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Capstone Project First Draft

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The role of friendship in shaping NU students' mindsets

Friendship is a significant part of any human's life, which has a certain degree of impact on almost all the other relationships and aspects of life. It has many different forms and varies depending on people who are in these relationships. In other words, every person has their own understanding of what friendship is, whom they call 'friends', what 'friends' are obliged to do in their relationships, and so on. A number of Western academics have already studied the topic from a sociological perspective, and, as a result, there are important findings that help to understand what effect friendship has on the society. However, it has not been studied much in Central Asia, not to mention the absence of research on friendship as a sociological phenomenon in Kazakhstan. Therefore, this capstone project will serve as one of the first research papers conducted on friendship as a sociological phenomenon among Kazakh youth (NU students, in particular). Thus, exploring the abovementioned aspects (that were observed in Western societies) in the context of Kazakhstani culture and the NU students will be beneficial.

This capstone project overlaps this gap and explores the role of friendship in the NU student community (from the sociological perspective) and the significance of friendship in shaping NU students' mindset. In this case, according to Oxford English Dictionary and Cambridge Dictionary, mindset is a complex of a person's preferences, beliefs, morals, values, etc., which impacts their way of thinking, decision-making and the relationships they build with people around them. As a result of the study, I expect to observe evidence on interrelation between the features of their identity that seem to be altered through external influence and the relationships of the respondents that they have with people whom they call "friends". Studying this topic is crucial because

friendship has a significant impact on how any community works. Likewise, friendships help the society function smoothly or, vice versa, make the tension within it grow stronger. In addition, kinship is widely studied due to its specific features and impact on the society and the people involved in this kind of relationship. Thus, another motivation to do this research was the fact that friendship is not considered as significant as other relationship types, which, by the end of this research project, I was expecting to prove wrong.

One of the publications that explores friendship in terms of sociology is a paper by Vela-McConnell “The Sociology of Friendship” (2017). The scholar studied friendship as a sociological phenomenon and its role in Western societies. Besides basic information on friendship (such as the term of the phenomenon, its nature and specific features, including information from various academics), the author emphasizes the concept’s ambiguity – for some, even an acquaintance can be considered a ‘friend’, for others, a ‘friend’ is equal to a family member. In addition, the paper sheds light on what effect friendship has on the society at a larger scale. The author claims that it “lubricates” the society by forming “bridging ties”, especially among the representatives of one group (sharing interests, background, racial or ethnic identity, etc.). This perspective is supported by another scholar, Yakkaldevi, in his 2014 study called “The Sociology of Friendship”. In other words, friendship, as a positive and supportive relationship between people, soothes out the rough edges, forming a “truly friendly society” (Vela-McConnell, 2017, p. 13). In contrast, a community lacking friendship bonds (and thus, social cohesion) may have constant tension and rising discontent. However, according to the scholar, a society that values friendship, especially among the representatives of different social groups, can be connected through social cohesion at the macrolevel. In addition to that, Vela-McConnell emphasizes the fact that friendship is underestimated as a sociologically important phenomenon. This is also confirmed by Eve (2002), who claimed that friendship lacks attention in this research field. This could explain why there is still no studies about friendship in Kazakhstan, which also motivates for doing this research.

The abovementioned sources will develop the topic from a sociological perspective; however, friendship is a phenomenon that should be considered from an anthropological view as well. “The ways of friendship: Anthropological perspectives” by Killick & Desai (2010) is a book that explores friendship in an additional dimension and provides context from various parts of the world, which is helpful to make comparison on the vision of friendship in different cultures. Considering the fact that there is a severe shortage of data on friendship in Kazakhstan, comparing

the results of primary research with the information from other countries may be helpful in analyzing the impact friendship has on various communities.

In addition to that, Holmes released “Introduction: Friendship and Emotions” in 2011, where he not only examined friendship in different geographical locations and provided theoretical framework, but also analyzed the phenomenon in terms of emotions and identity, which is advantageous for this capstone project due its focus on the formation of mindset, personality and identity among NU students.

Another aspect that is offered by Allan & Adams (2006) in “Sociology of Friendship” is the difference between friendship and kinship. These two concepts may seem unrelated; however, the dynamics of these notions are worth mentioning. Plus, Allan (2021) in his study called “A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship” also compares kin and non-kin close relationships (family vs. friends). Besides examining information provided in these two sources, data obtained through primary research is also beneficial for the analysis of these concepts. Family and friendship often swap roles several times during people’s lifetime. At the age of the target population (18 to 24 years old) and while studying at the university, the youth is more interested in making connections between each other and spending a lot of time on entertainment. However, like it was mentioned above, as this period of life passes, people tend to change their priorities and people of kin may become more important and valuable in their lives. Thus, it is expected that some participants of this capstone research may place friends above their kinship ties or spend more time with peer than with their families.

Since there is no research on friendship as a sociological phenomenon in Kazakhstan, only general data can be gathered. For instance, “Youth in Central Asia: Kazakhstan. Based on sociological survey”, a publication created in collaboration of Kazakh and German scholars in 2016, provides statistical data on the identity, lifestyle, values, and other views of the youth in Kazakhstan. According to the source, more than a half of the participants of the research (55.2%) reported that they “often” spend time with their friends, while only 0.4% of the respondents claimed that they never do that, and 0.2% did not answer this question at all. Spending time with friends is the fourth most popular activity for the Kazakh youth’s leisure time after listening to music, doing housework, and watching television. The age distribution of the respondents of the study is the following: 67.9% of those aged from 14 to 18, 55.7% of those aged from 19 to 24, and 41.8% of those aged from 25 to 29. This demonstrates that the older are the respondents are, the

less time they spend with their friends. This could be related to the fact that in the period of life of 18 to 24 years old (target population), young people tend to spend a lot of time with their peers. As they grow older, the priorities may shift because they start their own families and get more occupied with their jobs, relationships and family, rather than entertainment and friends.

“The Nazarbayev Generation. Youth in Kazakhstan”, edited by Marlene Laruelle and released in 2019, is a book that contains several studies on Kazakhstani youth and its moral views, national identity, globalization, cultural blending and youth activism. According to the sociological portrait provided by Marlene Laruelle (2019), “while two-thirds of youth declare that they are occasionally interested in politics, less than 10 percent of them discuss politics with family and friends or participate in any form of civic activism”. This piece of information is useful for the capstone project because the NU students’ attitude on politics is also mentioned in the interviews with the target population in addition to religion. Besides, “The Nazarbayev Generation. Youth in Kazakhstan” is a newer work, thus, it contains more or less up-to-date information. This kind of sources provide context on how youth in Kazakhstan functions within the society and what vision young Kazakhs have regarding various topics.

Through the analysis of the sources related to the research question of the capstone project, certain patterns, context and background knowledge on friendship as a sociological phenomenon were observed. Besides secondary data analysis, the study will be conducted through qualitative methodology. It will have the following ways of gathering primary data: an online survey and personal in-depth interviews. The survey will be used to obtain a general image on how friendship is perceived among NU students (on a large scale). This is an important step, as the context for the research is not complete (due to the absence of studies on friendship), and the survey would provide the necessary information to understand the experience and attitude of the target population on friendship. As the second step of data gathering, several interviews will be conducted personally in order to collect in-depth information on the topic.

The sample population for this capstone project is NU students’ community, thus, the age range will be approximately from 18 to 24 years old, and some exceptions may be possible. I have chosen this specific sample population because this way, the research is much easier to accomplish (more feasible), therefore, the chance of making mistakes and/or errors is reduced. In addition to that, I can be sure that the coverage of the target population is more even if I choose a smaller community instead of the whole country or even a city. Conducting a survey in this project requires

a probability sampling method (simple random sampling). This means that the survey was sent out to the sources with high “passability” and exclusive to NU students (email, NU community chats, via social media). Anticipatorily, the data was expected to be gathered from at least 50 NU students.

In the appendix, the questions for the survey can be found. The first question indicates how the respondents define the term ‘friendship’. The next three questions help understand how many friends they have, how many hours a week they spend together and how exactly they prefer to do that. This is done in order to understand the interaction between the respondents and their friends. I have also added an option implying that some respondents may not have any friends at all. Moreover, they may have people who they have fun with, interact daily and do the things people usually do with friends; however, they might not have the emotional connection and attachment that they think friends must have. Then, the respondents have to place their priorities from most to least important. Afterwards, the participants should identify what aspects of their lives have been impacted by their friends and how exactly. These questions will help obtain general information on the topic.

In the appendix, the questions for the separate in-depth interviews can be found, and more personal and detailed questions will be asked privately. These questions will be advantageous in answering the research question and learning more about the topic in the chosen context (friendship among the Kazakh youth, NU students in particular). In other words, these questions are aimed to learn how the interviewees perceive friendship and their relationships with friends. The initial questions may have altered, or follow up questions occurred in the process, depending on the respondent’s answers and the flow of the talk.

The first question defines how the participants perceive friendship as a relationship. The second one identifies what it takes to be a “friend”, what the criteria are, what obligations friends have (if any) in the respondent’s opinion. The following two questions explore what things could ruin or strengthen relationships, and what actions affect them. Afterwards, the respondents define how many friends they have. It provides context on the participant’s background. The next questions are similar to the previous ones about actions that impact the friendship, only this time, I gain information on some more personal aspects of friendship – what kind of treatment the respondent expects from someone they call a “friend” and what is acceptable or not acceptable in such kind of relationships.

After that, the role of friendship in the participant's life is identified by asking questions about their priorities (comparing the significance of friendship with that of other aspects of their lives, such as family, romantic partner, job, their free time or personal values and beliefs). This data can be compared to the studies on the differences between friendship and kinship ties and the degree of significance of each; not to mention that they define how important friendship is among NU students. Besides that, the following questions ask about betrayal and the respondents' experience about being betrayed by a friend and how it affected their other relationships. This provides additional information on the participant's perception of friendship, on its value, and how they filter their friend group (sort out whom they befriend). Plus, reflecting on how these situations affected the relationships in the surroundings can help us observe if the theory on "bridging ties" described by Vela-McConnell can be noticed. If the cases of betrayal have affected their relationships with other friends, tension occurs within their friend group, and, as a result, some relationships may be damaged or even ruined. In contrast, friendships serve as "bridging ties" between people, which has a positive impact on the whole group or even improve the relationships between the parties concerned (the traitor and the betrayed).

In addition to that, the second part of the interview will explore how the participants' friends have influenced their mindset formation, including their personality, beliefs, values, opinions, interests, habits, and so on. As a result of the in-depth interviews, I obtained information on which of these aspects were involved the most and the role of friendship in the formation of the participants' mindsets.

Since the topic of this capstone project is not explored well in Kazakhstan, and there are no references that could be used to navigate through this kind of large amount of information, there are quite a few limitations to this research paper. Firstly, as it was mentioned before, friendship is a fluid concept due to its objectivity and dependence on how each individual perceives the concept and defines it. This issue concerns not only the term 'friendship', but also 'betrayal' and other aspects of friendship mentioned in this study. Since the research was conducted based on the participants' experience, the data gathering process must be as precise as possible.

However, even that posed an issue because, due to the limit to a smaller field and sample (for the project to be feasible and precise), the focus on the students of Nazarbayev University makes it impossible to generalize the results and the conclusions of the study to a larger population (a city, a country, a region, etc.) – there is too big of a difference in the population number. This

means that this capstone project overlaps only a small area of the gap in studying friendship as a sociological and anthropological phenomenon. However, since there is no other research on friendship in Kazakhstan, the results of the capstone project could still be useful to at least roughly understand the context of friendship among a small part of Kazakh youth.

Besides that, there were issues with feasibility of the research. The interviews were slightly challenging to accomplish, as there is no tangible compensation for the interview. The survey was also hard to conduct because despite being sent out to a large number of people, hence, the number of responses turned out to be much smaller than expected, and a large number of the target population representatives were not covered. A possible reason for that is a large number of interviews and surveys circulating among the NU students' community due to the abundance of capstone projects. Therefore, when future research is conducted, additional emphasis should be put to data gathering to cover that gap.

Because of the challenges mentioned above, the survey gathered 37 responses from NU students. This method provided context with general information and some details worth mentioning. All the respondents agreed with the statement of consent. The first question required a short answer about the definition of friendship. There are several common key words which prompt that NU students perceive friendship as a non-romantic close relationship between people who respect, understand, support and care for each other, who are ready to help and give advice, who one can trust and rely on and share intimate details of their life. A synonym word that was used frequently is "soulmates". Respect, loyalty, honesty, special connection, shared values and interests, absence of judgement, feeling comfortable with friends, having fun together, being there for better and for worse are also some characteristics that were mentioned in the answers to the question.

According to the results of the survey, none of the respondents replied that they have no friends. Approximately a half of them have 6 or more friends, a third have 3 to 5 friends and the rest have 1 or 2 friends. When it comes to the time they spend with friends, around 40% dedicate 4 to 6 hours a week, approximately 35% spend 7 or more hours a week and the rest of the participants spend 1-3 hours a week to meet and connect with their friends. The participants mainly prefer to chat, go for walks, study, play various games, go out, gather with friends to eat or drink tea, visit museums, theatres, cinemas, and new interesting places, etc. The amount of time that the respondents spend on their friends could be evidence of the importance of friendship in their lives,

although making such assumptions based on only this amount of information would be considered overgeneralization. The way they expressed their preference shows that the main goal of their gatherings is connecting and enjoying their leisure time with friends.

As to the question about priorities, where the respondents had to rate their family, friends, work or education, hobbies, and personal time depending on how significant these aspects are in their lives, calculations had to be done. If a participant had marked something '1', or 'the most important', that aspect was given 5 points. If a participant had marked something '5', or 'the least important', that aspect was given 1 point. Everything in between was marked accordingly: '2' was corresponded to 4 points, '3' was corresponded to 3 points, and '4' was corresponded to 2 points. As a result, the following summary was drawn:

- 'Family' gained 169 points;
- 'Work/Education' gained 112 points;
- 'Friends' gained 110 points;
- 'Personal time' gained 97 points;
- 'Hobbies' gained 67 points.

According to these calculations, 'Family' got the highest result, thus, being placed first in the summarized rating of NU students' priorities. It is followed by 'Work/Education' and 'Friends' which have a small difference in two points, therefore, both of them could be placed second, since the scores are almost equal. The next important thing for NU students is personal free time, and hobbies are placed last. This kind of arrangement was expected, and it proved that friends in fact play a significant role in NU students' lives.

The last two questions of the survey refer to the aspects of the respondents' lives that were influenced by friendship. Among the most popular answers are habits, interests, opinions, and character traits (the order is preserved). Almost half of the survey participants claimed that their values were impacted as well, and only around 25% of the respondents felt that their beliefs (including religion) were altered under the influence of friendship. These results also support the theory mentioned above that friendship has an impact on how one's mindset shapes. There were also additional answers provided by the participants: "Taste in music and movies", "Vision", and "Education".

The last question obtains more detail regarding the previous answer by posing an open question. There were no specifically interesting findings in this part of the survey because all the

answers are only examples of how the aspects mentioned above were impacted by the respondents' friends. In general, a lot of participants mentioned their personality traits changing (them becoming calmer, tolerant, open-minded, sensible, or patient), opening to new interests and taking up various hobbies. Besides, numerous respondents mentioned their habits and opinions changing, as they are exposed to their friends' influence more and more with time. They have also overlooked their values (appreciating mental health, family, or friends more than ever, for instance). As a result, this particular question provided examples of how friendship may change the way a person's mindset is formed.

The in-depth interviews that were conducted in person took place at a quiet venue with no witnesses. The audio records are stored safely on my laptop and can only be accessed by me and the supervisors. In order to maintain confidentiality, all the names that were accidentally dropped during the interviews, were removed. Before each interview started, all the participants have heard the oral consent form, which is attached in the Appendix part of this capstone project and agreed to participate and provide personal information. Also, all of them were aware of the fact that all the interviews and interview questions were voluntary. The respondents were not coerced into taking part in the research project. All the interviews were conducted in Russian upon the request of the participants. However, this may result in inaccuracy in the discussion of the results because each language has its own semantical features and distinctions that may alter between one another. Thus, some meanings may be missed during translation.

In total, there are 8 interviews with detailed information on the topic. Five of the participants were female, three of them were male. For the qualitative analysis, the interviewees were given imaginary names to maintain confidentiality:

- Arman
- Bolat
- Chinara
- Dana
- Enlik
- Fariza
- Gulnur
- Hakim

In order to analyze the gathered data, coding was used. Coding allowed to systemize the information obtained from the respondents. The codes were applied to the interview transcripts and can be accessed in the Appendix part of this capstone project. The list of codes contains the code names, or tags, beside their meaning in the following way:

friendship term	The term for “friendship” provided by the participant
+obligations	The participant names the obligations regarding friendship
-obligations	The participant does not support the idea of obligations regarding friendship
+friendship	The participant talks about the actions that improve their friendship
-friendship	The participant talks about the actions that deteriorate their friendship
<<friendnumber	The number of participant’s friends is more than 10 (a lot of friends)
<friendnumber	The number of participant’s friends is between 5 to 10 (many friends)
~friendnumber	The number of participant’s friends is between 1 to 4 (few friends)
+treatment	The participant names their expectations related to good treatment among friends
-treatment	The participant names poor treatment among friends that they would not endure
=priorityfamily	The participant puts their family on the same level as friendship
<priorityfamily	The participant puts friendship below family
>priorityrompartner	The participant puts friendship above their romantic partner
=priorityrompartner	The participant puts their romantic partner on the same level as friendship
<priorityrompartner	The participant puts friendship below their romantic partner
>prioritywork	The participant puts friendship above work
<prioritywork	The participant puts friendship below work
<priorityfreetime	The participant puts friendship below free time
=priorityfreetime	The participant puts their free time on the same level as friendship
>priorityfreetime	The participant puts friendship above free time
<priorityvalues	The participant puts friendship below values

=priorityvalues	The participant puts friendship on the same level as values
>priorityvalues	The participant puts friendship above values
+kinship	The participant provides an example of a relationship with a friend being closer than that with a family member
betrayal term	The term for “betrayal” provided by the participant
+betrayal	The participant has experienced betrayal from a friend
-betrayal	The participant has not experienced betrayal from a friend
+betrayalconsequence	The participant has experienced the consequences of a betrayal from a friend
+habits	The participant has experienced change in their habits after starting to communicate closely with a friend
+interests	The participant has experienced change in their interests after starting to communicate closely with a friend
-interests	The participant has not experienced change in their interests after starting to communicate closely with a friend
+beliefs	The participant has experienced change in their beliefs after starting to communicate closely with a friend
-beliefs	The participant has not experienced change in their beliefs after starting to communicate closely with a friend
+values	The participant has experienced change in their values after starting to communicate closely with a friend
-values	The participant has not experienced change in their values after starting to communicate closely with a friend
+opinion	The participant has experienced change in their opinion after starting to communicate closely with a friend
-opinion	The participant has not experienced change in their opinion after starting to communicate closely with a friend
+personality	The participant has experienced change in their personality after starting to communicate closely with a friend

-personality	The participant has not experienced change in their personality after starting to communicate closely with a friend
+impact	Friendship had an impact on the changes in habits, beliefs, values, opinion and personality if mentioned by the participant
-impact	Friendship did not have an impact on the changes in habits, beliefs, values, opinion and personality if mentioned by the participant

Based on this coding system, the findings of the qualitative research were summarized. Firstly, the terms of friendship provided by interviewees match the terms from the survey. However, in-depth interviews allowed to get a more detailed response, for instance:

“A friend is a person whom I can trust some kind of important information of mine, while being sure that the person understands my values, beliefs, principles, and it is mutual. And I understand that I feel comfortable communicating with that person, being friends with them, we have fun, and we have common interests.”

(Enlik)

Arman emphasized an additional feature of friendship that he believes:

“... I do not think that friendship is based on how often you see each other, but rather on how well you converse when you meet. In other words, how much you trust one another, how you can connect with each other.”

(Arman)

Bolat mentioned that, considering his understanding of friendship, he treats them as the closest people. He mentions the word “relative”, which in Russian can be used with actual blood relatives and with non-kin people who are very close to someone. There is no exact translation to this word in English, so this remark needs to be considered for the discussion of the results. Also, Dana emphasized that for her, friendship is an essential part of her life. Gulnur mentioned that, in her opinion, friendship does not only apply to having fun together but also to being there for each other for the worst moments of their life as well.

According to the results of coding, six of the interviewees assumed that friends have obligations to each other and named them (to be honest, not to betray, not to set up, to keep secrets, to support, to be loyal, to keep promises, and other ethical obligations that are expected from one

human being towards another), whereas the rest of the participants do not believe that friends have any obligations towards each other at all. Afterwards, the respondents talked about actions that could improve or create friendship and about actions that could, vice versa, ruin or deteriorate the relationship.

The first category did not have any ideas worth mentioning, since it was all typical and overlapped with what was said in the first two questions and in the survey. The main idea that was discussed by almost all the interviewees is a special connection and common interests, values, etc. because these aspects comprise the talks between friends, which is a crucial part of the relationship. Plus, the good moral intentions of a person could serve as a fundamental part to nurture friendship. The second category (the actions that could deteriorate or ruin friendship) mainly counterposed the previous one; however, it had some curious points as well, such as lack of attention, using a person for their own self-serving purposes, toxicity, and so on. Arman, for instance, considers disrespect as an aspect that could damage his relationships with friends:

“... when there is no respect for each other, no respect to each other’s personal boundaries or an adverse atmosphere for the friendship. Obviously, deception and other things, but mainly, the contribution of a person to friendship is determined by respect.”

(Arman)

Next, the number of the participants’ friends were also calculated to construct a background for the respondents. Via this question, the interviewee’s critical side and evaluation of friendship can be observed. For instance, if a person has a lot friends, it shows that they are very communicative and, most probably, extraverted. However, if a person has only a few friends, it could either mean that they are picky or they could have a strict definition of friendship that narrowed down the number of friends to less than 5. For this criterion, there were 3 codes used that divided the participants into categories of people who have few friends (1 to 4), many friends (5 to 10) and a lot of friends (more than 10). However, this particular question turned out to lose its meaning because the distribution of answers for each category is even – there are two respondents per each category.

When it comes to the interviewees’ expectations on how they want to be treated in friendship, all the answers were more or less similar: they all wanted support and help when needed, attention coming from their friends and their friends’ interest in their lives and problems.

One of the respondents gave quite an interesting answer on what kind of treatment they expect from a 'friend':

"I sometimes have bad days, of course, when I may doubt my actions or decisions, and when this person [friend] can be an advisor, can give a piece of advice or prompt, for instance, or even regular days, when you have some kind of an emotional burnout, you are insecure, and a person can just remind you that you have certain characteristics and personality traits, they can help you achieve that. Well, and when, for example, I am just living and suddenly I want to have fun a little, have a rest, and you can just go out with the person or with a group of friends, and enjoy your time together."

(Enlik)

Here, Enlik provides specific examples of how a friend could help her deal with her issues or keep them a company, which represents her understanding of good treatment among friends.

Besides good treatment, the interview also included a question about maltreatment. In other words, what actions of poor treatment would not be endured by the respondents and, vice versa, what actions of poor treatment would not be performed by the respondents. Prior to the interviews, I expected simple answers, such as "betrayal", "deception", "insults", and so on, which were present. However, some participants provided curious responses. One of the interviewees had a broader understanding of the question:

"To offend a person, deceive them or treat them immorally. ... [By immorally I mean] things that are beyond morals, for example, harassment and such kind of things, the ones that cross the line way too much."

(Arman)

Bolat claimed that family issues are a private matter that a 'friend' cannot meddle in by giving unnecessary advice. Enlik mentioned negative influence, such as inclining to do something the respondent does not want to do (smoking, drinking, etc.), and that a 'friend' must respect the interviewee's personal boundaries, desires and beliefs. That being said, Enlik would not do this to their friend as well, so, according to the respondent, respect should go both ways. Also, Gulnur expressed strong negativity towards people who judge them and gossip about them despite knowing that it will hurt the friend. In addition to that, Hakim also shared an unconventional idea:

“[I would not endure] disrespectful treatment. When I do not get the chance to say something or to be myself, when I would need to wear a ‘mask’ for that person.”

(Hakim)

In the next part of the interview, we discussed the priorities of the respondents in relation to friendship. Firstly, almost all the participants put family first except for Hakim, who puts family, friends and their romantic partner on the same level, as equals because they do not want to choose ‘favorites’ among his closest people. When it comes to the romantic partner only one person confessed to have put friendship above their romantic partner, while the rest divided into two groups equally: those, who put their romantic partners above friendship, and those, who put them on the same level of priority. More than a half of respondents put friendship above work, and only one person considers work to be more important than friendship. Besides that, one participant puts free time on the same level as friendship, while the rest divided into two groups equally: those, who believe that friendship is more important than their personal free time, and those, who think in the opposite way. Lastly, when it comes to values, the majority of the respondents rated them as of lower importance than friendship, while only two people put friendship above values, and one person treats them equally. The fluidity of friendship as a sociological and anthropological phenomenon can be explained through these findings as well: the participants of the study have different understanding of friendship, different expectations, obligations and priorities. These nuances may not match when two people come together, so, due to the ambiguity of the concept, these findings show one of the reasons (besides the historical aspect) why friendship does not get enough attention in sociological studies and why there are not any in Kazakhstan.

In addition to that, the interview included a question about kinship ties. Almost all the participants claimed that having a friend who is closer to them than a family member is a familiar situation for them. These respondents provided examples of such relationships. Some of them constantly keep in touch with their friends, while their meeting with relatives may happen only on holidays. Plus, all of those who shared their stories stated that their friends know them much better and are aware of what is happening in the respondents’ lives. This is the kind of connection that was described in the literature review part of this capstone project. According to Allan (2021), kin relationships are becoming less important, so the focus is shifting towards such sociable

relationships as friendship. This seems to be proved by the interview results which showed real-life examples of how relationships with friends can become closer than those with family members.

Another important topic during the interviews was betrayal. The results show that all the participants perceive betrayal similarly, by associating it with deception, lies, using people, and consciously hurting your closest ones. Out of all the respondents, more than a half have not experienced betrayal in their relationships with friends, and only one of them did. Hakim has described their situation with the ‘traitor’: the interviewee shared their secret with their former best friend which was then leaked to third parties. Despite this betrayal, Hakim did not stop this relationship, they kept seeing each other; however, after that situation, the respondent became cautious and cold to the ‘traitor’. Prior to taking the interviews, betrayals were expected to cause distrust in the victim, so the number of friends was expected to be from 1 to 5; however, the theory was not confirmed because Hakim has 5 to 10 friends.

In addition to that, Dana has shared her story of betrayal by a best friend. Even though she does not consider it serious at that moment, back at the time when this event happened, it was hard for her, and she still perceives it as an act of betrayal.

“... I liked a guy, and we were talking for some time. Then, my close friend started talking to him. As a result, they started dating, even though she knew I had feelings for him. At that moment, it was very hard on me, to be honest, and I told her to her face: “You betrayed me. Why did you do that?”, and so on. In this situation, the reasons were not major, of course, but if a similar thing happens, God forbid, with one of my friends, maybe not a boyfriend, but a husband, or, God forbid, with work or something like that, for me, this is totally not acceptable. But now we have grown up, and we are still in touch with her.”

(Dana)

As a result of this argument with Dana’s friend, her relationships with the “traitor” had changed. Their friendship grew stronger because after they talked it over, they understood each other’s feelings, and no other arguments between them happened after that. Dana still thinks that situation was an act of betrayal, but it was important for her to save their relationship, so they discussed the matter and got even closer than before. Besides that, this argument had a visible impact on the friend group that they shared:

“... We did not have that big of a friend group, there were 5 people within it. But when we stopped talking [with the “traitor”], for a couple of days, there was tension. In other words, we were in the same class, in the same group, we used to come, look at each other, and that is it, so the tension [around us, in the class] was insane.”

(Dana)

Thus, the relationships between two people can have an impact on the whole friend group and the whole community. This proves Vela-McConnell’s point on the fact that friendship builds “bridging ties” between people within a community, and when the relationships are poor, the tension within a society rises.

In the next part of the interview, we discussed what aspects of the respondents’ lives were impacted by friendship. Firstly, all of the participants stated that their habits changed, or they acquired new ones under the influence of their friends. This includes both bad and good habits. When it comes to interests, only a small part of the respondents claimed that their interests changed due to friendly relations, whereas exactly half of them have not change in their interests after starting to communicate closely with a friend. To be precise, some of them clarified that usually their interests are the reason why they befriended certain people. In other words, the respondents’ already established interests served as the common ground to build friendly relations with some of their friends, and not vice versa. Dana even tried to adapt and take up new interests but apparently it did not work.

Half of the interviewees stated that their beliefs have changed after starting to communicate closely with a friend. Three other respondents did not seem to have experienced any change in their beliefs. When it comes to values, the majority of the participants have experienced shift in this aspect of their lives, while only one person denied such a change. According to the interview results, many respondents started valuing their family and friends more, so the change was for the good.

The questions that were supposed to show tendency in the change in opinions were not so useful because the respondents’ statements divided into two groups equally: those whose opinions altered after starting to communicate closely with a friend and those who have not experienced that. Some of them believed that such changes are natural as you get to know a person more and

as you spend more time with them; others are quite stubborn about their opinions. Hakim has shared that his opinion on politics and religion is not discussed with his friends:

“... the topic of politics and religion – these are the topics that do not have a right or wrong answer. I think each side is right in their own way, and discussing something, trying to prove something to someone is hard.”

(Hakim)

This partially supports the point mentioned by Marlene Laruelle (2019) in her book “The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan”, as she reported that only a small part (10%) of the respondents of her research discussed politics with their friends, while the rest prefers not to.

When it comes to changes in personality traits, only one person denied this kind of experience, whereas the majority has confirmed that their character traits shifted under the influence of their friends. Some interviewees stated that their friends make them better versions of themselves by motivating and teaching them to be wiser, calmer, more communicative, more positive, more active, or flexible. For instance, Hakim claimed that their personality has changed quite a lot:

“I have a friend whom I know from school. Earlier, we did not use to get on well with each other, but then I reconsidered how I should communicate with her, I started looking for another approach of communication. In other words, I became more adequate, so to say. I hope you understand what I mean. I became more appropriate, more caring, and I am trying to joke less because it used to annoy her, she did not like it. In other words, I started building boundaries that I started following, and I noticed how our communication improved.”

(Hakim)

Bolat also confirmed that his friends had an impact on his personality traits:

“For instance, until grade 9 or 10, I was a quiet and calm boy, but when I started my friendship with the guys who were popular at school, I adopted their popularity and became more... well, less ordinary. ... Less shy. I started communicating with people I do not know, with people surrounding me. I started going out more.”

(Bolat)

Chinara reported that her friend made her “more ambitious, goal-oriented, and motivated”, since she was more energetic and achieving than Chinara, while the participant herself was calmer and “went with the flow”. Gulnur has also shared that her friends made her a better version of herself:

“I think, my friends make me better. I mean, my friends have a lot of positive traits, so many. I learn from them every time. In other words, I have friends who are very wise, and they teach me how I should behave in a certain situation. ... And I see how they, for example, behave in a particular situation, and I think: “Wow, that is so cool”. ... In general, they demonstrate great traits in different manifestations. I am inspired by that, and they change me for the best.”

(Gulnur)

Finally, the last question of the in-depth personal interviews was related to all the changes we had discussed with the participants. Almost all the respondents (except for one) agreed that friendship had an impact on the changes in habits, beliefs, values, opinion and personality if any of those were mentioned by the participant:

“I think, mostly, yes, it is all because of friendship. Why? Because friends... you trust them and listen to them more. I have met a lot of interesting people, who are not my friends but rather are simple acquaintances, but personally I never trusted them blindly and I try not to follow their advice. Why? Because I do not trust them. It is important for me to have trust in a person, and when I trust them, I start listening for their advice.”

(Hakim)

“I think, yes, it is because of my relationships with friends. Mostly, it was an impact of people surrounding me, I guess, because I think that I started shaping as a person after finishing school, and then, quarantine happened, 2 years, and because of that I started spending a lot of time with my friends in one city. I guess, this shaped me as a person. It had a strong impact on some of my personality traits.”

(Fariza)

This is a key finding for this capstone project. The particular reason for that is, since mindset is determined through the aspects mentioned above (to be exact, through habits, interests, beliefs, values, opinions, and personality traits), and since changes in these aspects were influenced by friendly relations, we can assume that friendship indeed had an impact on the shaping process of the Nazarbayev University students' mindsets.

In this capstone project, friendship was explored from different dimensions. Through the analysis of secondary sources and using that knowledge to conduct an online survey and personal in-depth interviews, the way friendship is perceived by the Nazarbayev University students was discovered. In particular, the NU students understand friendship as a non-romantic close relationship between people who respect, understand, support and care for each other, who are ready to help and give advice, who one can trust and rely on and share intimate details of their life. According to the results of the research, the NU students believe that friendship implies mutual interest in each other's lives and comfortable communication. The definition that was constructed by researching this particular sample roughly matches the ones provided by Western scholars. Therefore, friendship in Kazakhstan does not differ from the Western idea of this concept so much that it causes any misunderstanding or confusion, there are no significant cultural differences.

Besides that, friendship was compared to other significant aspects of the NU students' lives, and the study showed that friendship takes one of the leading positions among the sample population's priorities. Thus, friendship is indeed important to the target population, and sometimes even more than certain family members, like it was observed during the in-depth interviews. Hence, the debatable topic of counterposing kin and non-kin relations may need further research, because, according to Allan's (2021) idea and the interview results, kinship ties may get shifted away from the priorities by friendly relations.

Finally, friendship has proven to play a significant role in shaping the NU students' mindsets, as it was observed during primary research by dividing the concept of mindset and the concept of friendship into narrower parts and comparing the experiences of the sample population regarding these aspects. In addition to that, since friendship shapes people's mindsets, it can consequently shape the society, because it is directly involved in forming relationships within the community through people's behavior and interaction. Therefore, it creates social cohesion, which eventually shapes society, as it was initially stated by Vela-McConnell (2017).

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APPENDIX

Survey questions:

1. What is friendship to you? How do you understand a person is your 'friend'?
2. How many friends do you have? [0 / 1-2 / 3-5 / 6 or more]
3. How many hours a week do you spend with your friends? [0 / 1-3 / 4-6 / 7 or more]
4. What do you prefer doing when spending time with your friends? [*open question*]
5. Rate your priorities from most important to least important: [Friends / Family / Work and/or Education / Hobbies / Personal time]
6. What aspects of your life have your friends influenced? [Character traits / Habits / Opinions / Beliefs (including religion) / Values / Interests / Other:]
7. How have your friends influenced the aspects of your life above? [*open question*]

Interview questions:

1. What is friendship to you? How do you understand it?
2. What duties and obligations do friends have to each other? (defining criteria, in other words)
3. What actions can positively change your perception of a relationship with a person? When do you become friends with someone? When do your relationships get stronger?
4. What actions can negatively change your perception of a relationship with a person? When do you stop being friends with someone? When do your relationships get weaker if not ruined?
5. Do you have a lot of friends? Can you name an exact number?
6. What do you expect from someone you call "a friend"? Are there any certain actions or words that you expect from them? How would you like to be treated by "a friend"? What would you never allow "a friend" to do to you and yourself to do to "a friend"?

7. How important is friendship in your life? Are your friends more important than your family? Are your friends more important than your romantic partner?
8. Are there any examples of your relationship with a friend which is/was much stronger than a relationship with a family member that is supposed to be close based on the view of the society?
9. Are your friends more important than your job? Are your friends more important than your free time? Are your friends more important than your principles and values?
10. Do you consider [*another participant's name*] your "friend"? How would you call them?
*Clarification: possible answers are "a best friend", "a close friend", "a good (or a bonded) friend", "a friend", "a pal", "a fellow student", "a study-buddy", "an acquaintance". The question will be asked about each member of the focus group.
11. How would you rate your friendship degree with [*another participant's name*] on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest)?
12. Why do you think so? Are there any specific reasons why you are [*relationship status with members (friends, acquaintances, etc.)*]?
13. What is betrayal to you?
14. Have you ever experienced betrayal? Please, describe the situation.
15. If yes, how has it affected your relationship with the "traitor"? How has it affected your relationship with your common friends if there were any (or surrounding people)? Have you sensed tension between you / among your group of friends (or surrounding people)?
16. Are there any habits that you have acquired after starting to communicate with the participants of the study?
17. Have your interests changed after starting to communicate closely with the participants of the study?
18. Have your beliefs changed after starting to communicate closely with the participants of the study?
19. Have your values changed after starting to communicate closely with the participants of the study?
20. Has your opinion on any topic (political, religious, tastes, on other people) changed after starting to communicate closely with the participants of the study?

21. Has your personality (character traits) changed after starting to communicate closely with the participants of the study? Have you become more aggressive (compassionate, considerate, thoughtful, caring, hot-tempered, open-minded, emotional, etc.)?
22. Do you think these changes occurred due to your friendship/communication with any of the participants of this research?
23. If yes, with whom? Please, elaborate on when and how it happened.

Written consent form (survey):

Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “The role of friendship in shaping NU students’ mindset.”

Procedures. I’m inviting you to do a survey that will take about 2 minutes to complete. The survey will ask you questions about friendship, what influence it had or is having on your mindset, opinions, beliefs, values and personality, such as *What is friendship to you? How do you understand a person is your ‘friend’? Rate your priorities from most important to least important.*

Risks. The potential risks of participating in this study is risk of breach of confidentiality, but the records will be kept as securely as possible both physically and electronically.

Benefits. Anticipated benefits from this study is contribution to sociology in Kazakhstan on the topic of friendship.

Compensation. No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study through the researcher (the contacts are below).

Confidentiality & Privacy. Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The results of the study will only be available to the researcher and the supervisor.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and if agreement to participation is given, it can be withdrawn at any time without prejudice.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, or a research related injury is received, the Principal Investigator, Aisulu Kossanova, +77012230231, aisulu.kossanova@nu.edu.kz should be contacted. Any other questions or

concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, resethics@nu.edu.kz.

Statement of Consent. By clicking “I agree” below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this research study.

Oral consent form (interviews):

Introduction:

Hello. My name is Aisulu. I am conducting an interview about the impact of friendship on the mindset formation among the NU students. I’m conducting this as part of research for the capstone project at Nazarbayev University.

Study procedures:

I’m inviting you to do an interview that will take about 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will ask you questions about friendship, what influence it had or is having on your mindset, opinions, beliefs, values and personality, such as *What is friendship to you? How do you understand it? What duties and obligations do friends have to each other? How would you rate your friendship degree with [another participant’s name] on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest)?*

Risks:

Some questions may seem to violate your privacy and/or make you uncomfortable. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. And you can withdraw (stop taking part) at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Benefits:

You may be able to reflect on your relationships with the other participants of the focus group or on the changes in your mindset throughout years and due to outer influence. In addition to that, by better understanding ways in which friendship affected your opinions, beliefs, personality, values, relationships, mindset or other aspects of your life, researchers and others may be able to identify significant observations and patterns on sociology of friendship among Kazakh youth.

Compensation:

No tangible compensation will be given.

I will keep the information you tell me during the interview confidential. Information I put in my report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team (the researcher, me, and the supervisors) unless we have your permission. The records will be kept securely both physically and electronically.

Voluntary participation:

§ Your participation in this study is voluntary.

§ You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the questionnaire for whatever reason.

§ If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.

§ If you decide to stop we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.

§ This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.

§ If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

§ If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can call or email Aisulu at 8 701 223 02 31 or aisulu.kossanova@nu.edu.kz.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee

E-mail: resethics@nu.edu.kz

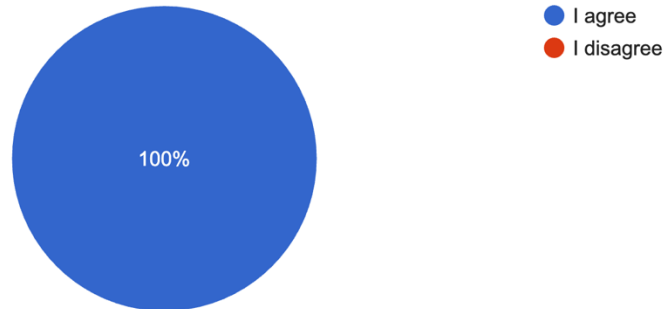
Consent questions:

- Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?
- Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point with no consequences to you?

Survey results:

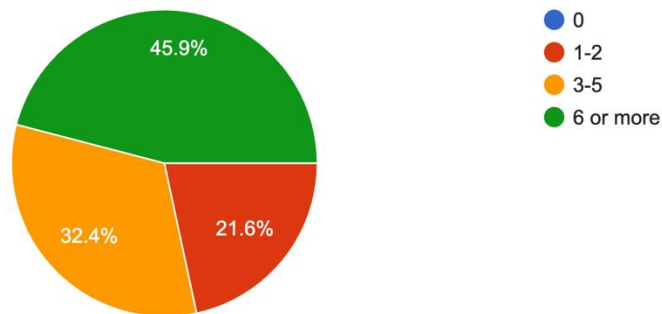
Statement of Consent. By clicking "I agree" below you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this research study.

37 responses



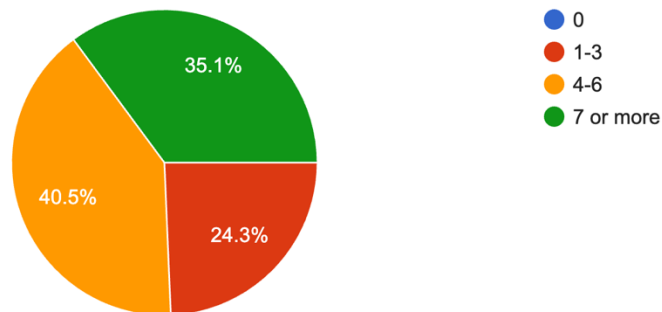
How many friends do you have?

37 responses

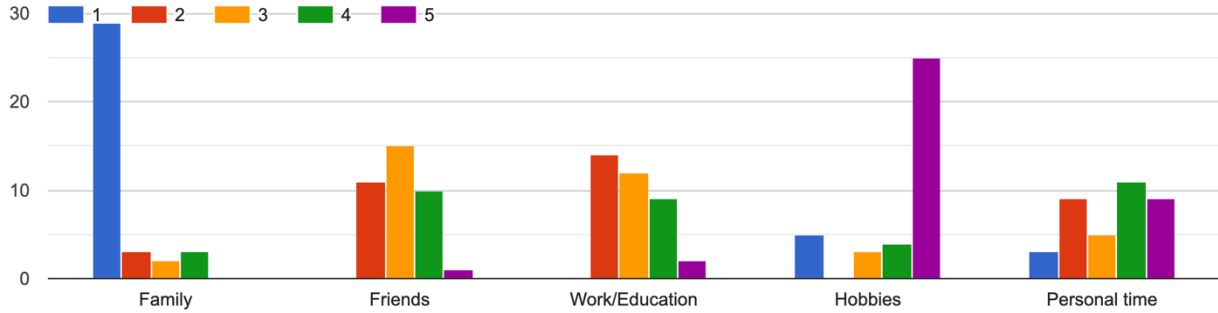


How many hours a week do you spend with your friends?

37 responses



Rate your priorities from most important (1) to least important (5)



What aspects of your life have your friends influenced?

37 responses

