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TRACKING FRIENDSHIP ACROSS SPACE AND TIME: A CASE STUDY OF A MOBILE PEER GROUP

This article explores the dynamics of personal relationships within a geographically mobile, large peer group (PG) over time. Based on a case-study of a PG examined within the broader Qualitative Longitudinal Study (QLS) on ‘Peer Groups & Migration’ in Poland, the analysis focuses on the transformations of friendships from early adolescence to adulthood. The paper sheds light on friendship relationships and gauges strength of bonds over fifteen years from a spatial perspective. By specifically examining three critical moments of the PG formation (ca. age 15), leaving home (ca. 18–19), and the current transition to mid-adulthood (ca. 27–29), a retrospective and temporally dynamic portrait of friendships continuously affected by mobility is proposed. We demonstrate the entanglement of youth friendships in space (mobility) and time, arguing that a rise of transnationalism did not alleviate the preference for having one’s friends in close spatial proximity.

Key words: migration; youth; friendship; peer group; qualitative longitudinal study (QLS)

Introduction: Friendship, Mobility and Time

Research on personal communities succeeds in demonstrating that friendships are not a primarily adolescent phenomenon and can be explored beyond the context of youth (Crosnoe et al. 2003; Pahl, Spencer 2004, 2006). The emotional underpinnings make friendships significant throughout the life-course (Pahl, Spencer 2004; Adams et al. 2000), yet the upheavals linked to transitions-to-adulthood make the lives of young people particularly attuned to the emotional support and challenges of friendships (Berndt 1992; Barry et al. 2009; Chow et al. 2011; Eisenstadt 1965). While the importance of friendships as reciprocal, emotional bonds (Pahl, Spencer 2004, 2006) has often been

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highlighted in research on becoming an adult (e.g., Berndt 1992; Barry et al. 2009; Chow et al. 2011), less is known about the impact of spatial aspect and (im)mobility on personal communities of young adults, particularly in peripheral localities (see Jones 1999). Keeping this in mind, the paper takes a retrospective look at a single and relatively large peer group (PG) originating from a medium-sized Polish town characterized by a particularly strong migration culture (Grabowska et al. 2017; see also White 2010). The so-called mobility imperatives and capacities (Cairns 2014) frame both spatial and social (un)desirability of the town of origin (later: *Town X*) for those coming of age in the era of high educational aspirations in Poland (Pustułka, Sarnowska 2021).

Drawing on the case study of a peer group drawn from a larger Qualitative Longitudinal Research on transitions-to-adulthood among Polish movers and stayers, we unpack emotional layers of friendships in relation to internal and international migration that the PG members have engaged in at different stages of early-to-mid adulthood. We use retrospective accounts collected through in-depth interviews with young adults to answer questions on the role that mobility/migration plays in terms of maintaining or breaking the bonds formed in the place of origin during adolescence. The aim of the paper is to show how the different aspects of friendship change not only over time, but also in relation to spatial dispersion of young adults who belonged to one peer group in the place of origin.

Catherine Donovan and colleagues (2001: 20) argued that most people in modern societies ‘live through very similar experiences of insecurity and emotional flux at various times of their lives, and relationships based on friendships and choice often become indispensable frameworks for negotiating the hazards of everyday life’. Based on this premise, we illustrate the emotional and spatial rationales behind certain friendships surviving or dissolving from mid-teens to early adulthood.

Research on friendships and peer groups with a Polish migration lens

The connection between friendship and peer groups (later: *PG*) constitutes a scholarly uncharted territory, perhaps due to different sub-disciplinary origins of the two terms. In particular, an interest in friendship was revived through family studies (Pahl, Spencer 2004, 2006) and PGs were explored in youth studies centring on subcultures and generations (e.g., Furlong et al. 2011). Growing popularity of research on connections made through virtual space and corresponding social network analysis affixes the notion of ‘friendship networks’ of strong and weak ties (see e.g., McCabe 2016). In this context, PG

helps retain the temporal focus on friendships commenced in adolescence where direct comparisons about individual paths can be drawn on the basis of Weber's life chances idea (1994). Reasons for bringing peer groups (as social structures) and friendships (as emotional endeavours) expands on the classic work by Eisenstadt (1965) who suggested that peer groups play an important role in socialization, specifically when social and affective bonds are being transformed during youth as a life-course stage. In this context, age-homogeneous groups composed of peers/friends act alongside intergenerational institutions (e.g., families) to ingrain societal mechanisms through socialization.

According to Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon (2004: 139), the fact that friendships are connected with the little-tangible realms of affect, emotions and pleasures explains why they were neglected by sociologists preoccupied with structures and institutions. However, as '[t]here is something about friendship that appears to be quintessentially post-modern' (Pahl 2000: 166), we are expectedly witnessing a notable revival of friendship as a topic in the 21st-century social research (e.g., Allan 2008; Pahl, Spencer 2004, 2006). Michael Argyle's (1999: 194–195) views of friends as 'those we trust and enjoy the company of' directly highlights the elusiveness of friendships and their concurrent demands: voluntariness, equality, shared interests and the inherent trust attached to the relation (e.g., Pahl 2000; Roseneil, Budgeon 2004). Thus, friendship studies postulate the need to locate the empirically examined relationships in respective social contexts (Allan 1998). And yet, precisely because friendships hinge on a relational and impermanently achieved quality of the evanescent relationship between people (Pahl, Spencer 2006), it is hard to operationalize them as an analytical category, particularly in cross-cultural applications (Szarota 2014).

The main challenge here is to 'unpack' friendship in a given context of the micro-social, emotional worlds of a person (Pahl, Spencer 2004: 203). While a dedicated research strand investigates the meaning of friend groups for the transition from adolescence to adulthood (e.g., Berndt 1992; Barry et al. 2009; Chow et al. 2011), this is not the case for migration research, wherein friendships are commonly concatenated with the lens of migrants' familial and extra-familial networks (Boyd 1989; Ryan 2015). Researching mobility is also prone to focusing on spatial dimensions, such as ruptures and transnational maintenance of significant ties back home or making new friends as a precondition for belonging in the destination state (Gill, Bialski 2011; Ryan 2015; Sinanan, Gomes 2020).

As a counterpoint, we follow Graham Allan (1998: 684–687) who urges an interactional view of friendships and argues that friendships should be explored in terms of their distinct 'natural histories' which might impinge on people's life trajectories. Such an application makes it possible to account for at least

two contextual issues. First, it directly connects friendships/peer groups and migration by embedding ‘natural histories’ of friendships in the migration culture of the semi-peripheral Polish Town X, situated more than 100 km away from larger urban centres of culture and academic life (see Grabowska et al. 2017). The locality has a specific social DNA of being one of the largely industrial monocultures inherited from the previous socio-economic system and spatially situated in a traditional, conservative part of Poland. Circular and seasonal migration linked to economic downturn was popular throughout 1980s and 1990s (see also Jaźwinska, Okólski 2001) and the EU accession in 2004 pushed out vast numbers of X residents to search for work in the Western Europe. With the absence of higher-education institutions and service jobs, migration culture is palpably ingrained in socialization (Botterill 2011), normalizing mobility of secondary schooling graduates (see also Jones 1999).

Secondly, looking at ‘natural histories’ reveals the specificity of what friendship means in Poland. On the one hand, there is a contemporary alignment of Polish friendship meanings with the Anglo-Saxon understandings (Szarota 2014), happening as part of other personal relationships also ‘catching up’ to the West (Pustułka et al. 2021). On the other hand, the meanings underscore the trait of assistance in life-crisis situations (Wiśniewska 2008), which devolves on socializational and structural meanings of bonds during transitions (Eisenstadt 1965). Moreover, friendships and peer-groups have been mainly researched within Polish education studies. Mariola Szczepańska and Elżbieta Gaweł-Luty (2010) focused on the developmental friendship framework for school-use, showcasing the pedagogic benefits of friendship among children and teenagers, whereas Grzegorz Humenny and Paweł Grygiel (2017) discerned gendered and class-based homogeneity within peer relations of primary school leavers. While research adopting psychological framework contributes to the knowledge on friendships in Poland in light of psychosocial development (e.g., Wasilewska 2013) or social competences (Prusiński 2017), there is a clear gap in the sociological research, particularly in terms of spatial (mobility/immobility) and temporal dimensions of friendships.

Therefore, the ‘natural histories’ (Allan 1998) or friendship/peer-group trajectories in a given social context warrant a typology that accounts for emotions vis-à-vis other aspects of social bonds, such as Ray Pahl’s (2000) adaptation of Aristotelian ideas of friendships related to benefits, pleasure and true connection. Utility-friends, who are usually limited to one arena of our lives, reliably remit benefits in a balanced way. Conversely, friends linked to pleasure are supposed to provide support, protection and perseverance in the face of a soulless world around us (ibid: 167), so such type of a relation does not necessarily need to be equal. For both these categories of friends, spatial distance may pose significant challenges (Gill, Bialski 2011), as migrants might be unable to reciprocate

assistance ‘here’ and ‘there’, while sharing quality time with friends is limited to transnational home visits and/or virtual space (Hiller, Franz 2004). Mobile individuals often express feeling out of place ‘back home’ and worry about non-migrants taking advantage of them (Bell, Pustulka 2017). Finally, soulmates are the ‘pure friends’, made selflessly and on an egalitarian footing (Pahl 2000). These true friends are bestowed with unlimited trust, which, theoretically, could make these friendships spatially-independent.

In addition, a handful of concepts expand the classic typology. ‘Toxic friendships’ have negative implications on adolescence and young adults (e.g., Abrams, Terry 2017), whereas ‘fossil friendships’ may only be residual, ebbing and flowing as ‘convoys’ with varying relational strength (Pahl, Spencer 2006: 98). These are interlaced with mobility plans and desires, since friendships engender certain social identities forged in the microcosms of peer groups that may foster accumulation of social, academic and cultural capital (e.g., Crosnoe et al. 2003). Although friendship reflects individual and agentic choice of significant ties, it remains continuously connected to social structures pivotal for social cohesion (Pahl, Spencer 2004: 71, see also Eisenstadt 1965).

During adolescence peers overtake parents and other adults as agents guiding choices and actions of youngsters (Harris 1995; Eisenstadt 1965), whereas the PG itself becomes a site of socialization (Arnett 2014) in the form of ‘an individual’s small, relatively intimate group of peers who interact on a regular basis’ (Ryan 2000: 102). It has an informal and discrete character since friendship relations contained to PGs are manifested through shared events and engagement in experimentation. They also evoke the meaning of a localized youth culture, conveying a recurrent or unique experience in certain localities (Corsaro, Eder 1990), also in the face of out-mobility as a typically destructive force for maintaining friendships over time (Pahl, Spencer 2006; Jones 1999)

Methodology

The analysis conducted for this paper relies on data collected during a large-scale Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) and implemented through socio-temporal tracking of ‘change in the making’ proposed by Neale (2018). The study – titled *Education-to-domestic and- foreign labour market transitions of youth: The role of local community, peer group and new media* - focused on how locality and mobility shape the processes of transitions to adulthood. It investigated peer groups as micro-social-structures that typically gather people with comparable backgrounds and life-chances (Corsaro, Eder 1990; Ryan 2000; Weber 1994).

The research relied on three waves of in-depth individual interviews carried out between 2016 and 2020, with the final pool of 211 interviews (n=111 respondents in Wave 1 – including *Egos* and their networks where possible, followed by diminishing numbers in Wave 2 and 3 due to funnelling and attrition; see also Neale 2018). Deliberate and snowballing recruitment strategies were employed in the project. The project received approval from the relevant Research Ethics Committee at the implementing institution. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with information about the study (anonymity, right to withdraw, data use, etc.) and asked to sign a consent form. Good practices of studying peer groups and networks meant that ‘no research material has been shared between interviewees; (...) it ensured internal privacy and unbiased reconstructions of personal relations’ (Grabowska et al. 2017; Pustułka et al. 2017). IDIs were conducted mainly face-to-face, with digital methods implemented sporadically for those who lived abroad.

For this particular analysis, eight accounts from members of a single peer group were chosen. The work was, therefore, thought out as an explanatory case-study approach (Stake 2008), informed by the evidence of entanglements between emotions/space or friendship/mobility in the examined accounts. Notably, standard guidelines were followed when it came to delineating a PG¹, as the project employed a self-selection method to determine who the closest friends of a person were (Ryan 2000; Pustułka et al. 2017). Sociograms were used to visualize social and spatial distances (Pahl, Spencer 2004) and interviewees narrated the story of peer group relations retrospectively from secondary school to early adulthood.

While the peer group in focus was larger (around 20 people during adolescence), the reconstruction on the basis of eight young adults who agreed to participate in the project clearly has certain limitations. The narrative given by the *Ego*, who was the initially recruited international migrant was prioritized as a reference, but later fine-tuned and validated through supplementation of data from other interviewees. Thanks to sociograms, it was possible to determine social links within a PG as interdependent relations between *Ego* and *Alters* in a social context of migration, both subjectively and contrapuntally to the interpretation of *Others*.

¹ The recruitment for the study was complex and deviated from an ideal model of having an Alpha migrant who recruits their friends and facilitates participation of an entire PG. With many relationships broken over time, alternative strategies had to be used and are described in a dedicated article by Pustułka and co-authors (2017). In the case of the case-study PG, a *Mixed Recruitment model* signifies that an *Ego-migrant* was relatively detached and provided contact details for half of the interviewees while others were recruited through a *Beta* contact who was still a PG member and facilitated contacts of the field researcher.

Our work followed rigorous steps of interpretive analysis (Miles, Huberman 1994: 8–12). After meticulous transcription of recordings (voice-to-text), a data reduction phase included developing and applying codes to all material in the Atlas.ti software. Themes, patterns, and relationships concerning the created codes were uncovered through case grids and vignettes as data-displays (Neale 2018; Miles, Huberman 1994). Combining individual narratives from eight members of the peer group allowed us to recreate crucial events of collective and ‘natural histories’ (Allan 1998) of temporal and spatial developments of friendships whilst obtaining adequate corroboration (see also Neale 2018). In other words, saturation was reached and we could learn about various PG members ‘then and now’.

Getting to know the case-study peer group

In this paper, we contextualize the peer group and ascribe it with a dedicated pseudonymized-name: *Pirates*. The pathways of the *Pirates* PG members should be viewed through a prism of altering relations through time and life-course stages (Neale 2018) with an additional lens of migration culture (White 2010). Drawing to an extent on Russel King and colleagues’ extensive review of youth migration types, causes and challenges (2016), we situate this study on the meso-level of locality (see also Jones 1999), wherein the EU youth migration continues to span economic, educational and lifestyle migration, also among Polish young adults (Pustułka et al. 2019).

From an analytical standpoint, the structure of the *Pirates* PG is built around Mirek², who is the *Alpha/Ego* and an international migrant living in a large German city since 2011. Other interviewees included a *Beta* contact Bogumila, who appears to have been a social intermediary between various members of the PG: girls and boys, movers and stayers, still-members and current-non-members. The remaining interviewees were Janina, Kornelia, Nadia, Tolek, Kamil and Sebastian. Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees include the fact that they were all born in 1988 and today have higher education and relatively stable jobs. At the conclusion of the study (2020), two were living abroad, five resided in large Polish cities and one was based in the locality of origin. We additionally identified several non-research participants – specifically Konrad, Gosia, Adek, Jaga and Aneta – who recurred across accounts and/or were deemed various types of ‘friends’ by *Ego/Mirek*.

² All respondents were given pseudonyms. Other identifiable information was also altered to ensure anonymity, although as much original detail as possible was preserved.

The analysis follows a temporal logic of the critical moments (Thomson et al. 2002) founded firmly on the dynamics of spatial connectivity and dispersion. Phase 1 concerns establishing this PG and friendships by the age of 15 in the locality of origin – *Town X*. Phase 2 is linked to the transformation of the PG when the respondents were leaving home (i.e. becoming an adult at 18, graduating secondary school and migrating internally), with due attention given to how studying in different cities impacted on the pre-existing bonds. Phase 3 presents the shape of the PG of members being in their late-twenties, looking particularly at the friendship experiences of those who moved abroad.

The birth of friendship

The *Pirates* PG was established when the majority of its members were around 13 to 15-years-old, which corresponds to attending former middle-schools known as *Gymnasiums* in Poland. The crucial period when the PG flourished came later, specifically during high-school years (ages 16–19). During early adolescence, the impulse for the PG's emergence was a summer camp attended by Mirek and many future-members. Importantly, the *Pirates* lived in very different parts of *Town X* and attended various schools. This in a sense made the PG initially appear delocalized: hanging out for these youngsters resulted neither from a simple proximity of living in the same neighbourhood, nor from attending the same school. Educational institutions – often highlighted in PG research (Harris 1995) – were not important for establishing the *Pirates* PG, though – arguably – they later paved the way for the friendships' ending.

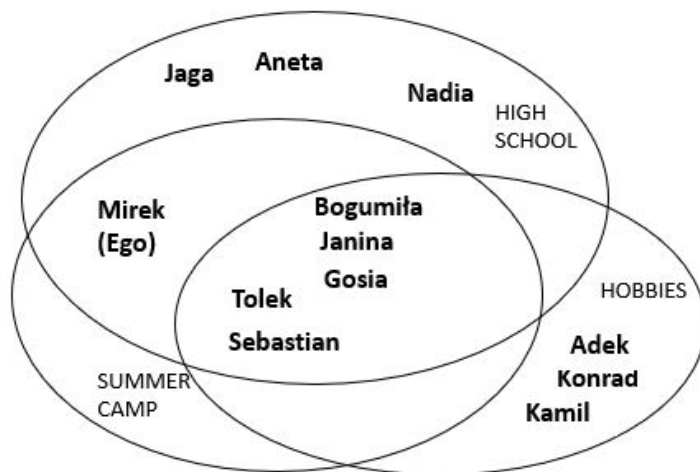
As we focus on the PG beginnings, the locality of a medium-sized town stands at a centre of what brought the youngsters together. Firstly, for many respondents the time in *Town X* is narratively confined to meaningful PG friendships in the recollections of key events. Secondly, *Town X* was generally perceived by members as relatively constricting and 'small', with emotional criticism of the locality serving as an integrative factor for friendships.

By the time our *Ego*/Mirek met Bogumila, Sebastian and Janina, the three have already known each other from earlier years in school and extracurriculars. Interestingly, the space comes to play through an event of being away from the place of origin in that the youngsters recognized each other as 'pleasant to be around' during a summer camp at the seaside:

It was the end of middle-school and (PG started) through summer camps in Jastarnia which I went to for five years straight [...] The connections were made on holidays and then we returned to X and maintained the group. It naturally evolved into friendships that simply lasted longer. We met after school (but) school was not important then [Mirek, Alpha-Ego]

A new group of friends continued to spend time together, being joined by ‘friends of friends’, introduced by the core of the pack, especially as they have chosen different secondary schools.

Figure 1. Sources of PG members



At the beginning, it appears that many bonds were formed rather at random or on the basis of earlier connections (see Pahl 2000; McCabe 2016). Mirek went to school with Janina but they initially did not like each other. However, they both liked their classmate Nadia and ultimately became more of a trio. While Mirek reflected on ‘connections’ from summer camp, Janina knew another tight bunch – Bogumiła, Sebastian and Gosia – from earlier education and scouting, with the latter also connecting them to a pair of boys from across town – Konrad and Tolek. The male duo, together with Sebastian, brought in more boys into the group, with Kamil and Adek becoming the closest to the core. The only outlier was Kornelia, who spent time with PG members but was only considered a very close friend by Mirek. Given the twenty or even thirty members at its height of *Pirates* as the ‘party group’ during late teens, it is understandable that affinity and proximity levels varied (see also Pahl, Spencer 2006):

[We were] 25, up to 30 people. It is always the case that there are some bonds with more affection, some partially important, and some a bit more distant. But it is still a whole group. For instance, when I was hosting a party at home – a BBQ or a late dinner – and invited friends, then about 30 people would usually show up [Mirek]

This statement could point us to considerable resources at the disposal of youngsters in the group, yet in fact a closer look at socio-economic backgrounds

of the PG members revealed a great deal of heterogeneity. The *Pirates* lived in dwellings ranging from tiny flats to grand houses, and their parents were just as often highly-educated as had vocational training with corresponding jobs. The social markup sets the *Pirates* apart from commonly studied groups and cliques, which are usually self-recruited homogeneously (Ryan 2000; Kandel 1978; Humenny, Grygiel 2017).

Lack of both spatial proximity and social class homophily points to an alternative rationale as to how the PG came to be so long-lasting and vital. Indeed, the bonds between members were predominantly rooted in emotional disclosures during leisure activities. It also evoked a heartfelt notion of ‘coming of age’ in a particular environment of a medium-sized town. Hence, it can be argued that various friendships comprised relations of utility and pleasure (Pahl 2000) as educational goals were realized elsewhere. Youngsters instead connected across schools and districts, building their friendship on frequenting ‘forbidden’ places:

[We used to go to Lucky Strike...] which was a horrible bar, a complete dive. We were always sold and served alcohol there, even when we were 15. Of course, everybody knew we were minors [Mirek]

Pirates similarly gathered to hold libations at allotments, wherein one of the members had a garden shed. The interviewees talked about these places as sites of experimentation (see Arnett 2014). Although literature often described consumption of regulated substances as a pathway to youth delinquency (Urberg et al. 1997), here it was rather remembered as ‘a cure to forget’ the town’s spatial isolation and resulting lack of opportunities. Interviewees linked drinking to three dimensions: boredom, facilitated socializing, and a type of *rite de passage* that guided them into adulthood. Living in a microcosm of a non-anonymous locality, youngsters searched for ways to acquire social skills needed later in life (Crosnoe et al. 2003; Arnett 2014).

Throughout the later teens, the PG members developed a socio-spatial rhythm of events. Besides the local places where they gathered without adult supervision, forged intimate relations and experienced emotional heartbreaks together, they continued their quests at spatial distancing from *Town X* by traveling to festivals and concerts. The passage of time was marked with birthday parties that culminated with turning 18:

I associate this (youth) period with a good group of friends. With parties which started at the end of middle-school and then went on all throughout high school. A series of 18th birthday parties as well. It was such a great time in my life. [Nadia]

Once again, the limitations of locality’s offer in terms of spaces of leisure meant a repetitive nature of all PG events across space and time intervals. In the

narratives, these were criticized as Mirek said that *'except for scouting groups, there was nothing (for youth to do) in X'*. Nevertheless, Nadia said that it was then that she *'met many people who are still – to a certain degree – my friends or even very close friends. It was carefree time, no duties, no work. We studied, but had a lot of free time (for friendships)'*.

Towards the end of high-school, people started to move their friendships more into the realm of seeking soulmates and determining real connections (see Pahl 2000). In small groups, they watched indie movies and bands or went hiking. Most importantly, in the trusted dyads or triads, they debated their future and upcoming educational decision-making. In retrospect, they underscored that their discussion topics were distinct and unfitting with the town's ethos of pragmatism and industrial entrepreneurship, as they tended to debate philosophy, theatre and fine arts. This way, the PG was a particular space of socialization (Arnett 2014; Eisenstadt 1965), which allowed people to develop critical thinking and find emotional support in the town generally dubbed as spatially and socially 'limiting'. The early-years *Pirates* attached inherent confidentiality and trust to their bonds (Pahl 2000). This was connected with social control and strong migration culture (White 2010). In short, *Pirates* started to uncover their true friendships and identified soulmates (Pahl 2000) that had similar plans about escaping *Town X*.

Leaving home and friendships in transition

As noted above, *Pirates'* relationships in time shifted from utility and pleasure to true connection (Pahl 2000). This trend appears reversed as the large PG began to fracture when certain members ceased to be beneficial to one another. The underplayed heterogeneity of class status recurred in full force during the final year of high-school, as youngsters faced future-related pressures from schools and parents (see also Pustułka, Sarnowska 2021). The relationships were fluctuating and school-based dyads and triads became more significant. This was a particularly difficult period for *Alpha/ Mirek* as he last-minute decided to pursue a place at a much-coveted university program in Engineering. It meant he was away at university city for a preparatory course on weekends and some friends started to question his loyalty or priorities:

This was a reality check, a moment of truth for friends. [I could see] whether they would be offended that I became so oriented on myself. Some people were really angry that I was not so engaged [in PG activities] anymore. They did not understand that [getting into university] was important for me. This was a certain moment where I made a choice [to focus on me] [Mirek]

This orientation features a clear goal and willingness to give up some of the possibly 'toxic' friendships (see also Abrams, Terry 2017) over the dream

of university-escape. While Janina and Nadia also focused on educational ambitions, Tolek, Sebastian, Kamil and – to an extent – Bogumiła – became a backbone of the PG. The leisure events kept taking place without the members who were ‘mentally’ already in different places. Janina and Nadia started seeing *Pirates*’ parties as unappealing: they met new people with sophisticated hobbies through study groups and concluded that at that point the truth of emotional bond was no longer there in the original PG.

With final exams approaching, all PG members were very much focused on leaving *Town X*, yet there was another dividing line because some planned to study in City Z while others had diverging locality preferences. In general, it transpired that everybody hoped for the best and the friendship became a convoy of a certain mobility dream (Pahl, Spencer 2006). During the summer following the A-levels, *Pirates* organized a trip to do water sports in the Polish Lake District and this event now seems to be a sort of a ‘last hurrah’ for maintaining PG friendships. The event – again happening ‘away’ from a spatial perspective – was described as an emotional turning point and a realization of the transitory phase for the PG. Specifically, it was that particular autumn when three socio-spatial patterns emerged with relation to *Old Pirates*, *New Pirates* and ex-members.

First, the *Old Pirates in Town X* carried out without a major change and with the same leisure-cantered focus, mostly realized through friendships of utility and pleasure. Tolek, Sebastian and Adek remained in Town X after failing to secure university places. Some of them engaged in seasonal labour migration, for example Adek worked in construction in Germany. Second, *New Pirates in City Z* moved the PG activities to the university town that was chosen as a place of study by Mirek, Nadia, Bogumiła, Kamil and Gosia, with some of them even renting flats together and combining the belief in their soulmate connections with utility friendships (Pahl 2000). It appears that the continuation of friendship here was based on the locality once again: the members stuck together because they had shared memories and perhaps felt more comfortable without having to face the ‘big city’ alone. Though they studied at different departments across various institutions, their shared activities stayed the same. Dissent came when opportunities in the city Z collided with the mentality of Town X:

It was always the same party, same stories, same jokes, same people and same topics. It was really nothing interesting. For me it never moved forward, it stopped making me curious at some point. City Z gave me so much more, a whole new spectrum of new friends, contacts, genuinely interesting and great people. I suddenly discovered that the old contacts [with PG members] started to disappear; I simply did not need it anymore.
[Mirek]

In a nutshell, for Mirek people from *Town X* became increasingly associated with close-mindedness, stagnation, and lack of ambition, mirroring the pattern already experienced earlier by Janina and Nadia. Conversely, others continued to maintain a very strong relation with the locale and each other, underscoring the importance of long-lasting PG bonds' stability.

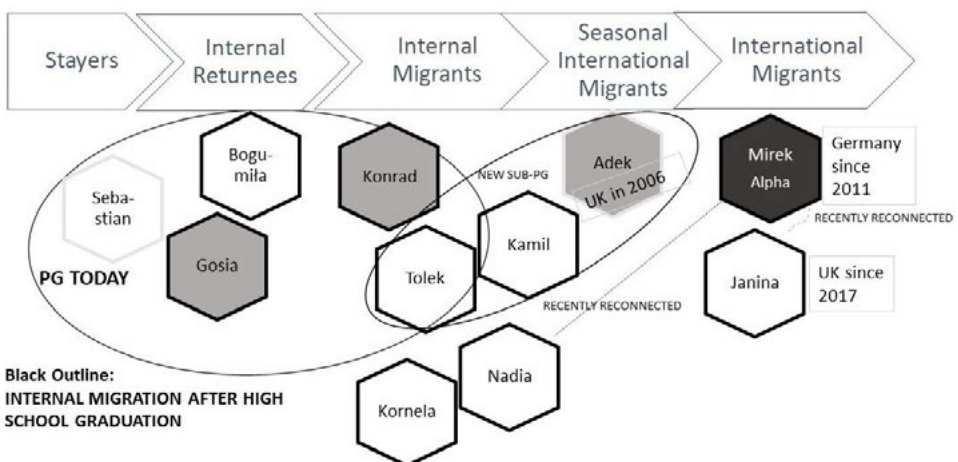
Finally, the third spatial shift related to those who neither stayed in *X*, nor moved to *Z*. The spatial distance – for instance in the case of Janina who moved to the capital city and already saw the bonds as 'shallow' or 'fossil'-like (Pahl, Spencer 2006) - meant a cessation of their PG membership.

Thereby, it can be argued that spatial proximity can be redefined to incorporate a new locality, but has not become multi-local in this case because PG membership was a push factor for migration that exclusively happened from *Town X* to *Town Z*. In addition, internal migration to places other than *Z* had detrimental effects for youth friendships for those factually absent from the PG-validated localities.

What lasts and what breaks: adolescent friendships in young adulthood

About 15 years have passed between the establishing of the PG and the initial interviews. Looking at individual trajectories in recent years illuminates that mobility is the feature of Pirates' young lives. Once again, there is a sense of continuity and change: while *Old Pirates* in *X* were not affected, tables have turned on *City Z* losing traction. Figure 2 below presents PG members on the mobility continuum, as well as denotes the bonds that continue to exist.

Figure 2. Pirates PG today



Upon graduating from university, Gosia was the first to return home to X to take over a family business. She was followed by Bogumiła who was offered a job in the area. Together with Sebastian (who never left X), the trio appears to constitute the core of *Old Pirates* in X today and mostly meet for ‘going out’ and drinks, just like before. They still party with some of the men – particularly Tolek and Konrad – who live in larger Polish cities. From the narratives, one can denote a new male subgroup gathered those who were less successful with their educational pursuits and, instead, engaged in labour/economic migration. Our *Alpha*, Mirek, has had continuously limited contact with PG members with the exception of Janina who became the second PG member to settle abroad.

Town X undoubtedly plays a vital role as a relational space: this is where the PG still exists and where even the non-members sometimes meet, either accidentally or in a planned manner during the holiday home visits. Like previously researched migrants (Bell, Pustułka 2017), our respondents did not feel particularly welcomed or attached to X. At the same time, the narratives about friendships from the PG realm strongly focus on locality and friendship convoys or fossils (Pahl, Spencer 2004, 2006). Nadia, for example, underscores that ‘*The association [between X and people] is still the same: when I come to X, I meet these and those people from [...] school times [and nobody else new]*’. This notion of X being a key aspect that brings people together was even more apparent for Kornelia:

I have noticed that friend groups from X are very tight. I have acquaintances [from X] that have been friends since primary school [...] and from Facebook I know that they go to each other’s weddings and every year take a group photo. There are ten of them and they’re still friends!

Kornelia here talks about *Pirates* though she is no longer a member of this group. Indeed, our *Old Pirates* share a feeling of trust and enjoy each other’s company (see Argyle 1999: 194–195). The bond evinces its presence when important life events occur, for instance as Tolek was a best man at Konrad’s wedding and Bogumiła was also in attendance. Overall, the friendships in *Old Pirates* continue as before, despite the members entering next life phases. In a way, the place of residence determines the inclusion and exclusion practices, as relations are primarily maintained among the chosen PG members when they visit *Town X*.

This turned out differently in the case of *New Pirates in City Z* because the latter lost relevance. After graduation, most members moved on – either back to X to be absorbed by *Old Pirates* (e.g. Bogumiła and Gosia), or migrating further away. Mirek has said that there was a pattern of ‘*Town X goes to City Z and then they ultimately leave Z behind again*’. City Z seems to have played a ‘stop-over’ role from a spatial perspective. In terms of where the young adults move to, at

least three routes can be observed. First, international migrants like Mirek or Janina chose to settle abroad. Secondly, people migrate internally to the Polish capital or other prosperous cities in search of professional success (Konrad, Kamil, Kornelia). Thirdly, one can observe a seesawing trend of incomplete-return migration, for instance when Nadia went back to the regional capital near X after getting married and pregnant. This was explained by a desire to be in a city large enough for good employment, yet close enough to X to receive family support as a new parent. Conversely, Nadia's attempt at reviving bonds with the *Pirates* peer group at a local/regional level has failed:

I hoped that moving back to Y would mean re-establishing contact [...] but I have an impression that there is no desire to do this on the other side. I tried many times, since I moved here [...] but we have only seen each other once. Therefore, I no longer see potential in this friendship.

The physical distance during the university and following years has grown and eroded Nadia's bonds. Unlike in other cases, there were no 'toxic' elements here, but the 'fossil' relation (see Pahl, Spencer 2006) still could not be rebuilt. A sentiment towards the high school friendship explains why Nadia has recently reached out and reconnected with Mirek.

For Mirek, an argument rooted in basic moral values ruptured one of his strongest PG friendships with Konrad who became a 'toxic' friend (Pahl, Spencer 2006; Abrams, Terry 2017), politically disapproving of Mirek's life choices and emotionally causing rifts between his old friend and remaining PG connections. This precluded Mirek from partaking in PG activities as Konrad had a stronger hold with *Old Pirates*. Unlike Janina, who left the PG more or less voluntarily, Mirek was somewhat pushed out. Nevertheless, with a passage of time, he now meets some of the *Pirates* when geographical coincidence allows: he saw Nadia during a business trip and hosted Tolek when he had an art exhibition abroad.

To sum up, geographical distance remains deterministic for the PG as a whole in that *Old Pirates* in X retained localized friendships that never 'fossilized' despite the passage of time. Spatial dimension does not have the same effect for dyadic friendships, which tend to continue successfully in transnational or virtual space. On that note, the role of social media cannot be overlooked as PG members talked about their passive and active presence in their friends' online lives. Specifically, many raised the point of being connected on Facebook despite not having spoken for years. Some interviewees were no longer friends, yet still knew everything about one another's jobs, partners and lives from social media. Moreover, virtual space is also important for active maintenance of bonds, as Bogumiła specified that the *Old Pirates* make plans to meet online and use Facebook for communications (see Valkenburg, Peter 2009). Conversely, Sebastian was adamant that the essence of the PG stems from them actually

meeting in a physical locality of X, with those away no longer being his friends. This was quite the opposite for Mirek or Janina who emphasized that bonds can be well-maintained at a distance. They continued their dyadic friendship and other relations virtually, believing it sufficient to only meet with a friend face-to-face once every few years.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the peer-group and its dynamics over time presented in this article is a strong contribution to youth studies (see Jones 1999; Arnett 2014), elaborating on the specific junction of friendship/emotions and space/mobility that is still under-researched in the Polish context. The focus on a particular, localized example of a youth micro-social world contained in a peer group allowed us to depict how emotional underpinnings of friendships may be overridden by spatial distance in the face of a prevalent migration culture (White 2010).

The paper broadly concurs that international and internal mobility may be destructive towards maintaining friendships over time (Pahl, Spencer 2006; Jones 1999), albeit in a nuanced way. Migrants are more attuned to the use of technology and see a plethora of ICT/social media as a way to maintain friendships with those they consider their soulmates or true, trusted friends (Pahl 2000). Physical co-presence facilitates re-establishment of selected bonds rooted in adolescence for those abroad, yet does not work in the same way for everyone. On the contrary, stayers have less interest in altering the bonds that have always been rooted in the locality. Their friendships seem to continue through utility and pleasure (Pahl 2000) with those spatially 'close by', while other bonds become lax with distance. Certain ambiguity surfaces when it comes to returnees: some may be welcome with open arms whereas others are unable to re-establish the friendships founded locally. This can be explained by the fact that 'fossil' friendships can operate through social media on a shallow level when Facebook, for instance, can be used as a way to jog the memory about the past and spark interpretations of the present. However, only 'true friends' and those seen as loyal, trustworthy soulmates with whom emotional past was shared (Pahl, Spencer 2004, 2006), were let back in.

Revisiting Ray Pahl and Liz Spencer's (2006) classifications, those who never left or returned to Town X can be said to exhibit a bounded friendship mode, which entails reliance on friends made in the 'golden era' of late teens, focused on leisure and 'going out'. In other words, the *Old Pirates* in Town X may experience new life phases, but their friendship has not been dramatically altered and reflects a mixture between the soulmates and pleasure-based bonds

in Pahl's terms (2000). The fact that the PG decreased in size from ca. 20 to just a handful of members also demonstrates that during high school many young *Pirates* treated the bonds in a utilitarian way: the group simply furnished opportunities for leisure and pleasure. Quite evidently, this type of friendship could not have lasted outside of X or beyond youth as a life stage.

A serial friendship mode (Pahl, Spencer 2006) can be found among the *Pirates* who became distant – both spatially and figuratively – around the first transition of moving away after high school graduation and looking for friends based on 'true connections' at university (Pahl 2000). Some merge the above two patterns and are the closest to the evolving friendship mode (Pahl, Spencer 2006) which signified still being a *Pirate*, yet allowing for bonds with those who were pushed out of the PG due to toxic friendships.

More broadly, this article relied on the type of sociological miniaturism (Harrington, Fine 2000: 313) in order to show that peer groups can illuminate wider social entanglements in the processes linked to emotions and mobility/migration. As personal identities mirror the kaleidoscopic nature of the surrounding society, friends can serve as an affine guiding force for our intimate and emotional worlds (Donovan et al. 2001). Peer-based bonds buffer and convoy transitional woes of socialization (Eisenstadt 1965). The investigated *Pirates* PG was locally-bound but made it possible for young people keen on leaving X behind to find like-minded youngsters who supported their ambitions. At the turning point of deciding on tertiary education, it transpired that some PG members indeed had a contested view on X and acted upon this, whereas others still saw it as the orienting point in which their lives were to be spatially and emotionally anchored forever.

Further, virtual space is a new and alternative space that did not exist for *Pirates* during high school period but emerged as a way to check on past-friends in adulthood (see Laniado et al. 2017; Décieux et al. 2018). Social media offer insights into how others are doing, so the *Pirates* remain a reference point for self-definition, even if the bonds are no longer there and the spatial distance is vast. Still, in spite of transnational and virtual realms being available for reference and perfunctory contact, the interviewees continuously preferred to have their friend groups in close spatial proximity across life-course stages from adolescence to mid-adulthood. In that sense, we conclude that – contrary to predictions - even the most coveted Pahl's 'soulmate' friendships (2000) are not spatially-independent. With many medium-sized localities across the entire Europe experiencing similar fate to Town X in terms of youngsters moving away, broader evidence of this pattern could feed into recommendations (see also King et al. 2016) about means of assisting highly-mobile European generations in creating and maintaining sustainable friendship networks beyond traditionally conceived peer-groups rooted in local communities of origin.

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