

Tufekci, Zeynep (2010). Who Acquires Friends Through Social Media and Why? “Rich Get Richer” versus “Seek and Ye Shall Find.” In Proceedings of the 4th International AAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM, 2010). AAI Press. Forthcoming.

The author constructs the theoretical framework with the initial question as to who is most likely to benefit from online friendship and why. A few theories are put forward about the types of people mostly likely to favorably view and seek online friendships. One view posits that socially strong individuals use the Internet to supplement their circle of friends (the rich get richer). On the other hand, the social compensation model suggests that socially impoverished individuals will be more likely to use the Internet to seek friendship. The author frames the current study as increasing the understanding of how young adults view the authenticity of online friendships and if online social connections become “real friends.” The study is also framed as examining whether beliefs about the possibility of online friendship predict the acquisition of online friends (Seek and Ye Shall Find). Finally, the study suggests to be an examination of the level of activity, comfort with use, and attitudes toward online friendship in “Millenials.”

The author makes a strong argument for the need for the study – understanding the correlations between certain behaviors and/or attitudes and the acquisition of online friendship is a useful point of knowledge. He also suggests the relevance of examining previously elucidated theories, the social compensation theory, around the “socially impoverished” person likely to be engaging in social networking sites looking for friendship. While this model was shown to be in place in the past, a new generation who has come of age online utilizing social media, the social compensation theory may no longer apply. Conversely, the stereotype that all “Millenials” are equally participative on SNS “may hide important differences in modalities of use, levels of skill, comfort with, or simply attitudes towards online sociality.” The author purports that the study examines the accuracy of this perception. Lastly, the point is established that there is a need to examine if this generation grows their online networks through the acquisition of online friends.

The author makes a plausible case for “the rich get richer,” perspective. The rich get richer idea postulates that people who have established many friendships offline will be most likely to acquire friendships online. Additionally, those who hold positive attitudes toward establishing relationships with previously unknown individuals through the online medium will in turn fulfill this attitude by developing those relationships. The author duly notes the potential for a bi-directional relationship, meaning, people who make friends online are also more likely to have positive attitudes toward that behavior.

The author also refers to the relevance in exploring the reasons people acquire online friendships, even in the face of having negative attitudes toward doing so, with regard to implications for education, business, and any field that might utilize SNS.

The author adequately ties the current study to prior and relevant research in this area but leaves the reader wondering why only some of the research questions were addressed. The most glaring disconnect is that the author claims the study examines whether online friends become true friends; yet it does not. The framing of the prior research as a debate that needs to be quelled obscures the movement from the social compensation theory towards the sociality/pre-disposition theories that are being tested by the research. Additionally, it is not clear how showing a correlation between different attitudes and the acquisition of online friendship might quell the ongoing debate described in the introduction.

The research question and hypotheses were hard to discern because they were not consistently stated. Specifically, it was claimed that the study examined whether online friendships could become real friendships but this examination was not made. Also, we wonder if the hypotheses set up a false dichotomy that then prevents a full understanding of the data analyses.

We perceive that the research questions and intentions posed in this study are:

- (1) to examine whether social media increase social networks,
- (2) whether online connections lead to true friendship,
- (3) to predict who would be most likely to make new friends using social networking sites (SNS) and
- (4) to examine if attitudes toward these types of relationships matter. The fourth

research question is not clearly understood by these reviewers.

The first research question suggests a causal relationship, which was not measured in the current study. Rather, the correlational analysis of the data collected is appropriate, given the variables of race, gender, years on the internet, age, and type of site visited. Such a design is effective for examining if relationships exist but not for determining causal factors. This design supports answering the research questions, "Who gains new friends from social media" (from a demographic standpoint) and "Is there a relationship between individual beliefs about creating online friendships and the practice of creating online friendships?"

This study used a convenience sample of undergraduate university students. While this is not unusual in social science research, the generalizability of the results may be limited, as noted by the researcher. Overall, the sampling methods used for this

study are fairly typical and the sample size is adequate, both achieving a large sample, as well as by spreading this data over several months. Regarding the choice of participants, the results may be confounded by a few factors: the fact that the subjects were all enrolled in an introductory social science course, the subjects may have received extra credit for their participation (thus they may have answered the questions in a socially desirable manner), and the subjects may have been motivated to please the researcher if he was their instructor (or if they believed so). In addition, regarding the longevity of the study, there is a possibility that attitudes may have changed regarding social networking during the data collection given the rapid dynamics of the online climate.

One of the statistical assumptions of regression is that the sample must be representative of the population for the inference prediction. While the convenience sample is appropriate for many reasons, we must wonder how a collegiate population fails to reflect the greater population of interest. Predictions made from this sample can only be applied to collegiate students, and there even exists limitations within this population. However, this further opens the opportunities for research in this unique element of friendship, seemingly inherent to social networking.

The overall methodology is fair with regard to the general examination of whether social media and beliefs about online friendship expand people's social networks. The methodology does not support studying whether online friends can become genuine friends. Rather, the qualitative data yield insight into subjects' ideas about who can form online friendships.

The researcher operationally defined and measured "social media" fairly adequately in our view but didn't examine specific type of SNS. We also have questions regarding the meaning of the acquisition of friends within "social networks" being defined in this case by "meeting someone new." Can people expand their social networks by developing deeper relationships with casual friends? Does quantity of "friends" equate to having more friendships? Can people expand their social networks by establishing contact with bloggers? Do subjects view "expansion" when someone whom they do not know requests online friendship? Or, is only intentional, requested, friendship considered valid friendship? One might even question why someone would indeed meet new friends online if they are satisfied with their current number and quality of friendships.

We note that the Methods section does not describe the data collection procedure. This could include: survey items (or the survey itself), the script used by the researcher (if one was used), how the survey was distributed, how the students were selected for participation, whether the students received compensation (of any kind) for their

participation, if students were given the choice to opt out at any time, etc. While the author indicates that some surveys were unusable, he does not discuss why. These procedures would provide necessary insight into the research that we now must **assume** to have been done in the best possible manner.

The most significant point to address here is that there is no measures section in the published study. Therefore, we have a limited understanding of the measures used. We do not know exactly how time on the Internet was measured. Did subjects track this information daily? What is the potential for error? For social desirability? How would the researcher know if the information was fabricated? These are significant points because the data may not be internally or externally valid.

The qualitative design, intended to measure the quantity/frequency of offline friends is only somewhat adequate in addressing the posed research questions. A single question was posed, "How many friends do you keep in touch with on a regular basis, meaning you see them or talk with them at least once a week?" This question is ambiguous (see for how long? talk for how long?) The ambiguity could lead to both an under-reporting and an over-reporting of social contact. Furthermore, who exactly are ones "friends" in this context? Co-workers? Family members? What else might it mean to stay "in touch"? Does that mean a neighborly wave across the yard? A 60-second conversation? Without this information, it is impossible to know the reliability of the data, as well as the internal validity (does the question measure what it is supposed to measure?). On the other hand, the question has some face validity for tapping into subjects' introversion and extroversion.

Subjects' were asked if they had ever met new friends using SNS. Their labeling an acquaintance as a "new friend" may be also unreliable. That is, what is the definition of a "new friend"? Does "new" refer to the fact that the individuals have never met? Could they have been enemies in the past? It is possible that subjects did establish new friendships but discounted them because they had had previous contact (i.e. the friend of a friend). Therefore, the information would not be accurate. Conversely, the number of new friends could be inflated by people who "friend" every individual suggested to them by the SNS. Thus, we ask, what, exactly, constitutes friendship? Are two people friends because they "friend" each other on a SNS? This information is unclear and open to much interpretation. The author does not define this construct for the reader or, presumably, for the subjects.

Finally, the dichotomous nature of the data leaves room for error. Subjects who were unclear about the meaning of "new friends" may have reported inaccurately.

The researcher states that the present study examines whether online friends can be *real* friends. In fact, there is no measure of this construct. Rather, subjects discussed whether or not they thought it was possible to meet new friends via social media. The genuineness of online friendships was inferred, not measured.

The coded qualitative data are an appropriate summary of the subjects' beliefs regarding online friendship.

Thus, we conclude that the current study only somewhat appropriately uses quantitative and qualitative measures to examine time spent on SNS, keeping in touch with friends, meeting new friends online, and attitudes toward meeting people online.

Additional measures could be used which could increase the face validity of the methodology. As mentioned by the author, future research could examine subsets of personality as predictors of online use of SNS. A closer examination of the effects of race on social networking is warranted.

The first notable point is that the researcher does not address whether the underlying assumptions of each statistical test are met. The research used a chi square, which is an appropriate test when examining categorical variables which have an equal chance of placement, such as gender. The chi square test has the assumptions of random sample, a sufficiently large sample size, 5 or more in all cells, and independence of observations.

There appears to be a thorough analysis of the collected data and the researcher reports the lack of statistical significance (for most variables) of the tests performed. With the quantity of T-tests needed to identify the possible significance of each measure the researcher was hoping to produce, we see an error rate that may diminish the findings to a point of insignificance.

There are other elements of data analyses that incite questions. First, the author's use of a statistical ANOVA is puzzling and unnecessary since ANOVA is used to examine more than two variables. The researcher appears to be comparing only gender with friendship (a 2 by 2 comparison). Although it is appropriate to report frequency data, a frequency measure doesn't yield information on the nature or quality of the interactions. The qualitative analyses are useful for investigating how people view the potential for online friendships and the data seems to be appropriately coded. However, a more useful analysis could have examined the reasons African Americans were more likely to meet online friends. Finally, the question posed to the subjects didn't capture their opinions of the "genuineness" of online friendships, which was one of the original research questions.

The author's discussion of the conceptual limitations is honest and accurate. The author concludes that variance among people in personality traits, communicative style and online behavior culminate into differences in willingness to acquire close friends through online interactions.

As to the data's findings about African-American college students use of SNS, additional information is needed. For instance, the author writes: "Without knowing the character of these new online friends, it is not possible to conclude the exact mechanism of the role of race. It may be that African-American students are seeking other minority friends and using social media to this end, or these students may be getting in touch with friends outside their own race."

Methodological limitations are worth noting. Information about gender and race was gathered, but then that information was neglected in the conclusive findings. The researcher would have done well to articulate the opportunity for furthering the insight into that finding that was manifested from the study itself. The bigger limitation though is the limitations of correlational research for this particular study. There's a lot of correlation cited but that doesn't necessarily mean causation. The correlation needs to be discussed in more detail. For instance when the author writes "only one variable was statically (*sic*) significant: time spent on the Internet, with those positive about online friendships spending about 23 more minutes a day compared to those who did not." But we can't be sure if those subjects spent more time on the Internet with their online friends made them feel positive about it, or if the positive feelings associated with online friending caused them to spend more time on the Internet. These correlations are bidirectional. Do some students not have online friend because of prior experience or did their prior experience with online friending mean that they didn't want online friends?

The conclusions are consistent with the author's reported results. The author identifies the simplistic dichotomy of online friending that dominated much of the discourse at the time: "the rich get richer" and the social compensation model. Instead the author offers a "seek and ye shall find" conceptual framework. The results of the study bear this out, at least partially, online friending is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With the exceptions of the reservations about the limits of a correlational research for this particular problem and the problem with the sampling as listed in section C, number 1 above, the results related to the study's theoretical base. Clearly the way college students perceive online friending influences their behavior. The use of the qualitative aspect was instructive.

The significance of the study shows that there is much to study in online interacting. This study was just one aspect of how people socially interact on the Internet. The study reinforces the idea that the Internet and SNS have many implications for education. It's clear from the study that different learners approach online environments differently, many learning styles and approaches are afforded through the medium. The study reinforces the idea that there is a lot of potential in online learning.

We conclude with a few implications for future research. Personal characteristics and communication styles need to be factored in when thinking about online interactions and associations.

The quote “some young people are looking for refuge from the demands of physical appearance” resonates with teachers of pre-teens and teenagers. Therefore disembodied, online interaction may be a preferred way for some students to interact, especially those who seek this kind of refuge. A study could be designed to see what significance this refuge effect might have on learners.

Another quote the author writes is provocative: “[some young people] are seeking to make deep connections through conversations.” The implication is that online friendships is just a small part of online interactions. Further research can be done to discover what productive conversation is, how it can be fostered, and what effect such habits have on learners.

Anonymity isn’t necessarily bad. There’s a debate in the professional press right now about whether to continue to allow forums on online stories. Commenting can devolve into little more than wounding ad hominem attacks with responders hiding behind anonymity. But this study’s reference to “strangers on a train” brings up an interesting side of the argument, with implications for education. Perhaps there are times when it’s appropriate for students to be anonymous online. What are the pedagogical implications of such a practice?