Discovering Homophily Amongst Students Who Study Abroad

Amos Syh Ern Chew

COMM 493

Messiah College

**Introduction**

Homophily has been a topic that has recently sparked a lot of interest in various fields of studies, including communication. As the world becomes smaller and more advanced, people are taking opportunities to travel, expand businesses and experience new things that would seem impossible to do 50 years ago. Because of this, people are placed out of their comfort zone and into a new environment and among new culture and people, where adaptation is essential. Some are naturals when fitting in, others find it rather difficult and to others, impossible. There are a lot of factors that affect the adaptation process, such as personality, openness, and having similar interests. Students in particular have been the subject of this study, due to their position of having to constantly move around and adapt into new environments. Studies and theories involving students and how they interact with social media and each other have led to theories and ideas connecting homophily and the ability to adapt in a new environment.

**Literature Review**

*Defining Homophily*

Homophily was first labeled by scientists in the 1950s, where the term explains the love of the same (Retica 2006). Homophily explains the proverb, ‘birds of a feather flock together’ by explaining how humans have a tendency to link up with one another in ways that confirm, rather than to test our core beliefs. For example, people who love trying new delicacies will tend to stick together as they have a similar goal, to try new food. This term has been used multiple times to label America’s current state of population as America has become diverse throughout the years since independence (Retica 2006).

Sociologists Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James Cook conducted a research on the principle of homophily and concluded that networks are homogeneous with regard to sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics (2001). Homophily proves that people tend to like and befriend someone who is more similar to themselves, debunking the myth of opposites attract.

*Homophily in Media*

Ample research by scholars has been done on finding the connection between groups and social media. College is a major life transition for many students, and stress levels are expected to be high during this phase of life. A study was conducted by Wright investigating the using social media, Facebook.com in handling stress and seeking emotional support. Wright wanted to find out the relationship between source perceptions and emotional support (Wright 2016). Emotional support is an important relational resource, as it can predict psychological and physical well-being. It also serves as a buffer against stressful situations and this support is often found in a variety of online support groups, Facebook included. Wright found that students may find a hard time communicating in a face-to-face situation, but with the help of networking sites, such as Facebook, students and peers are able to find and gain access to a network that include their interests and provide them with an opportunity to be part of a community (2016). Wright also found out that homophily played a huge role in predicting the degree where people feel emotionally supported. Attitude and background homophily appear to influence perceptions of emotional support among college students using Facebook. Facebook is tailored to people who have similar interests and the application groups them together, forming a community. This provides college students with convenient access to a wider support group network during a time of crisis.

MIT conducted an investigation on applying homophily in the realm of online dating. Researches Fiore and Donath conducted a study on an online dating website by examining 8 months’ worth of data and found out that users opted for sameness more often than leaving it to chance (n.a). Homophily is applicable even to establishing a romantic relationship and it affects how someone chooses their partner, further proving and strengthening what McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook were hypothesizing.

*Homophily in Studious Environment*

As discussed early, homophily is very well present in schools and colleges. Not only does it affect the social aspect among students, homophily also affects the relationship between teachers, professors and students. Gomez and Pearson conducted a study finding the relationship between homophily and native or non-native English speaking teaching assistants. They found out that because American teaching assistants perceived higher in background homophily as compared to international teaching assistants, the tendency for effective communication between students and American teaching assistants are higher and proven to be more effective (Gomez and Pearson 1990). Students believe that homophily between American teaching assistants are similar as they perceive them to share similar values and ideas thus nourishing the relationship between student and teacher. Granted that this study only focused on students in America, this theory is universal and can be applied to situations where students feel connected and share similar interests to the teaching assistant/teacher.

Danching and Shu wanted to find out just that. They wanted to apply homophily on Chinese college students studying in Hong Kong. They closely examined the formation process of friendship networks of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong (Danching and Shu 2015). They unveiled that the homophilic tendency is clearly a factor in accounting for in-group friendship pattern. Cultural differences discourage forming friendship between students from the mainland and the locals. The language barrier and information gaps that exists between the two groups of students disallow interaction opportunities and it is less enjoyable when it happens (Danching and Shu 2015). Students from the Guandong province that shared homophily characteristics in terms of language and culture found it easier to befriend the locals in Hong Kong.

*Gap and Goal*

Extensive studies have demonstrated how homophily affects society in a studious environment and how it affects interaction among people in the realm of media. Researches focused on how social support can be found in media and how people will similar interests will receive it from each other. They also found that having similar backgrounds and interests with a person will allow for easier and greater interaction. While these studies have provided great insight into how human interaction works, this study will attempt to focus on students at Messiah College who study abroad and how a similar community affects their adaptation process. With this study, I attempt to explain why these students tend to be attracted to certain groups and why some are able to adapt better and quicker. I will also be able to provide an insight to our organizations involved in study abroad programs on campus and how students who study abroad adjust in this college’s environment and use this information to further improve the programs.

In this time where studying abroad and in a new environment becomes more and more common, this study helps organizations understand the concept of homophily and are able to tailor their organizations better with the results of this study. This study will qualitatively analyze the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between homophily and a student who studies abroad adapt in his/her new environment?

RQ2: Does homophily actually allow students who study abroad to gain a helping hand in a new environment or does it keep them in their comfort zone and disallow them to try new things?

**Methods**

In order to conduct this experiment, I scheduled personal, semi-structured in-depth interviews with about 8 international students from Messiah College. In-depth interviews provided me as the researcher to extend the opportunity to establish a positive connection with the subject and allow them to tell their story of how they adapted while studying at Messiah College. As the researcher, I have been able to gain a deeper connection and understanding with my subjects and gain insight on their life and their perspectives (Davis, Powell & Lachlan, 2013). These individuals were selected using quota sampling in order to obtain a variety of perspectives in terms of race, gender, and class while maintaining the fact that these students are at least from a different country. Among all of the subjects, the broad commonality is that all of them came into Messiah College as an international student and have at least spent 1 year at Messiah.

To begin, I will be asking the subjects a few demographic questions, followed by questions that describe their involvement on campus, being part of the international community and how they have situated themselves since the time they came to Messiah. These broader questions will hopefully encourage subjects to answer the questions that would reveal characteristics and application of homophily and how this has impacted them while being at Messiah.

A full outline of planned questions can be found in the Appendix.

**Results**

Throughout the interview process, various experiences were discovered and opinions were shared as the interviewees thought about their friendships at Messiah in a perspective that they have not thought about. Common themes were shared as well as polar-opposite perspectives amongst all 8 interviewees. Conducting the interview revealed a lot of insight in how friendships are formed among international students here at Messiah. While most of my hypothesis were agreed on, there were a few themes that surprised me. The main themes and accompanying examples can be observed in the following table below. A summary of the answers amongst the interviewees can also be found in the table below.

The table will be split into two parts to facilitate the two research questions listed above. The first table will answer whether homophily affects making friends at Messiah and the second table will answer whether those friendships have led to new experiences.

**Table 1**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Knowledge about Messiah | Most of the interviewees found out about Messiah College through a friend/family/organization. |
| Number of Groups joined while at Messiah | With the exception of one, all the interviewees were involved in more than one group/organization on campus |
| Friendship based on involved group/organization | Split in the middle, the interviewees had various opinions on this subject.   * Yes. Coming in as an international student places them and other internationals in the same boat. Being placed in groups also forced them to interact and eventually make a friend out of it. * No. Interviewees in this group did not find other interests other than being in the same group. Found friendships in different circumstances. |
| Ways used to make friends | All interviewees agreed that classes and being on a floor also helped in forming friendship. Jobs and events also created conversations between the interviewees and people attending the event. |
| Qualities/ Characteristics to look for while seeking friendship | Being genuine, loyal and fun were characteristics that the interviewees set when they had intentions to making a friend with someone. |
| Qualities/Characteristics reflect your own when seeking friendship | Everyone agreed that they held the same standards that the other friend would be able to see in them. |
| Times of interactions/encounters before considering the person as a friend | The answers varied on a scale. Some defined a friend as simple as comfortably greeting them while some interviewees defined a friend as someone whom they can confide and are there when hard times come. |

**Table 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Friendships that you made that led to other friendships | With the exception of one, everyone agreed that the friendships they made led to other friendships. |
| Having shared interests help in adapting in this environment | Everyone agreed that having a shared interest has helped them adapt in this new college environment. |
| Friendships that lead to new experiences | Everyone also agreed that new experiences were formed that co-related to the friendships that they made |
| Topics discussed while hanging out in groups | A wide range of topics came up when the interviewees were asked this question. Anything from food to spiritual questions. |
| Friendships made help shape your personality | Everyone’s personality was shaped and affected after making and choosing their friendships while at their time at Messiah. |

**Discussion**

As demonstrated in the table above, the interviewees’ answers uncovered several ideas about homophily and how it has affected their time and experiences here at Messiah College.

*Knowledge about Messiah.* Initially designed as an introductory question, I quickly came to realize how influential a friend can be. With the exception of one interviewee that resorted to Google to search for colleges, all the interviewees were influenced into choosing Messiah by a friend, family or an organization.

Family played a huge part in the decision. Some interviewees had older siblings that were either alums or where studying in another college nearby and introduced Messiah College to them. Others had friends that are studying at Messiah and their stories and experiences that they share with my interviewees influenced them to choose this college. Messiah also have partnerships with colleges internationally, and that is how one interviewee came into knowledge about them. Messiah started a program with this college and even sent ambassadors and counselors to send a good rep and name about Messiah, ultimately to draw international students. This step drew one interviewee and led this person to begin application to attend Messiah College shortly thereafter.

*Number of Groups joined at Messiah.* Most of the interviewees were actively involved in multiple groups across campus. Interviewees also mentioned how there were involved in other groups, but decided later in the year that it did not tailor to their needs and left the group/become a passive member. Half of them also held leadership positions in the groups that they joined, thanks to the impact that they have received when they joined the group initially, and wanted to give back.

*Friendship based on involved group/organization.* I had initially hypothesized that friendships would be formed based on the groups/organizations that they were in. However, as I went through the interview process, I came to realize that my interviewees had very different opinions, direction and goals that they would like to achieve from the groups that they were in. My data was split in half and I will explain and elaborate into two parts: those who said yes and those who said no.

Those who said yes, explained that being in groups allowed them to make friends, more specifically the international group (ISA MuKappa). As international students, they have the privilege to come to Messiah a week before any freshmen could. It is during that time that the international community welcomes the new people and to some of my interviewees, that is when they made their friendships and have called them their closest friends on campus. The international community, ‘is a community where everyone is placed in the same boat, and thus rely on each other to go through to storms of college’, an interviewee says. The interviewees believe that this special community, placed under the same circumstance, have the tendency to rely and stick with each other. Other than that, the interviewees love for sports also drew them to club teams on campus, allowing them to meet other students and potentially make friends with them, which they did.

Those who said no, explained that groups/organizations were an addition to their circle of friends. Coinciding with discovering *ways to make friends,* my interviewees made friends from a different approach. Other than jobs or being placed in interactive events, the interviewees also made friends through classes, being on their floor and finding friends in other groups that shared much more of a similar interest with them instead of from the group that they are a part of. One interviewee commented on ‘how most of my friendship was formed before I joined those groups, and I found interests with other people outside the groups.’ These group of interviewees realized that the groups that they were in did not have similar interests with them, other than the common reason that they are in the group. They found other people through random interactions or events that brought people they would never ever meet under a group circumstance, but they found similar interests with a group of strangers, that would later be called friend.

One interview took an interesting turn when this person revealed that studying abroad with a group of other Messiah students changed the way she made friends. Whilst abroad, slogans such as ‘Falcon Fly Together’ and living on the same floor in a different country allowed this person to interact with a set of new people that she would have never met if not for this program. After multiple interactions, this person realized that there were similar interests amongst them and friendships were formed throughout this study abroad experience.

*Qualities/Characteristics to look for while seeking friendship/ reflect your own when seeking friendship*. As mentioned in the table, being genuine and loyalty were the top answers among all the interviewees. Entertaining, fun and someone who I can do a lot of things with were also some of the answers that were popular among the eight of them. This can be summarized as people who they would call as friends as those who had similar interests to them, as they hope that people see them with those qualities as well.

Another characteristic that was interesting was that a person would be able to be a challenge to them, allowing them to grow spiritually and academically, and someone who focuses on them and is intentional when in their presence. Having similarities is not the only quality that would define friendship, though it makes a huge part of it. As the interviews point out, there are other factors that influence someone in enlarging their circle of friends.

*Times of interactions/encounters before considering the person as a friend.* I received answers that varied in degree of frequency. This can be further explained with an analogy of a scale with two extremities of frequency of encounters on each of the scale. Some of my interviewees fell under the side where if they felt comfortable looking them in the face and saying ‘hi’ and when they do not need to keep their guard up while interacting with them. The rest of them fell under the side where it takes a lot more encounters and meaningful conversations before they would consider one as a friend. Being comfortable to open up and confide, not being worried to impress the friend, being there when hard times are present, and being able to confide in them.

*Friendships that you made that led to other friendships.* Everyone but one agreed that the friendships that they have made throughout their time at Messiah has led to other friendships. As one of them puts it, ‘making a friend that has a circle of friends will eventually lead to encounters where mutual friendships are formed’. Friends that are made eventually opens the door for more interaction with other people that potentially could have similar interests with them. ‘That is how you expand your social network’.

For the person that noted that the friendships made did not lead to others, the person was referring to club scenarios where a group of people have already solidified their friendship with each other that when an outsider seeks to befriend them, they do not feel the need to expand their group as they are already comfortable with the numbers that they have. Being placed in a situation where everyone is new and seeking friendship would help in this process of making friends that would lead to other friendships.

*Having shared interests help in adapting in this environment.* Sharing something in common that eventually led to friendships has helped all my interviewees adapt in this college environment. Doing things together and being on the same mindset has led the interviewees to adjust well in this new environment. This has also led to *friendships that led to new experiences.* Making new friends (especially American ones) has led to trying and experiencing new things. As one put it, the interviewee gets to experience Thanksgiving every year differently as the interviewee gets invited by different friends to spend Thanksgiving at their home, leading to a new American family experience every time. Having road trips and going off campus is one experience that all interviewees agree on that have come out from making new friendships.

*Topics discussed while hanging out in groups.* There isn’t a thought process when thinking of what topic to be discussed when hanging out with their group of friends. All of the interviewees talked about how whatever topic that would just come up during the time spent together. It could be the randomness of things, such as food, crushes, classes and rant sessions. It could also switch over to deeper topics such as politics, culture, future plans and home. These topics discussed opens up knowledge about their friend as they share their own experiences. As the Social Penetration theory notes, getting to know someone is like peeling an onion. Through these topics discussed, the interviewees are able to peel off the layers and find out more about their friend.

*Friendships made help shaped your personality.* Everyone agreed that the friendships that they have made throughout their time at Messiah has helped them shaped their personality for the better. One interviewee talks about how different this person’s personality and experiences were before this person came to Messiah. It was after coming to Messiah and meeting new people who shared similar interests with her influenced this person to be more mature and a better person. In addition to them studying abroad and living independently without parental help, making friends is really crucial as it could potentially how you live your life as you step into the real world.

**Conclusion**

This research study qualitatively looked at the relationship between homophily and students who study abroad adapt in their new environment. I found that homophily is a huge factor in adapting in their new environment as friendships are formed through similarities. In some cases, being placed in groups does not necessarily lead to a discovery of people who have similar interests, as it can possibly be found outside a group circle. I also realized that being genuine and loyal are the most essential characteristics that a person looks for while seeking friendship.

This research study also looked at whether homophily allowed students who study abroad gain a helping hand in a new environment or disallows them to do so and keeps them in their comfort zone. I found that making new friends through similar interests led to experiencing new things and local things that they would have never had if they were kept in their bubble. With the making of new friends, it has eventually also shaped personalities and led people to be a better person.

With the limitation of only using resources available at Messiah College, it would be interesting to further this research in a bigger, circular college/university to find out how friendships are formed in those settings. This research can help organizations and groups look into their members and evaluate how the chemistry of the group and evaluate how affective their group matches people together internally.

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Appendix I

Semi-structured Interview Script:

The interview will begin with a short portion of questions regarding you time at Messiah:

1. What is your ethnicity/nationality?
2. How many years have you been at Messiah?
3. What is your major at Messiah?
4. How did you come to know about Messiah?
5. Are you part of any groups/organizations at Messiah?

The interview will then move on to ask questions seeking the relationship between the subject interacting among their groups/organizations at Messiah and how that has helped them adapt at Messiah College.

We are going to start with some questions on your social life at Messiah College and how you form your friendships at Messiah.

1. Are you actively involved in the groups/organizations that you are a part of at Messiah College?
2. Would you say that most of your friendship was formed because of the group/organization?
3. Were there other ways that you applied/used to make friends while at your time at Messiah?
4. Please describe what are the qualities/characteristics you look for when seeking friendship?
5. Would you say that the characteristics you look for are similar to your own?
6. If not, what attracts you to make friends with someone?
7. How many encounters, interactions, things you discover about the person before you would acknowledge the person as a friend?

Okay, I am going to proceed with asking the next set of questions on how your friendships have affected your time at Messiah College.

1. Did the friendships you made while you were here led to other friendships?
2. Did finding a group of people that shared interests with you help you adapt in this new environment?
3. Did these friendships lead to new experiences?
4. What are the topics that are discussed while hanging out with them?
   1. Similar interests
   2. Random topics
   3. Philosophical questions
5. Did you feel that these friendships that you have made helped you shape your personality?

That is all that I have for you. Thank you so much for your time and your honesty. Please

remember that none of these answers will be specifically associated with your name in the published work and that you are ensured complete confidentiality in this research study