

Cross Cultural Analysis of Amatonormativity in Close Friendships

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Abstract: *This study investigates the cross-cultural manifestations of amatonormativity—the societal assumption that romantic relationships are the most valuable and universal form of intimacy—and its influence on close friendships in the United States and China. Drawing from Professor Elizabeth Brake’s (2012) conceptualization of compulsory romance, this research examines how individuals prioritize, perceive, and experience intimacy within non-romantic relationships. Using an original 26-item self-report questionnaire, data were collected from 214 participants (59 from the U.S. and 155 from China) to assess attitudes toward romantic and platonic intimacy, the impact of romantic involvement on friendships, and cultural variation in amatonormative beliefs. Quantitative analyses revealed that U.S. participants generally valued friendships more highly than romantic relationships, whereas Chinese participants regarded both as similarly important. Across both samples, participants expressed a desire for deeper emotional closeness in friendships than they perceived as socially “normal,” suggesting an internalized constraint shaped by amatonormative norms. These findings indicate that while amatonormativity is present in both cultural contexts, its expression and influence differ according to age, social expectation, and cultural discourse surrounding romance and family. This research contributes to ongoing discussions on asexuality and aromanticism by highlighting how compulsory romance structures everyday understandings of intimacy and friendship across societies.*

Keywords: *Amatonormativity, Compulsory Romance, Marriage, Friendship, Intimacy Expectations*

1. Introduction

Forming romantic relationships is regarded as common humanity. In the past few years, scholars who studied asexuality and aromanticism have been exploring and questioning the social and institutional forces that contributed to such universality (Rich 1980, Sprecher and Felmlee 2021).^[1] Professor Elizabeth Brake (2012) coined the term amatonormativity, meaning compulsory romance, to describe the societal belief that a “central, exclusive, amorous relationship” is a “universally shared goal” for all humans. This normative assumption regards romantic relationships as “valuable relationships,” while devaluing other forms of intimate relationships, such as friendship or chosen family.^[4] It is important to specify that the romantic relationship Brake describes adheres to the most conventional and narrow definition: monogamous, long-term, sexual, and romantically involved (Carroll and Wenzel 2025)^[5]. This definition does not account for broader or non-normative forms of romantic connection, such as polyamorous or asexual romantic relationships. For the purposes of applying this framework to my analysis, I will adopt this specific definition to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency in this essay.

Romantic relationships are encouraged both socially and institutionally. Scholars have pointed out that contemporary society idealizes and glorifies romance in various media and common language (Granger 2020)^[6]. For example, from movies to fairy tales, it is common to end the plot with fictional characters having “lived happily ever after” with their romantic partner. It suggests that forming romantic relationships is not only viewed as the source of their happiness, but also a life goal to reach. When a romantic relationship transitions into legal marriage, a common trajectory, it confers “numerous benefits and responsibilities,” including some not granted to other types of relationships (Emens 2014)^[8]. Those privileges primarily or exclusively reserved for a legal spouse include joint property ownership, tax benefits, health-insurance benefits, immigration sponsorship, and legal authority in medical decision-making. As consummation is typically necessary for the complete legal ratification of a marriage, legal privileging of sex in the context of intimate relationships – romantic relationships – “devalues both sexual relationships that lack an intimate component and intimate relationships that lack a sexual component” (Rosenbury and Rothman 2010)^[7].

Despite growing theoretical interest in amatonormativity, there is limited empirical research

exploring the consequences of internalizing such belief (Carroll and Wenzel 2025)^[5]. Under amatonormativity, close friendships, an intimate yet not sexual relationship, are often viewed as “secondary, incomplete, and preparatory” for romantic relationships – rather than being recognized for their own importance (Granger 2020)^[4]. In this study, I aim to examine the extent to which individuals have conceptualized and responded to amatonormativity in close friendships. I aim to explore: 1) the degree to which people prioritize romantic relationships over close friendships; 2) the expectations they hold regarding intimacy in close friendships; 3) the factors affect their acceptance of amatonormativity; and 4) the variation of amatonormativity between cultural groups (the United States and China). Xu and Whyte (1990) have noted that in contrast to Western society, where romantic attachment is often assumed as the foundation for marriage, Chinese society – especially in older generations – places greater emphasis on family involvement in partner selection. However, a transition developed from arranged to free-choice marriages in China, reflecting a convergence with Western ideals of pursuing romance^[3].

By applying the framework of amatonormativity, this research contributes to growing conversations in the field of asexualities and aromanticism of “untangling the constructs of attraction, sex, desire, and romance that were once assumed to be linked” (Carroll and Wenzel 2025)^[5], offering insights into how compulsory sexuality and romance structure intimate interaction in the general public.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Questionnaires collected 217 samples, with 3 responses excluded from the research due to clear signs of inconsistent or nonsensical answers. As a result, the final valid sample was formed by 214 participants. The ages ranged from 13 and 62 years ($M = 32$, $SD = 13.8$). The sample included two socioeconomic and geographic groups: 59 high-school students from the United States ($M=38.14$, $SD=11.22$) and 155 participants from China ($M=15.86$, $SD=1.24$). Participants represented diverse gender identities: 148 identified as cisgender women, 54 as cisgender men, 3 as non-binary, and 9 preferred not to disclose their gender. Participants also reported their living arrangements: 55.6% indicated that they currently live with their parents, while 44.4% reported having moved out.

There were no specific inclusion criteria applied, because it was assumed that all participants have experienced or formed some type of close friendships in their lives.

2.2 Measures

A 26-item original self-report questionnaire is designed to explore participants’ perceptions of amatonormative norms and relational expectations (Appendix A). All participants were asked to provide their gender, age, and situations. The survey included yes or no questions, items in 4-point Likert scale (e.g., from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, from Not Important to Very Important), and categorical questions. The survey explored and assessed participants’ family relationships (e.g., acceptance, openness, role models), emotional support structures, values of romantic relationships and friendship, friendship quality (e.g., time spent with friends), and amatonormative impact (e.g., changes in friendship closeness after entering a romantic relationship). The survey was designed in English and later translated into Mandarin Chinese for Chinese-speaking participants; translations were verified through a back-translation process to ensure conceptual equivalence.

2.3 Procedure

The U.S.-based participants were recruited through a convenience sample at Poly Prep Country Day School, a private high school in Brooklyn, New York. Chinese participants were recruited on social media, which allowed broader geographic and demographic reach across various regions of China. All responses were anonymous and self-reported. The informed consent was presented to the participants clarifying the study’s purpose, the confidentiality, and anonymity of the information collected. All potential participants were informed that it was voluntary participation. Although they could not skip any question that they prefer not to answer, they could withdraw at any moment without consequences. Individuals were recruited through a non-probability sampling method for 1 month and received no financial incentives. The survey was administered to U.S. participants via email and Google Form while distributed to Chinese participants via Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn), an online survey platform.

2.4 Data analysis

Data analyses were done by Microsoft Excel (2025), R (version 4.5.0), and Python (version 3.10). In order to process the data, all 4-point Likert scale responses were transformed into ordinal numerical values (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree) for the purpose of statistical analysis. Yes/no questions were transformed as dichotomous variables (1 = Yes, 0 = No). Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the data. Correlations test and T-test were conducted to examine relationships between variables.

3. Results

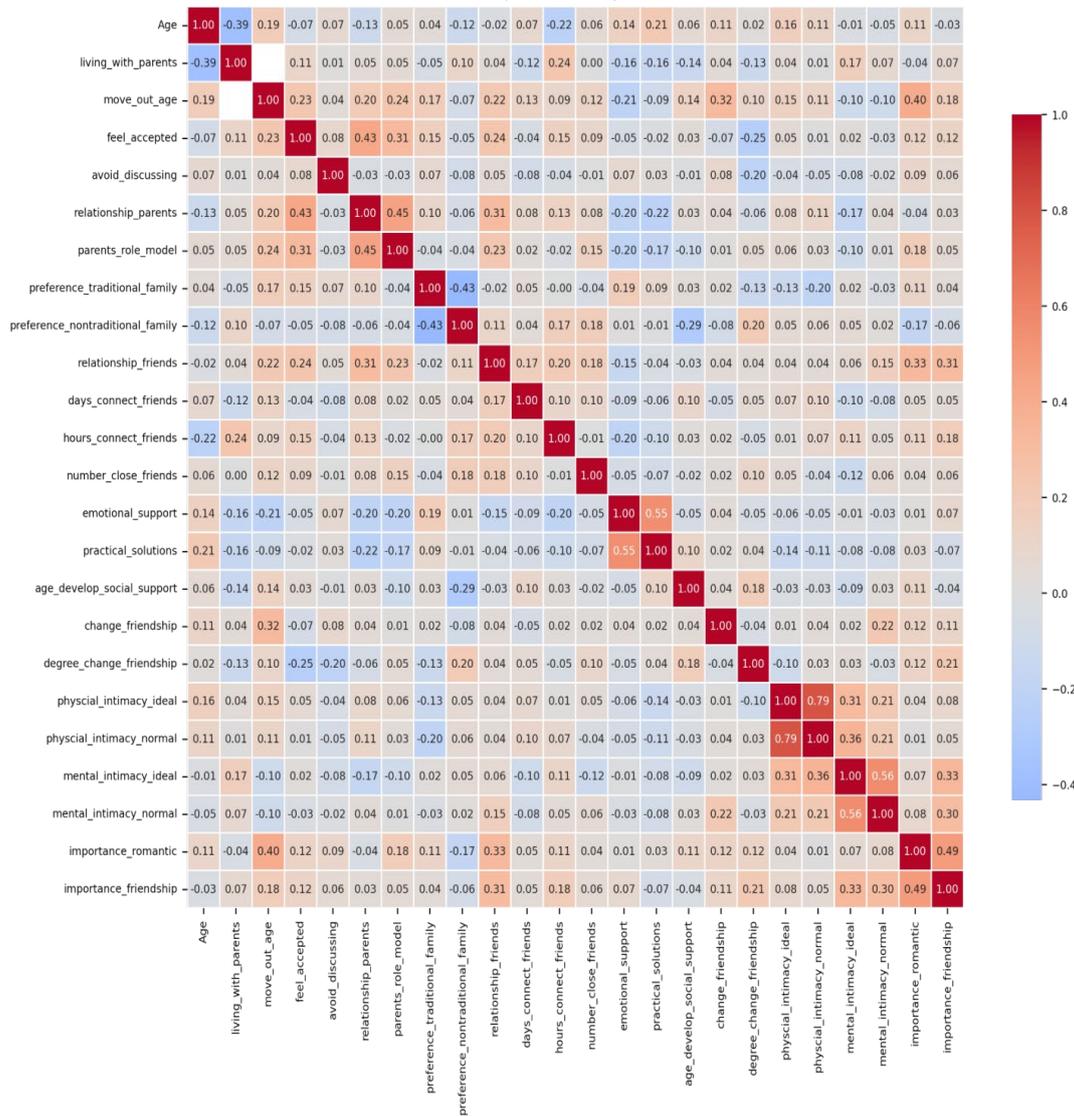


Figure 1. Correlation Heatmap of Romantic Relationship and Friendship Preferences in Chinese Sample

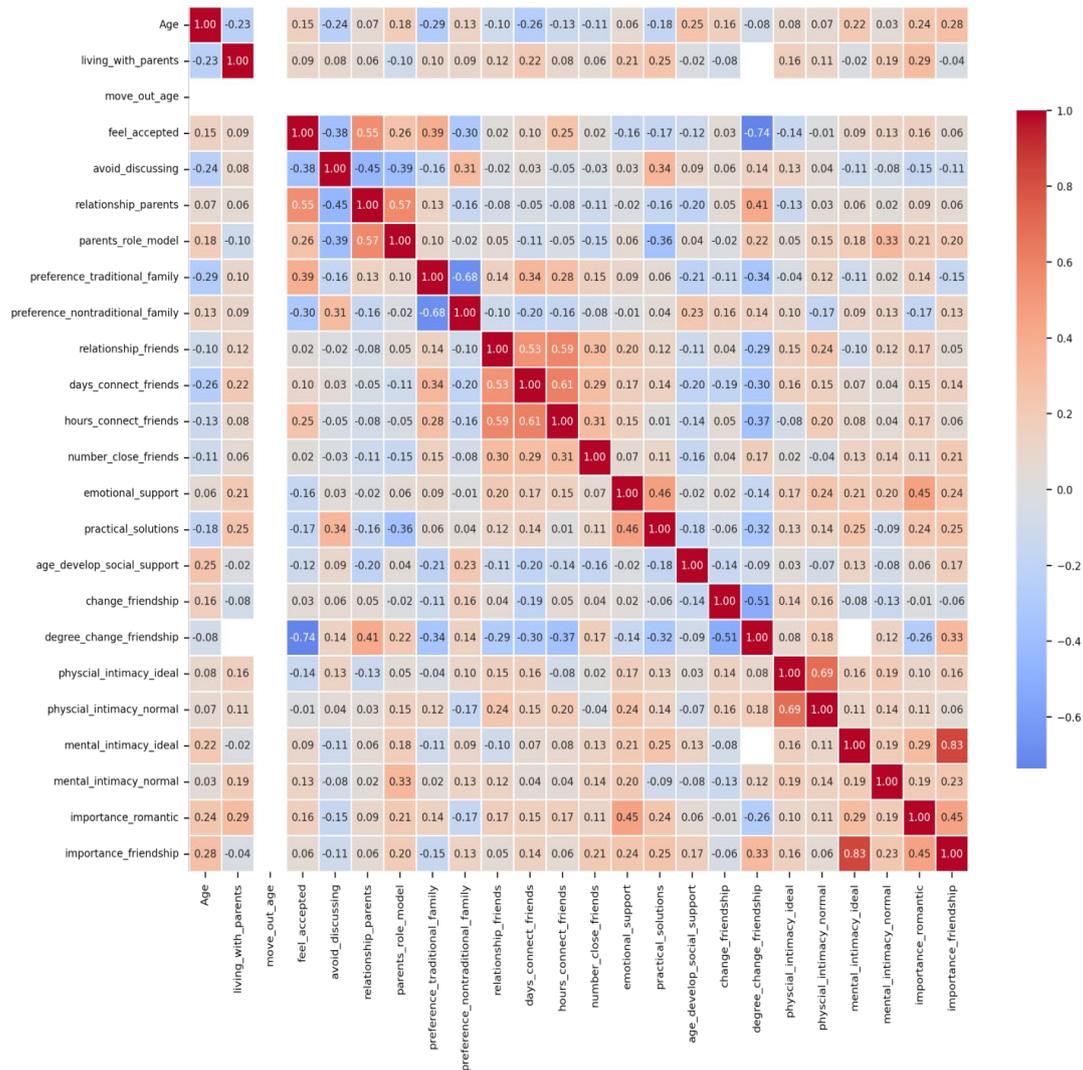


Figure 2. Correlation Heatmap of Romantic Relationship and Friendship Preferences in the U.S. Sample

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Relationship Importance and Expectations.

	USA		CHN		Scale Range
	M	SD	M	SD	
Importance of Romantic Relationships	2.80	0.89	3.23	0.78	1-4
Importance of Friendships	3.86	0.47	3.32	0.59	1-4
Ideal Physical Intimacy in Friendship	0.58	0.50	0.43	0.50	0-1
Normal Physical Intimacy in Friendship	0.37	0.49	0.36	0.48	0-1
Ideal Mental Intimacy in Friendship	1.00	0.18	0.6	0.49	0-1
Normal Mental Intimacy in Friendship	0.73	0.52	0.58	0.50	0-1

3.1 Prioritization of Romantic Relationships over Close Friendships

Comparing Figure 1 and 2, participants' reported importance of romantic relationships (M = 3.23, SD = 0.78 for China; M = 2.80, SD = 0.89 for the U.S.) was generally lower than the importance they assigned to friendships (M = 3.32, SD = 0.59 for China; M = 3.86, SD = 0.47 for the U.S.). Paired-sample t-tests indicated that in the U.S. sample, friendships were rated significantly more important than

romantic relationships, $t(58) = 10.45$, $p < 0.001$. In contrast, the difference in the Chinese sample was smaller and not statistically significant, $t(154) = 1.52$, $p = 0.07$. Counterintuitively, participants who reported that their friendships changed to closer after entering a romantic relationship ($n = 37$ for the whole group) scored higher on romantic relationship importance ($M = 3.30$) than those who reported no change ($M = 3.08$), with marginally significant ($t(177) = 1.42$, $p = 0.08$).

3.2 Expectations of Intimacy in Close Friendships

Participants generally reported higher and $M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.50$) was higher than normal physical intimacy ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.49$, $t(58) = 3.85$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, ideal mental intimacy ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 0.18$) was higher than normal mental intimacy ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.52$, $t(58) = 3.40$, $p = 0.001$).

In the Chinese sample, a similar pattern was observed for physical intimacy scores (ideal: $M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.50$; normal: $M = 0.36$, $SD = 0.48$) were also slightly higher for ideal compared to normal, $t(154) = 2.73$, $p < 0.005$. However, for mental intimacy (ideal: $M = 0.60$, $SD = 0.49$; normal: $M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.50$), the difference was smaller and insignificant, as $t(154) = 0.87$, $p = 0.19$. Correlation analysis indicated strong positive correlations between ideal physical and ideal mental intimacy ($r = 0.28$), as well as between normal physical and normal mental intimacy ($r = 0.17$), though the strength varied by intimacy type and cultural group. In addition, the number of days per week spent connecting with friends was positively correlated with ideal mental intimacy, although the correlation was weak for both U.S. sample ($r = 0.07$) and Chinese sample ($r = 0.10$).

serious romantic relationships, while adults may view romantic partnerships as a key part of life. Another reason may be cultural. In China, romantic relationships often carry expectations related to family be influenced by their past experience with romantic relationships, or lack thereof, when self-evaluating the importance of indirect questions to evaluate amatonormativity. The existence of amatonormativity can be observed in its significant impact on close friendships. People in both cultures seem to desire more closeness in their friendships than they believe is typical. This gap is especially noticeable in the United States, where ideal and “normal” levels of intimacy differ the most. One possible reason is that amatonormativity is more dominant in the United States than in China (Xu and Whyte 1990)^[3]. Having internalized such norms, U.S. teens may feel uncomfortable showing vulnerability or affection to friends, even when they want to. These norms could come from cultural messages that deep emotional sharing should happen only in romantic relationships. This supposition supports previous critiques of amatonormativity. As Granger (2020) points out, our society often sees close friendships as less complete or important than romantic ones^[6]. If people believe they aren’t “allowed” to be emotionally close with friends, they might limit themselves—even when those friendships could be, and they have a desire for, a major source of support.

However, the previous theory cannot explain why people who value romance over friendship become closer with friends after stepping into a romantic relationship. This could suggest that rather than the binary preference of favoring either close friends or romantic partners, they could regulate each other in a more complex way that is currently unexplored. Overall, this research indicates the existence of amatonormativity in both China and the United States across various ages. Considering the gaps between the ideal needs and perceived norms of intimacy in friendship and levels of idealized intimacy than what they considered “normal” in society. This was true for both physical and mental intimacy (Table 1).

In the U.S. sample, ideal physical intimacy ($M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.50$) was higher than normal physical intimacy ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.49$, $t(58) = 3.85$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, ideal mental intimacy ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 0.18$) was higher than normal mental intimacy ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.52$, $t(58) = 3.40$, $p = 0.001$).

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3.3 Factors Affecting Acceptance of Amatonormativity

Preference for traditional family structures is used as a proxy for amatonormativity based on its definition. It was expected to be associated with individuals’ relationships with their parents, considering parents as the agency. Participants self-evaluated their relationship with their parents ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.60$ for China; $M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.64$ for the U.S.) with several related questions. However, there were no significant correlations observed.

4. Discussion

These results suggest that American teens tend to see their friendships as more important than romantic relationships, while Chinese adults see both types of relationships as similarly important. One reason may be age: most teens have not yet experienced serious romantic relationships, while adults may view romantic partnerships as a key part of life. Another reason may be cultural. In China, romantic relationships often carry expectations related to family and future planning, especially among older generations. These findings seem to reject the theoretical framework of amatonormativity, the belief that romantic relationships should be prioritized above all else. Considering the subtleness and pervasiveness of amatonormativity, participants might be influenced by their past experience with romantic relationships, or lack thereof, when self-evaluating the importance of each intimate relationship.

However, given the fact that amatonormativity is a highly unfamiliar concept to most of the participants, the questionnaire also contains several indirect questions to evaluate amatonormativity. The existence of amatonormativity can be observed in its significant impact on close friendships. People in both cultures seem to desire more closeness in their friendships than they believe is typical. This gap is especially noticeable in the United States, where ideal and “normal” levels of intimacy differ the most. One possible reason is that amatonormativity is more dominant in the United States than in China (Xu and Whyte 1990)^[3]. Having internalized such norms, U.S. teens may feel uncomfortable showing vulnerability or affection to friends, even when they want to. These norms could come from cultural messages that deep emotional sharing should happen only in romantic relationships. This supposition supports previous critiques of amatonormativity. As Granger (2020) points out, our society often sees close friendships as less complete or important than romantic ones^[6]. If people believe they aren’t “allowed” to be emotionally close with friends, they might limit themselves—even when those friendships could be, and they have a desire for, a major source of support.

However, the previous theory cannot explain why people who value romance over friendship become closer with friends after stepping into a romantic relationship. This could suggest that rather than the binary preference of favoring either close friends or romantic partners, they could regulate each other in a more complex way that is currently unexplored. Overall, this research indicates the existence of amatonormativity in both China and the United States across various ages. Considering the gaps between the ideal needs and perceived norms of intimacy in friendships, the finding suggests that amatonormativity can negatively impact the qualities of close friendships.

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