

Friendships of Latin American Students in Brazil: From Individual Well-Being to an International Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to describe the composition of the friends' networks, the formation of friendships and the role of friends of students from other Latin American countries in Brazil. A hundred students from 14 countries, including Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Chile, Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Costa Rica and Uruguay answered a questionnaire about their friendships. In total, 768 friends were mentioned, 469 of the same nationality of the student, 188 Brazilians and 111 of other nationalities. Compatriots living in their country of origin was the largest group (331), followed by Brazilians living in Brazil (182), compatriots in Brazil (85), and other foreigners in Brazil (80). Most of the students reported friendship with at least one Brazilian in the destination country (73%) and 97% sought to make friends in the destination country, developing friendships with Brazilians (89%), people from other countries (78%) and compatriots in Brazil (63%). The main difficulties in developing friendships with Brazilians were language (37%) and cultural differences (27%). The support received from the friends was recognized by 96% of the students and having friends in the destination country was considered important or very important by 95% of the participants. It can be concluded that these students present a diversified friends' network in terms of nationality and place of residence. In Brazil, they cited more Brazilian friends than compatriots and other foreigners, indicating that the concept of homophilia is not enough to explain the composition of the friends' network.

Keywords: Friendship, International students, Latin America

Friendship and happiness or subjective well-being are positively related, also in Latin American countries [1, 2]. Although studies on friendships in different contexts in Latin America are not frequent, friendship is not only related to individual happiness and subjective well-being, but it is fundamental for social and cultural integration of internal migrants as well as international migrants, besides acting as integration factor in local communities in Latin America [3-6]. The purpose of this investigation was to describe friendships of Latin American international college students in Brazil, specifically friends' network, the origin of new friendships and the role of friends.

The number of international students has increased worldwide, motivating research to make their overseas experience more positive, including studies on the formation and role of friendships [7]. Traditionally, these students go to developed countries in Europe, North America, Asia and Oceania. The friendship of Latin American international students in other Latin American countries is still poorly investigated.

Foreign students often find it difficult to establish friendships with people from the host country, and friendships tend to be with people from the same country [8-13]. Cultural differences have been considered as elements that make it difficult to make friends from

other cultures, among other reasons, by different conceptions of friendship [14]. On the other hand, these differences may be positive elements in these friendships, when students are receptive to other cultures, revealing transcultural empathy [15]. Having friends from different cultures allows the exploration of different cultures and languages, alongside the assistance provided, as well as the presence of factors such as self-revelation and networking [16].

According to Gareis, Murkin and Goldman, international students often complain about the lack of friendships with people from the host country [17]. In the case of international students in the US, they observed that international students evaluated their friendships with Americans as inferior to their friendships with people from their own country or from other countries. The number of friendships and satisfaction were significantly associated with communicative adaptability, and English proficiency. Gareis also noted that the region of origin and destination affect the international student friendship experiences in the US, influencing the number of American friends and their satisfaction with these friendships [18]. Students from English-speaking countries and North and Central Europe had the most positive experience, while students from East Asia had less positive experience. Regarding the region of destination, the students had better results in the south of the country than in the northeast and better results in non-metropolitan rather than metropolitan areas.

In an ethnographic study on the adaptation of international students in England, Brown noted that friendship emerged as the main theme of the study [10]. The students reported the desire and need to have friends from the same country, for sharing the language, cultural heritage and access to instrumental support beyond fear of discrimination and lack of contact with people in the country, which was a source of disappointment for students. Few students left their ghetto of friendships with people of the same ethnic group. In another study, Leong pointed out difficulties in making friends of foreign students in the USA, identifying Chinese students as those who face more academic and social difficulties due to language and cultural barriers [19]. The study highlighted the contribution of individual factors (fluency in another language) and context factors (activities promoted by the institution) to foster friendship development.

In a study of multicultural attitudes and friendships with international students in the US, Williams and Johnson suggested that friendships with people from the host country are important for a successful experience abroad but making friends with American students was challenging and rare. In this study, the authors sought to understand the lack of cross-cultural social reciprocity of American students at a university in the southern United States, known for its racial divisions [20]. Students with international friendships had higher scores of openings for new experiences and lower scores on apprehension regarding intercultural communication.

In a study conducted in New Zealand, Vaccarino and Dresler-Hawke pointed to friendship as part of the process of socialization and integration of these students, investigating the benefits to local students, as well as the barriers and difficulties to make friends with international students of different cultures [21]. The results indicated that local students make friendships with international students because they are different and can learn new things from them.

Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune analyzed networks of friendship, social connectivity and homesickness and levels of satisfaction in international students [7]. According to the authors, international students make friendships with individuals from their own country, from other countries and from the host country. Research has indicated that these students often have more friends from their own country, but also indicated a relationship between having more friends in the destination country and satisfaction, contentment, less homesickness and social connectivity. Based on data from 80 international students and contrary to previous studies, these students did not have more friends from their own country, and those with more friends from the host country were more satisfied and less homesick. Those who had a greater variability in their friends network with people from the destination country proved to be the most satisfied, content, and socially connected.

Also in the US, Hotta and Ting-Toomey investigated the perceived quality of the friendships of 20 international students, which revealed a number of themes, such as the variety of patterns of intercultural adjustment, the role of cultural expectancy, personal time in the development of intercultural friendships and the dialectic of friendship, such as feeling visible or invisible, open or closed communication, or feeling like a guest or a stranger [22].

Recent studies carried out in the United States have indicated the relevant role of the institutions to promote activities that allow the frequent contact and integration of international students,

facilitating the formation of friendships with local students [23]. The importance of context was also highlighted by Rienties and Nolan, who investigated the friendship networks of 485 international students and 107 local undergraduate and graduate students in the UK [24]. The authors observed that students from different cultural backgrounds developed friendships differently with other international and local students, indicating that the institutional context affects such relationships.

On the other hand, studies in China also indicate the difficulties for international students to make friends with the natives. Ran investigated the relationship between Chinese identity, friendship, and language skills of international Chinese ethnic students in China, including their ability to develop friendships with local Chinese [25]. The results indicated that feelings of dissatisfaction about not having Chinese friends are significantly related to the desire to make Chinese friends. Chinese language skills are positively related to whether the student has Chinese friends or not. The issue of cultural differences, specifically of language, has been pointed out as a major difficulty in establishing international student friendships in Asia. Morita, for example, analyzed the formation of international student friendships at Japanese universities, concluding that until English is more common in Japan, international students need strong Japanese language skills for a satisfactory social integration in Japan, including friendship with Japanese people [26].

In a study carried out in South Africa, Motlhaka investigated the formation of intercultural friendships, finding as a result that liking the other and sharing similar values and beliefs facilitated social contact between students from different countries [27]. According to the author, the results suggest that intercultural friendships provide opportunities for learning about friends' values, beliefs, and language.

Some investigations into international student friendships were conducted in Australia. Crossman and Bordia observed that the formation and deepening of international friendships positively affected the learning experience and increased involvement among Australian students participating in international virtual projects [28]. Also in Australia, Woods et al. observed that more experienced students serving as tutors for international students entering the university contributed to the formation of intercultural friendships among international students [29]. Still in Australia, Belford examined how international students describe the development of their friendships, including personal narratives and perspectives on friendships with a focus on cultural similarity and intercultural communication skills [30].

Studies on the subject in Latin America and Brazil are still few. Hendrickson, in a study carried out in Argentina, pointed out those different contexts differentially affect the formation of friendships in the destination country [31]. Comparing students from public and private universities and study centers abroad, he observed that international students from these centers have more friends of the same nationality than those of public and private Argentine universities. In these institutions, international students have more friends of different nationalities. In relation to friendship with Argentineans, international students in the study centers have fewer native friends from the country, at the beginning of their period in Argentina, but when they are finishing their studies, this difference is no longer significant, comparing with international students in

public and private universities. The author concludes that context is important for establishing friendships with people of different nationalities.

Some investigations in Brazil involved international students from different backgrounds. Garcia investigated friendships of 100 foreign university students studying in Brazil [32]. Of the 820 friends mentioned, 439 were of the same nationality as the students, 256 Brazilians and 125 of other nationalities. Other investigations were carried out on the international friendships of Brazilian students. Garcia investigated the international friendships of 120 Brazilian university students in Brazil who cited 331 friends from 59 countries [33].

Some studies have analyzed the friendships of African students in Brazil. Garcia and Rangel investigated the friendships of 12 Cape Verdean university students in Brazil who cited 109 friends, 81 Cape Verdeans, 18 Brazilians and 10 other nationalities [34]. Among the 35 closest friends, 24 were known from Cape Verde. Garcia and Goes investigated the friendships of university students from Guinea-Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe in Brazil [35]. Twelve students were interviewed and most of the friends were of the same nationality or Brazilians.

Regarding Latin America, in a study about friendships of Brazilian university students with citizens of South and North America, Garcia, Brandão, Costa and Togatlian observed that the participants had more friends in the USA than in other countries, such as Mexico, Canada, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia [36]. Eighteen friends (44%) were from the US, seven (17%) from Mexico and seven (17%) from Canada. The detachment of the Latin American community stands out. Garcia, Fabres and Ferraz reported the results of an investigation of some aspects of the friendships of 20 international students from Latin America (Mexico, Central America and South America) in Brazil, based on interviews [37]. They conclude that students from other Latin American countries have found it difficult to make friends in Brazil, partly due to cultural differences, especially the difference in language.

Some studies about the experience of international students in Brazil sometimes address the topic of friendship, without this being the focus of research. For example, Medeiros, Andrade and Passos have reported experiences of Brazilian students in international mobility and report that the friendship links are among the five most important experiences lived by these students abroad, emphasizing the formation of friendships with exchange students from other countries [38]. Oliveira and Freitas analyzed the experience of Brazilian students abroad and they reported the difficulties of Brazilian students to relate to other students inside and outside the university context and in the formation of friendships and social networks [39]. The lack of openness to the relationships and the competitive position of the local students made it difficult to form friendships.

In another case, Dos Santos and Miranda analyzed the perception of 12 university students from five countries that made academic mobility at the National University of La Plata, Argentina, including Brazil, Colombia, Spain, Japan and Mexico [40]. All reported difficulties in making friends upon arrival. The formation of friendships occurred mainly with other exchange students. Issues such as shyness and the existence of pre-formed college groups

were also indicated as difficulties in establishing new friendships. They still indicated that they did not have a real friendship with the Argentineans, having more friends of other nationalities

The objective of this research was to investigate some aspects of the friendships of Latin American university students residing and studying in Brazil. The specific objectives were: (1) to describe the network of friends of these students in terms of nationality and country of residence; (2) to investigate the formation and development of new friendships in the destination country of these students and the difficulties encountered in this process; (3) to investigate the role of friends in the life of the international student regarding the support received in general terms and specifically for their social integration and academic life at the university in the country of destination; (4) to obtain data on the meaning of the friendships for the international student under the investigated conditions and suggestions to facilitate these friendships.

This paper aims to contribute with data about friendships in the Latin American context for a better understanding of the relationship between friendship and international education in this context. It also aims to contribute to the social and cultural integration of Latin Americans in other countries of the continent.

Method

Participants

A hundred students from 14 countries, including Colombia (40), Peru (15), Argentina (6), Venezuela (9), Ecuador (8), Mexico (5), Paraguay (4), Honduras (4), Nicaragua (2), Chile (2), Bolivia (2), Costa Rica (1), Dominican Republic (1), and Uruguay (1), studying in Brazil, answered a questionnaire about their friendships, being 47 male and 53 female, 54 master's students, 40 doctoral, four undergraduate and two other modalities. The length of stay in Brazil ranged from three months to eight years and nine months. As for marital status, 78 were single, 19 married, two separate, and one in another condition. Participants answered a questionnaire, whose data were tabulated and analyzed with the aid of descriptive statistics. Students lived in 11 different states in Brazil, in the Southeast (79), Northeast (3), Central-West (5), South (12) and North (1).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Once identified, potential participants were invited to participate in the survey. If they accepted, they signed the consent form for participation in research and answered the printed questionnaire or by e-mail, with closed and open questions about their friendship relations. The instrument (questionnaire) consisted of the following parts:

1. Personal information: age, sex, marital status, city and country of birth, city and country where he/she currently lived, time in the country, among other points.
2. The friends' network: Table with the data of best friends (up to 10 friends), with indication of the country of origin and the city and country in which they reside.
3. Study abroad and friendships: Problems faced when arriving or staying in the destination country, the possibility of contact with people from the same country and other foreigners at the university of destination. The development of friendships, attempts made to make friends and success in making new friends in the destination country, and the origin of these friendships in terms of the nationality of the friend. The difficulties of making friends in the destination country with people from the host

country, co-nationals and other foreigners. Contact with friends in the country of origin and help or support from friends in the destination country. Shared activities with friends, presence of a best friend in the destination country and origin and the most important episodes of this friendship. The role of the university or course in the country of destination to facilitate social integration and the integration process. The importance of a student having friends in the destination country.

Participants answered a questionnaire and data were tabulated and analyzed with the aid of descriptive statistics. The purpose of the analysis was to present a descriptive picture of the friendships of Latin American international students residing and studying in Brazil.

Results

Concerning the friends' network of students from other Latin American countries in Brazil, 768 friends were mentioned, 469 of the same nationality of the student, 188 Brazilians and 111 of other nationalities. The friends' networks were organized according to the country of residence of friends. Co-nationals living in their country of origin formed the largest group (331), followed by Brazilians living in Brazil (182), compatriots in Brazil (85), other foreigners in Brazil (80), compatriots in other countries (53) and friends of other nationalities living in other countries (28), other than the country of origin or destination. Most of the students reported friendship with at least one Brazilian in the country of destination (73%), as well as the presence of students from their country of origin (80%) and students from other nationalities (93%) in the universities where they studied.

A total of 768 friends were cited, of whom 347 (45.2%) lived in Brazil. Of these, 85 friends were of the same nationality, 182 Brazilians and 80 of other nationalities. 97% of the students sought to make friends in the destination country, developing friendships with Brazilians (89%), people from other countries (78%) and compatriots in Brazil (63%). Most of the students (66%) did not find it difficult to make friends in the destination country, with 33% having difficulty making friends with people from the host country, 3% with people from other countries and 1% with compatriots. The main difficulties in developing friendships with Brazilians were language (37%), cultural differences (27%), different habits or interests (25%) and reservation in relation to foreigners (22%). Other difficulties were personal factors (such as shyness, age, little free time, introverted character) or social factors (prejudice towards foreigners, specifically to Latin American countries, maintaining distance from Latin Americans). A summary of data about the friends' network and the best friend are presented in Table 1 (the national origin of friends), Table 2 (the national origin and country of residence), and Table 3 (friends living in Brazil and the best friend).

Table 1: The national origin of friends

	n	%
From the same country	469	61,1
From Brazil	188	24,5
From other countries	111	14,4
Total	768	100,0

Table 2: The national origin and country of residence

	n	%
Co-nationals living in the origin country	331	43,6
Brazilians living in Brazil	182	24,0
Co-nationals living in Brazil	85	11,2
From other countries living in Brazil	80	10,5
Co-nationals living in other countries	53	7,0
From other countries living in other countries	28	3,7
Total	759	100,0

Table 3: Friends living in Brazil and the best friend

	%
Friends living in Brazil	45,2
Friendship with a Brazilian	73,0
A Brazilian best friend – in Brazil	42,0
A co-national best friend – in Brazil	28,0
A best friend from other country – in Brazil	20,0

In relation to the role of friends, the support received from the new friends made in the destination country was recognized by 96% of the students, mainly emotional support (73%), help with language problems (57%) and support in academic activities (51%), support in financial or administrative difficulties (36%), support in housing problems (34%), support in feeding problems (5%). Health problems have also been mentioned. Having friends in the destination country was considered important or very important by 95% of the participants, being considered very important (70%) or important (25%). In addition to academic activities, other activities shared with new friends included leisure or recreation (94%), religious activities (22%), politics or social activities (31%) sports, family activities, arts, tourism, meals, parties, and work activities.

The presence of a best friend in the destination country was recognized by the majority (74%), but 26% did not have a best friend in the country. In Brazil, 42% indicated a Brazilian best friend, 28% of their nationality and 20% of another country. The most important episodes of this best friendship were related to emotional support (52%), leisure activities (46%) and support in studies (38%). Other episodes were related to economic issues, emergency aid, political and cultural aspects, empathy, and basic orientation to paperwork, housing, bank. The main results about friendship development and functions are summarized in Table 4 (Friendship development and functions), Table 5 (Difficulties to make friends), Table 6 (Main difficulties in friendship with Brazilians), and Table 7 (Role of friends).

Table 4: Friendship development and functions

	%
Tried to make friends in Brazil	97
Made friends with Brazilians	89
Made friends with people from other countries	78
Made friends with co-nationals	63

Table 5: Difficulties to make friends

	%
No difficulty	66
Difficulties to make friends with Brazilians	33
Difficulties to make friends with people from other countries	3
Difficulties to make friends with co-nationals	1

Table 6: Main difficulties in friendship with Brazilians

	%
Language	37
Cultural differences	27
Different habits or interests	25
Keep distance from foreigners	22

Table 7: Role of friends

	%
Received support from new friends	96
Emotional support	73
Help in language problems	57
Help in academic activities	51
Share leisure activities	94
The importance of having friends abroad	95

The majority (58%) presented some type of problem when arriving or staying in the destination country, against 42% who reported no problems. The problems reported were language problems (36%), financial or administrative problems (26%), problems with housing (21%), problems with food (12%) and problems in academic activities (11%). Other problems were illnesses, cultural differences, security, making friendships, bureaucracy and difficulties of relationship with Brazilian institutions, lack of information and orientation in the university and prejudice against Latin American peoples. In the destination country, 97% of the participants kept in touch with friends from the country of origin, through social networks (88%), especially Facebook (67%), WhatsApp (54%) and Instagram (9%). The contact was also via e-mail messages (33%), SMS (17%) and Skype (51%).

Regarding the institutional role, 44% indicated that the host university acted to facilitate their social integration through integration meetings (27%) or indication of people to assist in the integration process (19%) or written material on the possibility of integration in the university (7%). In most cases (56%) there was no activity. Other actions recognized as facilitators of the integration process were the presence of an International Relations Office, accommodation for foreign students, integration in courses and events related to leisure, and Portuguese language courses.

Discussion

The cultural or national diversity of the friends' network of international students has been a recurring theme in the literature. In the present study, the 100 participants cited 768 friends, 469 of the same nationality, 188 of the native country (Brazilians) and 111 of other nationalities. This refers to the friends' network as a whole, but when we consider the country of residence, it can be observed that co-nationals living in their country of origin form the largest group

(331), followed by Brazilians living in Brazil (182), compatriots in Brazil (85), other foreigners in Brazil (80), compatriots in other countries (53) and friends of other nationalities living in other countries (28) than the country of origin or destination.

It can be observed a great diversity in the nationality and place of residence of friends. According to studies conducted in other regions, these students often find it difficult to establish friendships with people from the host country, and friendships tend to be with people from the same country [8-13]. According to Gareis, Murkin and Goldman, international students often complain about the lack of friendships with people from the host country [17]. Leong pointed to difficulties in making friends of foreign students in the US, identifying Chinese students as those who face the most difficulties due to language and cultural barriers [19]. Williams and Johnson suggest that making friends with American students is challenging and rare [20]. In an ethnographic study on the adaptation of international students in England, Brown noted that friendship emerged as the main theme of the study [10]. Few students left their ghetto of friendships with people of the same ethnic group. This was not observed in this case, since the number of Brazilian friends in Brazil is greater than the number of co-nationals in Brazil. In addition, most students reported friendship with at least one Brazilian in the destination country (73%), despite the presence of students from their country of origin (80%) and other nationalities (93%) at the university where they studied.

In relation to friends in Brazil, of the 768 friends, 347 (45.2%) lived in Brazil. The formation of friendships in the country of destination was also common, since 97% of the students tried to make friends in the destination country, many developed friendships with Brazilians (89%), people from other countries (78%) and compatriots in Brazil (63%). In Brazil, 42% indicated a Brazilian best friend, 28% of their nationality and 20% of another country.

Thus, the results of the present study agree with those reported by Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune, who observed that international students make friendships with individuals from their own country, from other countries and from the host country [7]. Hendrickson also pointed out the importance of the institutional context for the formation of friendships in the Latin American context, concluding that the context is important to establish friendships with people of different nationalities [30]. Thus, the data are also different from those of studies on the friendships of African students in Brazil when most friends were co-nationals [33, 34].

Comparing data from the present study, with data from other regions, it can also be assumed that the origin and destination of the students affect their friendships. Gareis also noted that the region of origin and destination affect the friendship experiences of international students in the US, influencing the number of American friends [18]. However, difficulties were also present, especially in relationships with people from the host country. Most of the students (66%) did not find it difficult to make friends in the destination country, with 33% having difficulty making friends with people from the host country, 3% with people from other countries and 1% with compatriots. The main difficulties in developing friendships with Brazilians were language (37%), cultural differences (27%), different habits or interests (25%) and reservation in relation to foreigners (22%). Garcia, Fabres, and Ferraz interviewed Latin American international students from Mexico, Central and South America in Brazil and

observed difficulties in making friendships in Brazil, partly due to cultural differences, especially the difference in language [36]. Dos Santos and Miranda also observed difficulties in university students from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, in Argentina [39]. All reported difficulties in making friends upon arrival. The formation of friendships occurred mainly with other exchange students. Cultural differences have been considered as elements that make it difficult to make friends from other cultures, among other reasons, by different conceptions of friendship [14]. Studies in China also indicated the difficulties for international students to make friends with the natives, due to cultural differences, specifically language and the same difficulty with the language was observed in formation of friendship with Japanese people [25, 26].

In relation to the role of friends, the support received from the new friends made in the destination country was recognized by 96% of the students, mainly emotional support (73%), help with language problems (57%) and support in academic activities (51%). Friendships with people of their own country have been recognized as providing different forms of support, especially instrumental (Brown, 2008), emotional and spiritual (Maundeni, 2001). For this reason, international students seek to create a subculture to support them emotionally and socially in the host country (Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008). In addition to the support, 94% of the students shared leisure activities with friends. The most important episodes of this best friendship were related to emotional support (52%), leisure activities (46%) and support in studies (38%).

Having friends in the destination country was considered important or very important by 95% of the participants. Medeiros, Andrade and Passos report the experiences of Brazilian students in international mobility and report that the bonds of friendship are among the five most important experiences experienced by these students abroad [37].

Regarding the institutional role, 44% indicated that the host university acted to facilitate their social integration through integration meetings (27%) or indication of people to help in the integration process (19%). Recent studies carried out in the USA on the relevant role of institutions in promoting contact and integration of international students, facilitating the formation of friendships with local students [23]. The importance of context was also highlighted by Rienties and Nolan in the United Kingdom, when students from different cultural backgrounds developed differentiated friendships with other international and local students, indicating that the institutional context affects such relationships [24].

It can be concluded that these students present a diversified friends' network, in terms of nationality and place of residence, including people of the same nationality, Brazilians and other foreigners. The networks are not limited to friends in the country of origin or destination but include co-nationals in other countries as well as friends from other countries living in different countries. In Brazil, they cited more Brazilian friends than co-nationals and other foreigners, suggesting that the concept of hemophilia is not enough to explain the composition of friends' network. The data suggest that students from other Latin American countries have succeeded in their social integration in the Brazilian university environment, indicated by their wide network of Brazilian friends in Brazil. However, as 27% of the students did not indicate Brazilian friends, the integration should be expanded. It can also be concluded

that friends are considered important, presenting diverse roles, providing support in various areas, affecting their subjective well-being, as emotional support, but also assisting in cultural issues such as language problems and academic issues, promoting social, cultural and academic integration, as well as sharing leisure activities [41].

Final considerations

The data of the present study indicate that international students' friendships are related to the culture and origin and destination of these students, indicating that for Latin American students in Brazil, despite difficulties to make friends in a foreign country, these friendships develop and, in the country of destination, there are friendships with people from the destination country, from the country of origin and also from other countries giving rise to an international community of friends. Finally, it could be concluded that friendships, besides contributing to individual subjective well-being, are also an important means to build an integrated worldwide community in the context of international education

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