanding how group dynamics function at a university level may be superimposed to the operation of group behaviour within the workplace. As the ability to work efficiently and effectively within groups are simply mandatory for contemporary careers, this research may prove essential in shaping social relationships. N.Schullery's work on the benefits of Heterogeneous versus homogeneous groups (Schullery, 2006) describes a recognised hallmark of successful groups being membership diversity. The focus group of undergraduates retains distinct importance, due to the underlying factor of group work and socialising in University being largely akin to socialising in the workplace. These results may be superimposable, providing a starting point into manipulating which factors bolster formation, in order to provide smoother group collaboration at a career level.

The current academic scene on social grouping focuses on observing factors (Mabry 1999), quantitatively through metrical analysis. As a complicated social study, this retains significant benefits such as a simplification and ordering of otherwise convoluted data. However, it is important to remember that, although the process of logical, statistical organisation, there are risks of missing the subtle nuances of social grouping. To this extent in our research, our perspective rested on working backwards from previously established work. This is seen from Frey's etymology research, which sought to identify segments of group interaction as codable units (Frey, 2005). Through quantitative analysis, a measure of communication had been ascertained via an input-throughput-output measure. However, the theory lacks direct engagement of deeply considering each specific factor involved. This is something that we hoped to develop upon.

As an example, we observe that international students are often involved in friendship groups composed of other international students (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). In fact, the majority of domestic students (excluding the most enthusiastic and with the greatest multi-cultural exposure) tend to subconsciously find it difficult to associate with international students, often finding that internationals appear self-excluding (Peacock & Harrison, 2009). The contrast in social attitudes may lead to high inter-racial interaction and friendship between some groups and simultaneously, ethnic isolation and conflict between others, especially with respect to the subtle disruption of social norms (Antonio, 2004), (ibid). Thus, we should expect mixed results with respect to responses on the extent to which ethnicity ties them to their friendship group.

There are however, other examples of studies which similarly attempt to increase specific engagement with formation factors. Van Cleemput (2012), on "Friendship types and Clique formation", provides a more in depth analysis as to factors attributable to formation. The study also narrows its scope through the high focus group of adolescents (as compared to more general discussion of 'friend groups' seen

prior). Furthermore, an initial mixing of mixed method data collection depicted a better way to view nuanced data sets, providing our method for data collection with some direction. But as similarly seen in Mabry's work, the metrification of factors through the FTFC proxy statistic, resulted in a hierarchical listing of factors. This does not address their interplay or association in an engaging way, limiting the methodological measures taken to ascertain an association in results.

Our research intends to fine-tune this blended approach between the qualitative and quantitative elements, as well as best utilise an evidential approach in determining which characteristics are important (e.g. ethnicity, proximity, hobbies). To mitigate the impact of assumptions -which had limited past literature- a structured action plan for the methodology was employed. Drawing upon major schools of thought have allowed us to compile a list of factors attributable to friendship group formation. This has been further consolidated by the interview process.

While such factors are essential to the policy considerations undertaken by many of these academics, we believe that our study provides an essential back-stop as to the initial starting point. In a sense therefore, adding further context and background to why the investigation of friendship groups should hold any importance at all, with an impact at the policy level. Undoubtedly, research shows that the ability to work "efficiently and effectively" with others in a group is mandatory to not just student, but career and business success (Kenneth J Chapman, 2006 ). Ensuring that our research added scope to an area of significant advancement was essential; therefore providing a starting point of friendship formation is a critical theoretical addition.

# Methodology

## Research Design

Our research design effectively drew on an extrapolation of previously discussed methodology, whilst implementing some improvements. Specifically, the blended approach employed by Van Cleemput in “Friendship Groups and Clique formation” provided a base for our design mechanism. To provide an overview of our theory, the first aspect of our methodology aimed to investigate what underlying factors exist through an interview process. Recurring factors were thematically analysed, in order to provide a logical outcome of observable factors which could then be distributed to a wider pool of participants. There are three core benefits to this structure.

- a) Assumptions of what the factors attributable to formation were mitigated, through focused primary data.
- b) Our found factors could be further backed through previous academic theories as to commonalities in social grouping (such as Marby’s discussion on systems theory)
- c) Allowed for a systematic check on the factors applicable to the pool of surveyed students. The pool of data collected controls variables such as differences between universities in a precise manner. The questioning process is precise and relevant to specifically this study, and avoids broad stroke analysis.

After these core factors could be identified through the interview process, they were injected into surveyable characteristics. Receiving a primary data pool of over 100 respondents, factors induced from qualitative methods could then be statistically analysed through univariate and bivariate plots.

## Interviews

To position our work within the field, we adopted Frey and Marby's methodology of quantifying group interaction through codable units. This guided our use of thematic investigations to analyze interview data.

For our qualitative analysis, we conducted two rounds of interviews.

### **First round:**

The first round of interviews facilitated in formulating the list of factors used in our survey about factors related to friendship group formation.

Using the results from previous academic studies conducted in university settings, we had an initial list of factors, which included “geographic proximity and race” (Marmaros and Sacerdote, 2006), activities and interests (Werner and Parmelee, 1979), and sexuality (Morris, 2017).

We conducted the two interviews to add to this list of factors. We selected interviewees with diverse backgrounds and ensured consistent interviewers. In each interview, one interviewer personally knew the interviewee.

After transcribing the interviews, we used a deductive approach to add new factors to the existing list. We created codes representing the factors mentioned by the interviewees. These factors, along with those from academic research, were included in the survey for respondents to rank in terms of the importance in initially bringing together their own friendship groups at LSE.

### **Second round:**

While waiting for survey responses, we conducted two more interviews to achieve two objectives. Firstly, we aimed to understand the relative importance of each factor in initially bringing friendship groups together. We coded for all 12 factors in the four interviews, counting the frequency of each code. Interviewees shared the instances and aspects that connected them to their friendship group, focussing on the initial interactions.

The second objective was to establish a correlation between the factors and the characteristics of the friendship groups.

## **Surveys**

We conducted a short survey across our general population that primarily targeted their perception of the importance of certain factors in forming their friendship group: their ethnic cultural background, where they live or their accommodation, their sexual orientation, their academic or career aspirations, etc (see table under ‘Relative Analysis’ subheading for full list of factors). Each of these was rated on a Likert scale, ranging from ‘Not important’ to ‘Very important,’ with options denoting moderate importances in between. We also asked a few demographic questions to determine their programme, year of study, and some other information. We received 114 responses, and omitted 25 responses from our data as they indicated that they did not have any friendship group, which is our specific focus.

## **Statistical Analysis**

To complement our qualitative analysis, we designed a two-fold strategy to carry out the quantitative analysis. For the first step, after collecting the data from the survey feedbacks, we aimed to find the

relative importance of each factor by comparing their distribution with the population one. After this, we conducted logistic regression of “get\_along” and separately, “meeting\_freq”, against our various factors.

We chose the outcome variables as ‘get\_along’: which measures the extent to which respondents perceived themselves to get along with their friends, and ‘meeting\_frequency’: which measured how often respondents thought they saw their friends. The latter was measured in previous studies through more indirect methods (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2006); the former outcome variable was chosen due to practical limitations: since we lacked resources so that we have to determine friendship closeness by proxy, we used a respondent rated ‘closeness to friendship group’ to get a discrete spectrum of outcomes, and would be a more direct measure of friendship closeness, assuming reflective responses from respondents.

## **Ethics**

Previous studies highlight the potential ethical concerns with our particular sampling method: convenience sampling. (Brewis, 2014) highlights the importance of making sure that our friends (likely those who will be the first respondents in our convenience sample, given they are the easiest to get in touch with) are truly accepting of the responses they are giving and the purposes for which they are being used. “If we were to share our previous publications with our friends beforehand, they would have a clearer sense of the eventual outputs before agreeing to take part. This may also assist in navigating the difficulties associated with objectifying our friends in print, by asking them from the outset to consider how it might feel to become a two-dimensional representative of a specific social group.

“(…) we need to consider whether our existing relationships with our friend-respondents could mean that they simply trust us to ‘do the right thing’”.

We need to be careful that the relationship between the researcher and the researched is mutually beneficial and not exploitative- these are ultimately life perceptions and experiences that we are researching. However, in most experiments, no concerns are raised by respondents, whether they are friends or not. We need to ensure however, that this is not due to dismissal and laziness (as seemed apparent in previous cases), but due to careful consideration (Gordon, 2001).



# Discussion

## Qualitative Analysis

### Relative Importance

For the second round of interviews, we counted the number of times that a set factor was brought up by each of the four interviewees when they were describing their first five to seven instances in which they spent time with their friendship group, and we formatted this into the below table.

	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Total
Your ethnic / cultural background	0	1	0	3	4
The country / countries you've lived in	0	4	1	1	6
The languages you speak	1	1	1	1	4
Your faith or religion	1	0	0	0	1
Where you live / your accommodation	3	4	2	0	9
Your sexual orientation	1	0	2	0	3
Your gender identity	1	0	1	0	2
Your political opinions	2	0	3	0	5
The programme you're in / modules you take	3	2	0	4	9
Societies / clubs that you're in	0	1	4	2	7
Your hobbies / interests (e.g. travelling, clubbing, sports)	2	4	3	1	10
Your academic / career aspirations	0	1	0	0	1

As shown, the factor that was mentioned the most were the interviewees' "hobbies / interests", followed by their "programme [...] / modules", and where they "live / [their] accommodation". Hence, this result allowed us to formulate a hypothesis that a student's "hobbies / interests" is the most important factor drawing their friendship group together, closely followed by their programme / modules taken, and where they live / their accommodation.

Therefore, the aim of this qualitative analysis was to complement the findings of the quantitative data, both of which aim to find the relative importance of each factor in determining the formation of friendship groups.

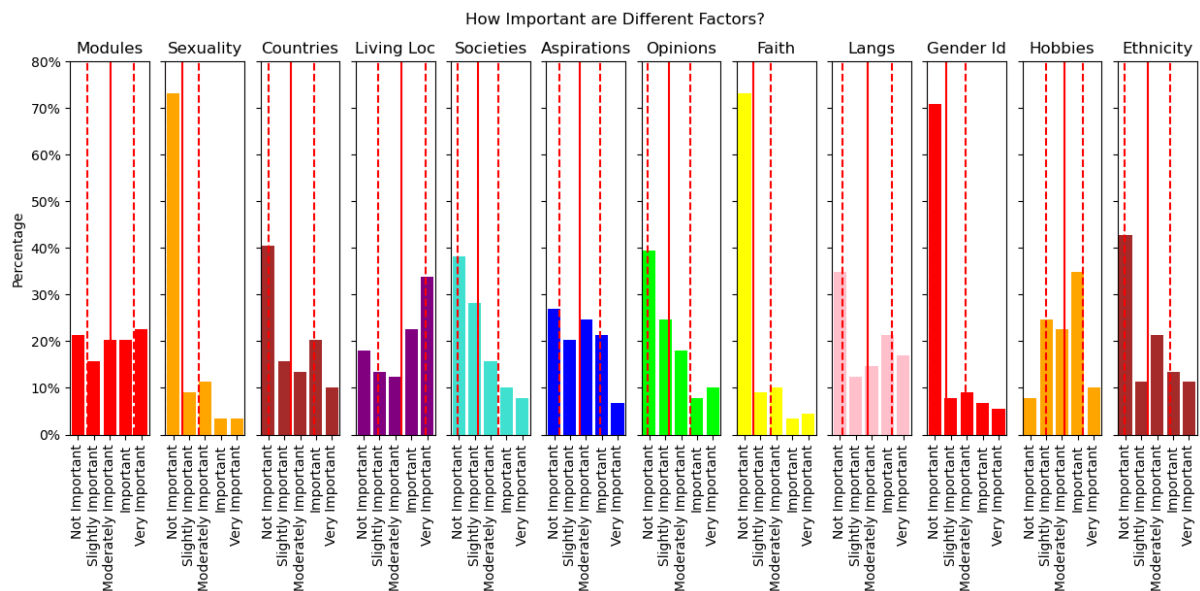
## Correlation: Factors Forming a Friendship Group and the Characteristics of this Group

We asked the four interviewees about the activities that they engage in with their main friendship group. The below table shows that the activities that the interviewees engage in are aligned with the factors that initially brought this interviewee's friendship group together.

	Activities that this interviewee's friendship group engages in	The factor(s) that these are most aligned with	Are these factor(s) included within the initial factors that brought this interviewee's friendship group together?
Interviewee 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activities in-line with religion that the majority of the group follows, ie. limited clubbing and drinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Your faith or religion</li> </ul>	Yes
Interviewee 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exploring tourist attractions and new cuisines in London</li> <li>- Playing instruments</li> <li>- Watching films</li> <li>- Going clubbing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Your hobbies / interests (e.g. travelling, clubbing, sports)</li> <li>- The country / countries you've lived in</li> </ul>	Yes
Interviewee 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Going clubbing</li> <li>- Going to societies together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Your hobbies / interests (e.g. travelling, clubbing, sports)</li> <li>- Societies / clubs that you're in</li> </ul>	Yes
Interviewee 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Going to societies together</li> <li>- Studying and revising modules together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Societies / clubs that you're in</li> <li>- The programme that you're in / modules you take</li> </ul>	Yes

Therefore, we have presented a key correlation between the factors initially bringing together the students' friendship groups and the 'nature' of this friendship group, represented by the activities that they engage in.

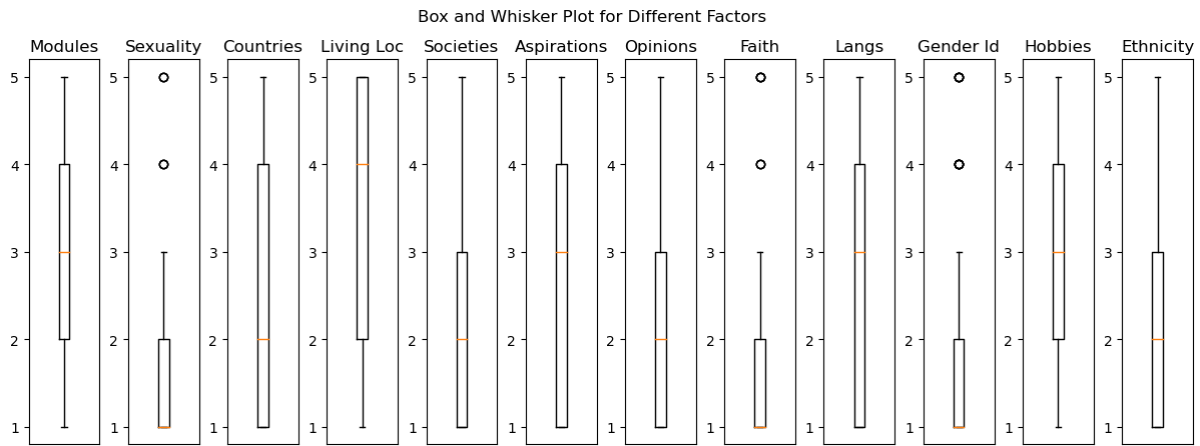
## Quantitative Analysis



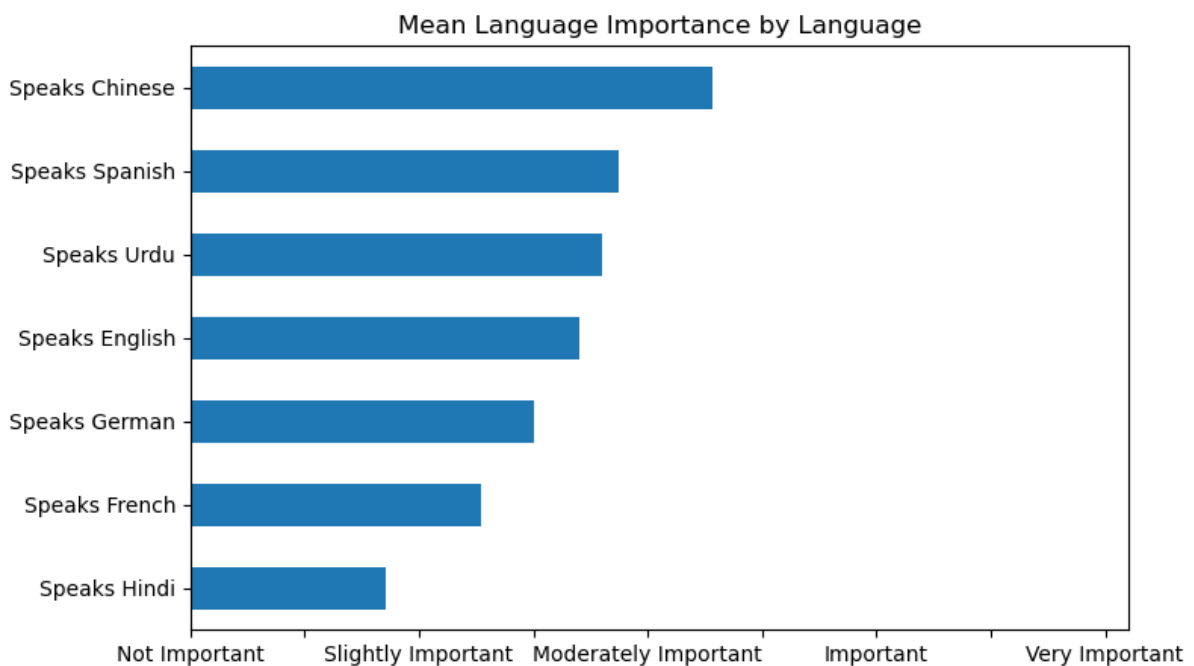
Above, we can observe the distribution of responses for different factors. For reference, ‘Living\_loc’ refers to living location/accommodation, ‘langs’ refers to ‘languages’ and ‘Gender\_id’ refers to gender/gender identity. We can immediately observe that there are some factors that respondents very consistently rated to be completely unimportant: sexuality, faith, and gender. We also found that there were some that moderately consistently saw these kinds of responses, such as countries where one is from, societies, opinions, languages and ethnicity. Aspirations, hobbies, and modules generally saw mixed responses. Only living location and hobbies saw an evidently greater response rate for greater importance relative to lower importance. This is partly supported by our second multiple ordinal logistic regression.

The solid red lines represent the mean, whereas the dotted red lines show 1 standard error either side of the mean. Only living location and hobbies have a mean to the right of moderately important, suggesting on average, respondents thought they were more than moderately important.

Finally, the majority of responses suggested at least some importance (the 4 top categories out of 5) for each factor. Excluding sexuality, faith and gender, we see that more than 50% of people thought each factor had some importance (i.e. less than 50% said they had no importance). We can thus say that the other 9 factors are factors that are perceived to contribute to friendship group formation in some practical sense.

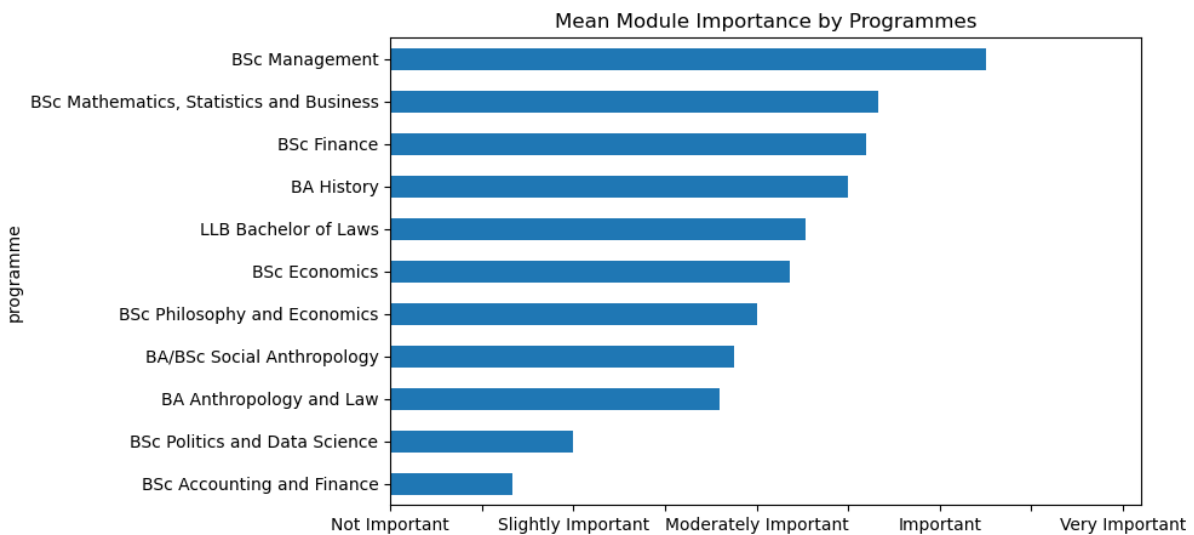
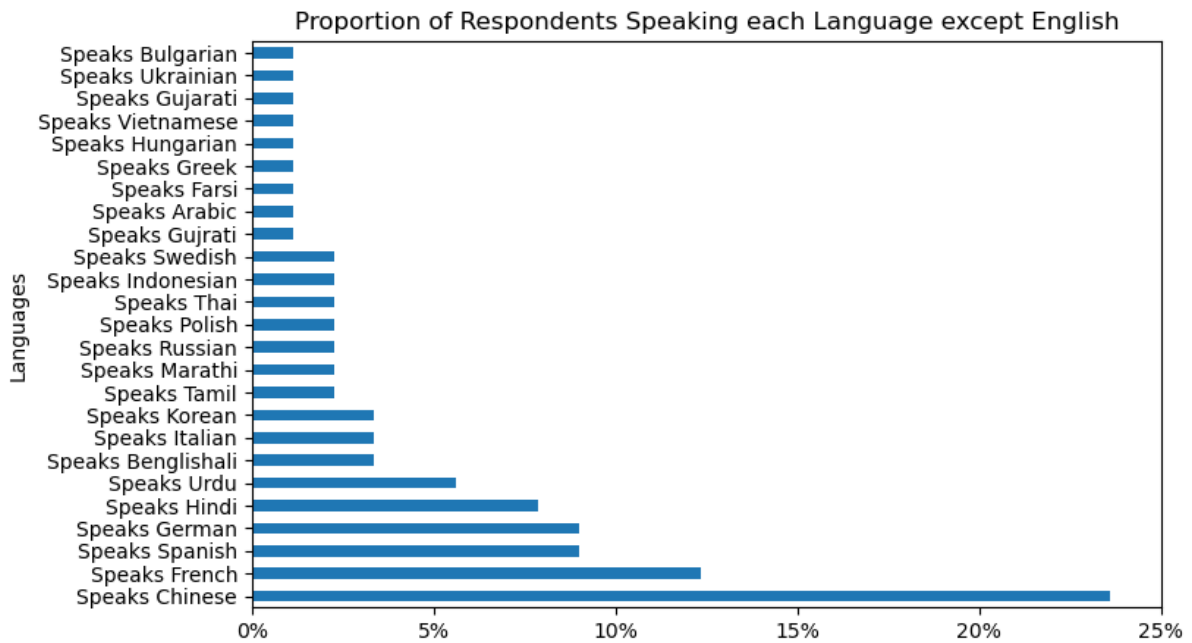


Above, we can see the box and whisker plots for the varying factors. These contain the remaining population parameters, the quartiles, the median, the minimum and the maximum values. We see that some observations are outliers, but we decided not to get rid of these since these are categorical variables (with pre-set limits on how high or low one can choose) and are ultimately perceptions/opinions, so we can't exactly say that these are absurd or invalid. This is especially the case due to our small sample size. We can also see that living location has a median above the midpoint, and above all the other medians, so we can conclude that in our sample, living location was in general seen as the most important factor. Again, most of the medians are above '1', corresponding to 'not important', so for all but the 3 'unimportant factors', more than 50% of respondents gave some importance, as observed above.

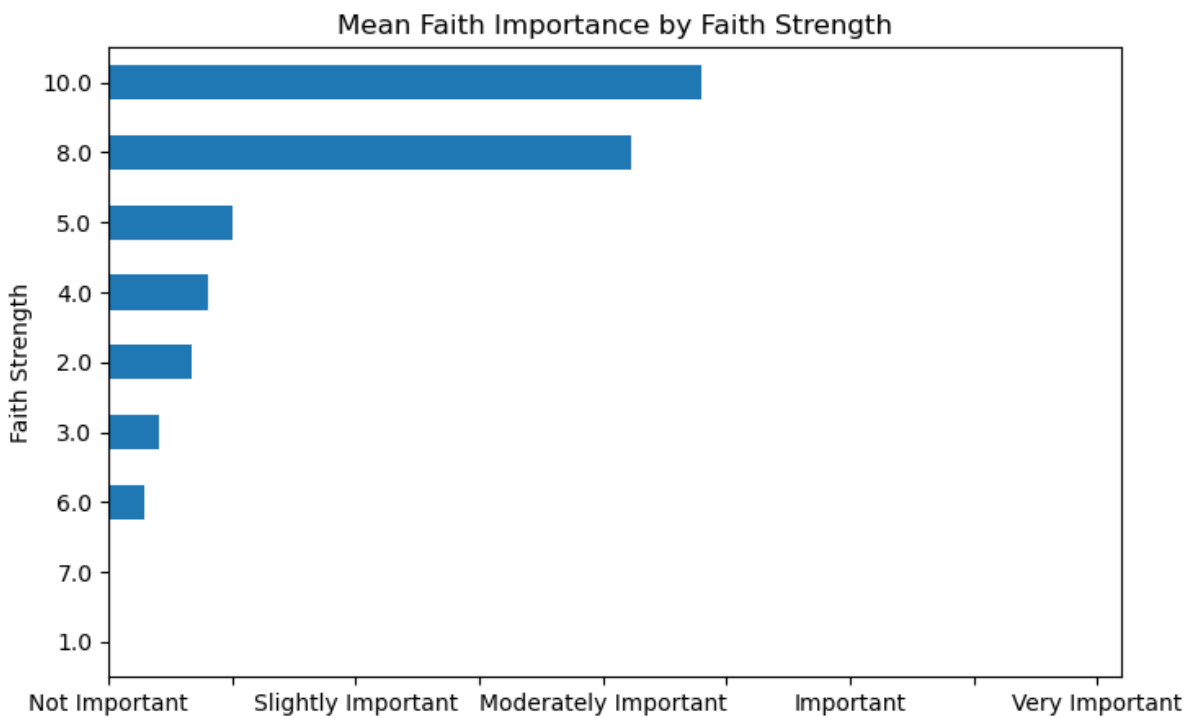
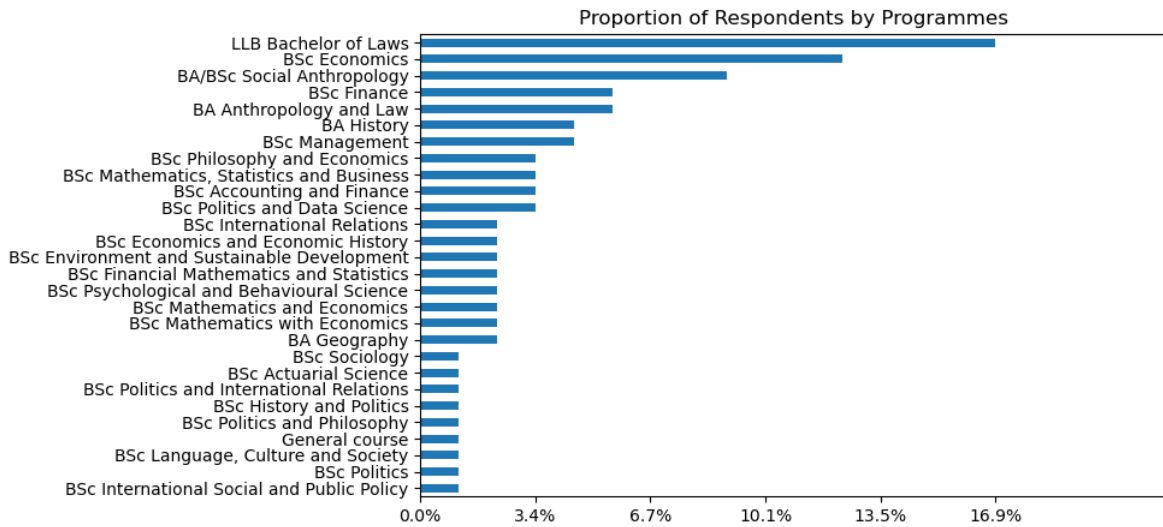


Although language importance on average may be quite mixed, aggregating by language helps to make more useful comparisons. Again, We removed languages whereby less than 3 respondents spoke it from

the language importance table, to avoid sampling fluctuation in affecting our analysis. It seems that as found by a previous study (Peacock & Harrison, 2009), chinese students often find difficulties in making friends from other parts of the world, perhaps brought together by language.



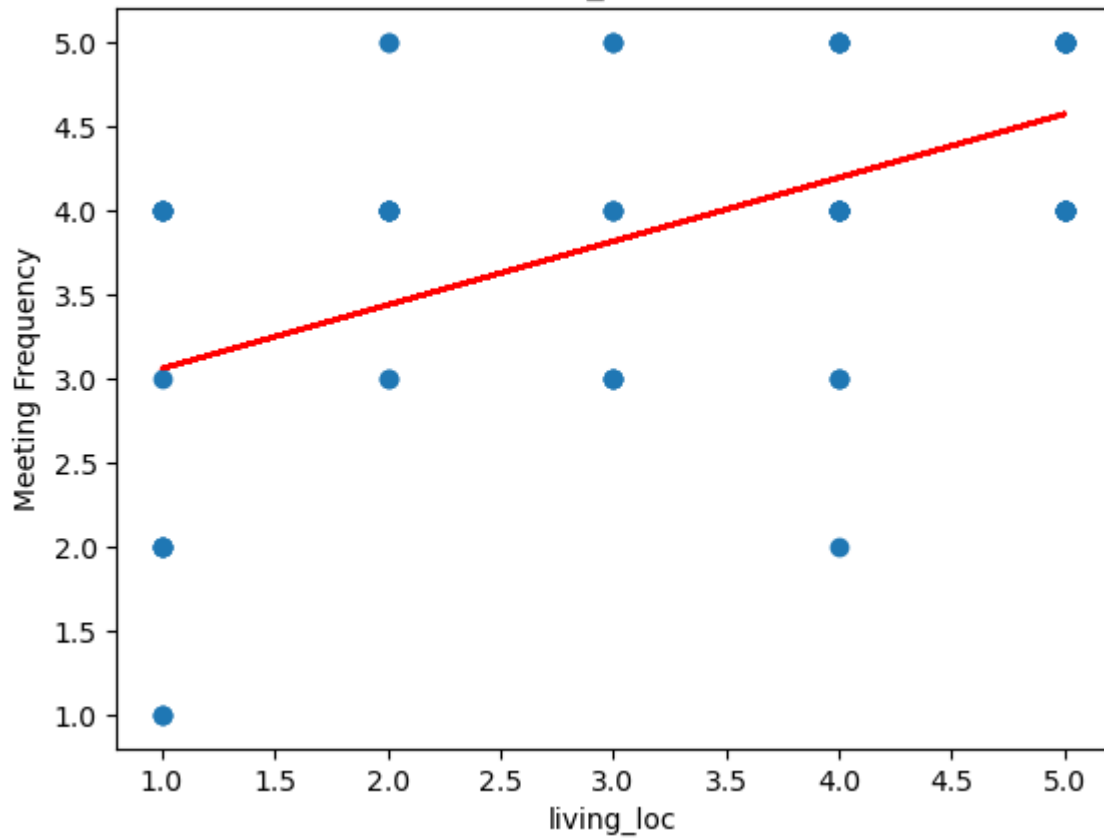
We also observe that some programmes feel that the modules they do bring them together more than others. This could be due to contributing factors, such as engaging in modules that are not shared by other programmes or the time demands of a particular course. However, this is likely due to sampling fluctuation. We got rid of courses that had less than 3 observations



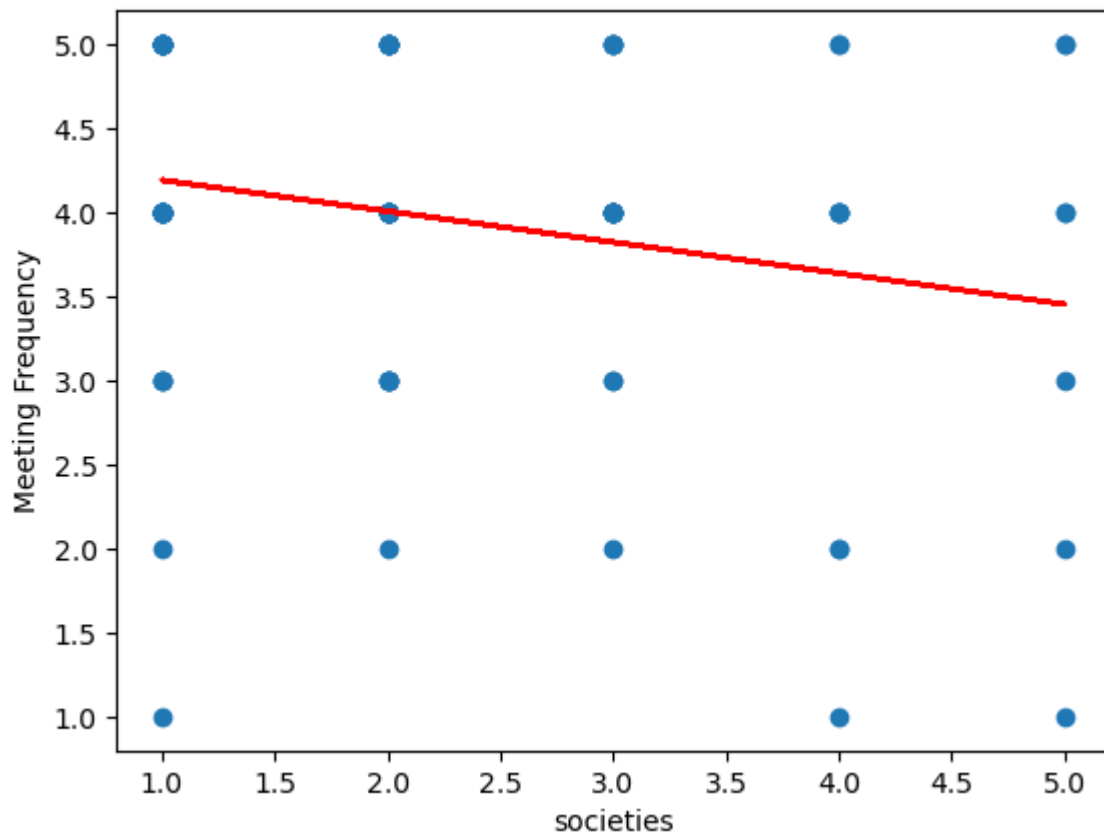
We also see a strong association above. As faith strength increases, faith importance increases in the formation of a friendship group. This again has the same filter for small observations.

The below scatter plots were used to confirm that the pattern of the points and an OLS line of best fit generally confirmed our ordinal logistic regression results. The strongest association is with meeting frequency and living location: it appears that those who are brought together by accommodation see their friends more often.

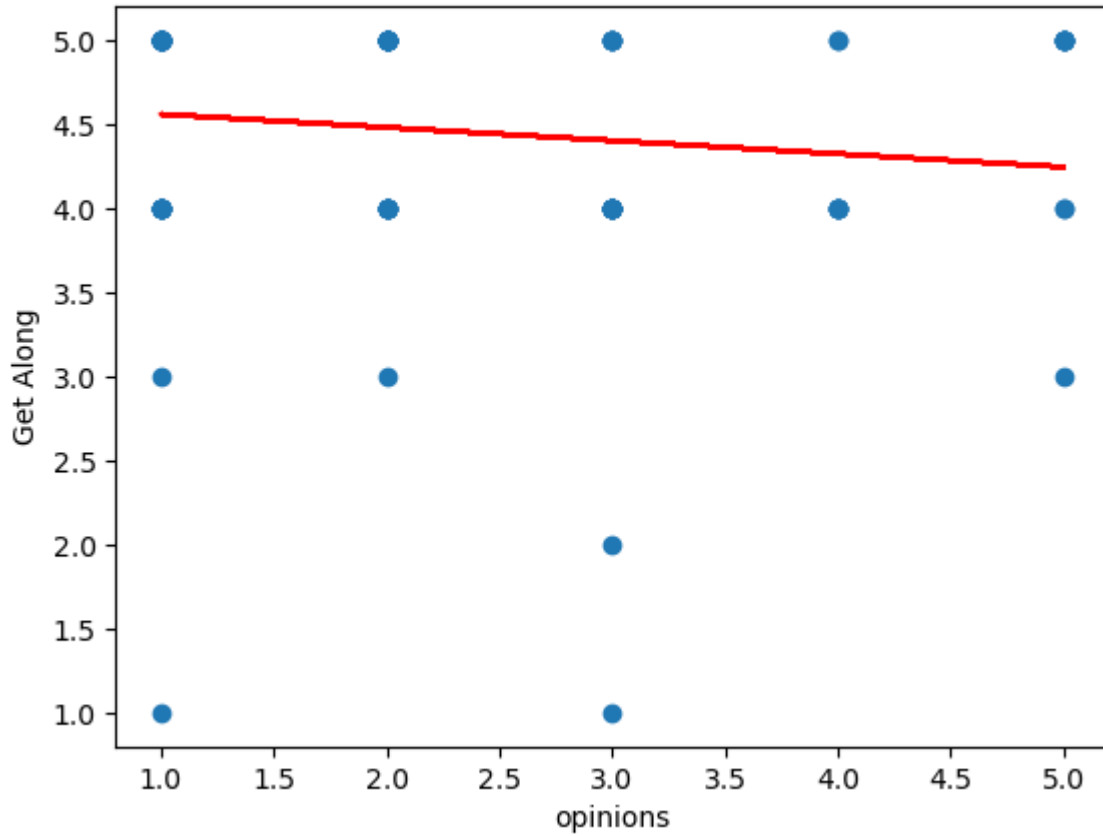
Scatter Plot for Living\_Loc with Line of Best Fit



Scatter Plot for Societies with Line of Best Fit



Scatter Plot for Opinions with Line of Best Fit



Ordered logistic regression

Number of obs = 114

LR chi2(12) = 18.03

Prob > chi2 = 0.1146

Log likelihood = -121.65694

Pseudo R2 = 0.0690

get_along	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
modules	.1700893	.1574565	1.08	0.280	-.1385198	.4786984
sexuality	.3804572	.2266935	1.68	0.093	-.0638539	.8247683
countries	-.336412	.175107	-1.92	0.055	-.6796153	.0067914
living_loc	.1141882	.1361392	0.84	0.402	-.1526396	.3810161
societies	.0460518	.1753127	0.26	0.793	-.2975548	.3896584
aspirations	.0425358	.1743564	0.24	0.807	-.2991964	.3842679
opinions	-.5548792	.1794199	-3.09	0.002	-.9065357	-.2032227
faith	.2857343	.2263719	1.26	0.207	-.1579465	.729415
langs	-.0126189	.1533689	-0.08	0.934	-.3132164	.2879787
gender_id	-.2397916	.1733076	-1.38	0.166	-.5794682	.099885
hobbies	.0256598	.1930922	0.13	0.894	-.3527939	.4041135
ethnicity	.023054	.1888015	0.12	0.903	-.3469902	.3930981
/cut1	-3.917272	.9187405			-5.71797	-2.116574
/cut2	-3.313896	.8636877			-5.006692	-1.621099
/cut3	-2.2605	.8156853			-3.859214	-.6617859
/cut4	-.2076401	.7776879			-1.73188	1.3166



We can see that only the coefficient for political opinions is statistically significant at the critical level of 0.05%, with the 95% confidence interval containing 0 and the z score being greater than 3. In fact, this result is significant at the 0.01% significance, having a p value of 0.002%. This is a negative coefficient, meaning a negative log odds ratio. Exponentiating this, we obtain an odds ratio of 0.57. Moving up an X axis category, on average, increases the cumulative probability by a factor of 0.57, i.e. one obtains a lower cumulative probability. This suggests a movement down to lower numbers on the Y. We can thus say that those who think opinions are less important report themselves also to be closer to their friends. Perhaps it is the case that learning to accept different beliefs is useful for friendship formation.

Ordered logistic regression		Number of obs = 113				
Log likelihood = -130.56817		LR chi2(12) = 54.82				
		Prob > chi2 = 0.0000				
		Pseudo R2 = 0.1735				
meeting_freq	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
modules	.0332367	.1502412	0.22	0.825	-.2612307	.3277041
sexuality	.4254812	.2281492	1.86	0.062	-.021683	.8726455
countries	-.1035723	.1737697	-0.60	0.551	-.4441547	.2370101
living_loc	.9254845	.1584904	5.84	0.000	.614849	1.23612
societies	-.4415208	.1798343	-2.46	0.014	-.7939895	-.0890521
aspirations	.2386742	.181744	1.31	0.189	-.1175375	.594886
opinions	-.3634182	.1800545	-2.02	0.044	-.7163186	-.0105179
faith	.2598264	.223324	1.16	0.245	-.1778806	.6975334
langs	-.1157491	.1526966	-0.76	0.448	-.4150289	.1835307
gender_id	-.3241581	.1717978	-1.89	0.059	-.6608757	.0125594
hobbies	-.0688893	.1865198	-0.37	0.712	-.4344614	.2966829
ethnicity	.0265218	.1894071	0.14	0.889	-.3447093	.3977528
/cut1	-4.277424	1.253349			-6.733942	-1.820906
/cut2	-2.408936	.8522823			-4.079378	-.7384928
/cut3	-.6989976	.7562638			-2.181247	.7832522
/cut4	.6368984	.7505723			-.8341963	2.107993
/cut5	3.225049	.8126532			1.632278	4.81782

Here we see that living location and societies are also associated (positively and negatively respectively) at a statistically significant level, but with meeting frequency. We can conclude, therefore, that those friend groups who think they are brought together by accommodation or living location spend more time with their friends, yet complexly, those brought together by societies see their friends less often, perhaps due to the lack of frequency of society meetings (weekly as opposed to daily or multiple times a week).

## Conclusion

We have observed that 9 out of the 12 of our factors are perceived by the majority of respondents to be tied to the formation of a friendship group. Sexuality, faith and gender identity were consistently ranked as ‘not important’, suggesting that friendship group formation may actually be healthier than we imagined. We also see low importance ratings for ethnicity, countries, societies, opinions and languages, although not to the same extremes. However, aspirations, modules and hobbies (in generally ascending order of average importance rating) were seen as more important, and generally had mixed views. Most notably however, living location/accommodation was consistently rated as an important factor, and was seen to be positively associated with the frequency with which people see their friends. We also observed that being brought together by shared political opinions was negatively associated with getting along with friends- perhaps the acceptance of different opinions (whether political or not) from the get-go may help keep good quality friendships.

To summarise, universities seeking to form friendship groups and make students socialise more could focus on bringing more students into shared accommodations, especially those with similar courses and hobbies.

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