

# **The Effect of Proximity on Emotional Connections in Platonic Relationships between Young People during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Keywords:** COVID-19, platonic relationships, proximity.

**Abstract:** In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, previous literature has highlighted the lack of social networking opportunities due to the government's home quarantine measures. Based on this, social activity decreased, ultimately making us question whether this had an impact on proximity levels within friendships. This study surveyed 64 participants, asking how often and how close they were to their friends in 2020. The survey measured the distance and emotional connections between close friends, hypothesizing that proximity makes friends feel closer. Results showed that distance is an important factor affecting intimate relationships. The significance of this study is to provide people with information on how to better maintain good friendships and to test whether distance affects the connection between close relationships.

## **1. Introduction**

Previous literature has demonstrated that relationships are more likely to be formed when in closer physical proximity to others (Hewstone et al., 2012). Referred to a study by Back et al. (2008), the difference in friendship strength between those sitting next to each other and those sitting nearby was significant. Participants in this experiment were freshmen that were randomly assigned to seats and asked to introduce themselves. The investigators collected the participants' friendship scores one year later. Results showed that there was a large and significant difference in friendship strength between those who sat in the neighbor's seat and those who did not. Whilst those in neighboring seats were much more likely to have high levels of friendship intensity, those in the same row/with no physical relation were much lower, suggesting that proximity affects the likelihood of relationship formation.

Similarly, Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) have presented the filter theory as an attempt to understand how relationships form and develop. By analyzing both short-term and long-term couples, they were able to highlight the importance of proximity in romantic relationships. Research has found that relationships are one of the main predictors of personal happiness, with those with greater social ties reporting higher levels of happiness and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2013; Uchino et al., 1996).

## **2. Research design**

### **2.1 Data collection and sample analysis**

Sixty-four volunteers were surveyed through an online questionnaire. Each participant filled out a relevant questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 30, the average age is 22, including 37 current students, two graduates, 24 workers, and one international student. There were four men and 60 women included. The average age of the participants was 26 years, and the standard deviation was 29.91.

### **2.2 Questionnaire design**

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire one year after the outbreak (July 2021); The questionnaire asked about the frequency and distance of emotional interactions with friends during

the COVID-19 isolation period. Participants were able to fill out the questionnaire using their mobile phone or computer, and there is was no time limit.

Participants were asked to report their gender, how close they lived to their friends' homes, how much time they communicated with their friends (less than 10 hours a week /11-50 hours /51-80 hours /81-100 hours), and how strong their emotional connection to their friends was (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the strongest and 10 being the weakest). Participants were also asked if they communicated with their friends at a similar rate during the stay-at-home period as they did during normal periods.

### 2.3 Data result analysis

As seen in Table 1, 36 out of 64 participants said that they lived close to their first best friend, meaning Figure 1.

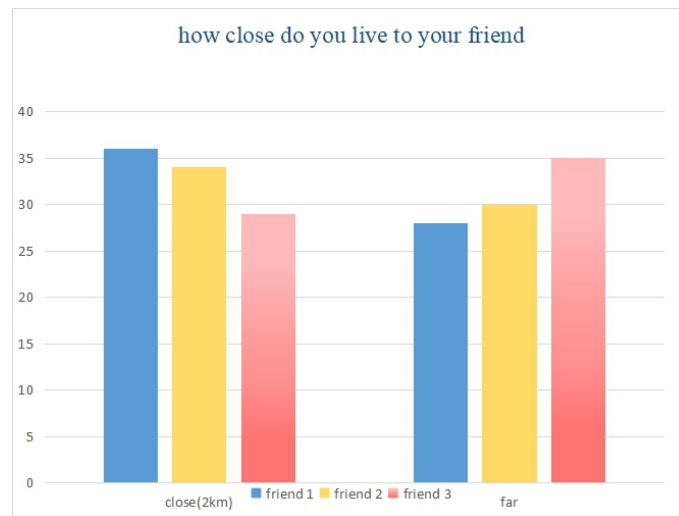


Figure 1. How close do you like your friend

They were within 2km of each other. In the survey, 34 the participants favorited the first closest friend, while 30 chose the second closest friend. However, when asked to consider a third friend, the results differed, as seen in Figure 2.

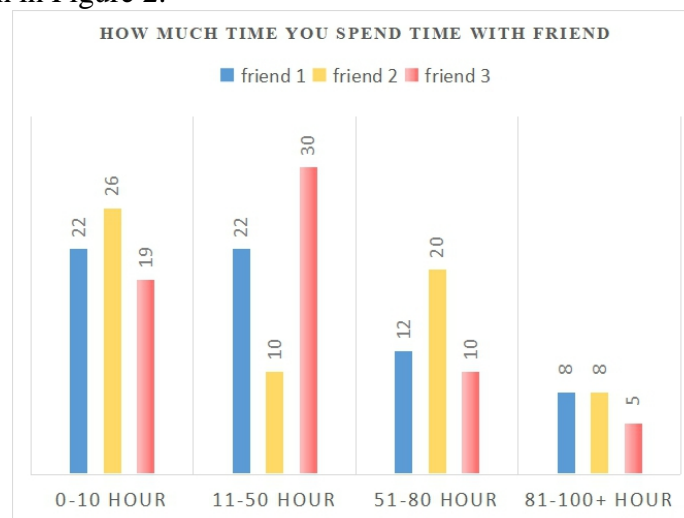


Figure 2. How much time you spend time with friends

From the chart, 22 of the 64 volunteers spent less than 10 hours with their first close friend. Twenty-two people spent 11-50 hours with their best friends. Twelve people spent 51 to 80 hours with their best friends; In addition, eight people spent more than 80 hours with their best friends. The second closest friend data shows that the number of people who spend 0-10 hours with their best friend has decreased from 22 to 20; The number of people with 11-50 hours increased from 22 to 26;

The number of 51-80 hours decreased from 12 to 10; The number of people who spent the most time with their friends for more than eight hours remained the same. For a third close friend, the number of people who chose 0-10 fell again to 19; The number of people choosing 11-50 gradually increased to 30; The number of people choosing 51-80 remains the same, or 10; The number of people who chose 81 hours or more fell to five.

When asked to rate the emotional connection with their friends, the majority of participants recalled having higher emotional connections to their friends in general. In a first-friend emotional connection survey, 44 people chose a strong relationship, compared with 20 who chose a weak one. In the second friend survey, 43 people chose strong feelings and 21 people chose weak ones. In the third friend survey, the number of people who chose strong feelings was less than the first- and second-best friends, only 40 people, while the number of people who chose weak feelings was more than the first- and second-best friends, 24 people.

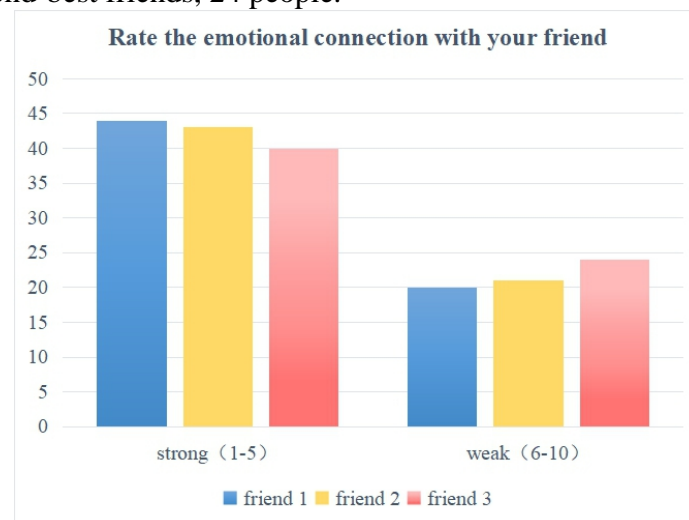


Figure 3. Rate the emotional connection with your friend

### 3. Result

In conclusion, the number of people living close to and far away from their close friends is similar. The proportion of people living near to their close friends is higher than that of people living far away whilst time spent with close friends within a week varied between, most people choose between 11 and 50 hours. For the intensity of feelings in close friends, there were twice as many participants overall who chose to have strong feelings as the other partner. Therefore, although more people choose strong emotions than weak emotions, there is no clear feature in the choice of distance and time spent together. Overall, results show that proximity has no significant impact on young people's platonic relationships during COVID-19, and the hypothesis of this survey is not supported.

### 4. Discussion

Although this study investigated the influence of distance and contact frequency on friendship, referring to the Back et al. (2008) experiment on the difference in friendship strength between people sitting in neighboring seats and those sitting in other seats. Yet, the limitations in this study must not be ignored. First, I didn't categorize the test questions carefully, and it wasn't clear that participants who chose option A in the first friend also chose option A in the second friend. Moreover, different people interpreted the concept of a close friend differently, and there was no guarantee that each person's choice would have the same meaning as the other participants. In the end, the limitations of the participants prevented me from observing significant changes in the survey results. In addition, the epidemic environment may affect everyone differently.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the survey, which collected information from 64 Internet users, did not match the hypothesis. This is partly due to the limitations of some of the surveys and the fact that most people still have strong feelings about their close friends during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concluded that proximity did not have a significant effect on Platonic feelings among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## References

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