

# Who Acquires Friends Through Social Media and Why? "Rich Get Richer" versus "Seek and Ye Shall Find"

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## Abstract

There is an ongoing debate, not just among academics but in popular culture, about whether social media can expand people's social networks, and whether online friends can be "real" friends. The debate refuses to die. This paper addresses this question subjectively, from the point of view of the user, and examines predictors of acquiring new friends through social media use. This is a multi-method study with quantitative (n=617) and qualitative sections. Some previous studies have found a "rich-get-richer" effect where people who are socially active offline benefit most from online interactions. This paper examines whether online social ties become real friends subject to a self-fulfilling prophecy: those who do not believe in online friendships are not likely to make such connections. I compare the "Rich Get Richer" and "Seek and Ye Shall Find" models by examining relationships between the amount of offline socializing, amount of online social activity and the belief in online friendships. Respondents' attitudes as to online sociality are qualitatively examined. The results support one of the earliest theories of computer-mediated-communication: hyperpersonal interaction. It appears that some people perceive online interaction to concentrate on the conversation itself, rather than on appearances, and find it to be freer of social judgments. On the other hand, for other people, face-to-face interaction has inimitable features that simply cannot be replicated or replaced. African-Americans are significantly more likely to meet new friends online. This study contradicts the idea that people who are more social offline are more social online, as well as the notion that it is only the social misfits who use social media to make new friends as there was no difference in the number of offline friends between those who made new friends online and those who did not.

## Online Friendship: The Subject Never Dies

The question of Internet sociality seems to inspire strong feelings. There are repeated waves of media coverage, alternatively questioning the validity of online friendships, or remarking on the wonder of it all (Deresiewicz 2009; Mallaby 2006). Although early studies suggest that Internet users were lonelier and had less social capital (Kraut et al. 1998; Nie and Hillygus 2002), other studies show that some people do acquire friends through social media (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Hampton and Wellman 2003;

Wellman et al. 2001; Zhao 2006; Hampton 2009). Recent empirical findings indicate that about a fifth of Internet users met new friends online and some portion of those friendships even migrate offline (Gennaro and Dutton 2007; Wang and Wellman 2010). The refusal of the topic to die suggests that, for many people, the idea that one can meet friends online simply does not resonate.

Many earlier studies were based on the premise that Internet interactions were anonymous, text-based and necessarily fleeting since identities could not be established. While some celebrated the transitory and ungrounded nature of identity on the Internet as a means to free people from restrictions of being embodied (Stone 1991), others were less sanguine about what they considered to be "lonely crowds online" (Turkle 1995). Others argued that anonymity might create a "stranger on a train" effect by making people feel comfortable sharing important matters without fearing entanglements of disclosure (Derlega and Chaikin 1975; Rubin 1975). Lack of visual cues was similarly seen as liberating from the social judgment of appearance which often dominates people's initial impressions of each other (Walther 1996).

Today's Internet, however, is a very different place. It is used by hundreds of millions of ordinary people who do not resemble the mostly-white, mostly male, tech-savvy netizens of the early days. Social media applications such as Facebook are among the most popular applications and interactions on these sites are not anonymous, often involving considerable levels of self-disclosure, especially among youth (Tufekci 2008a). Further, most profiles also display lists of friends, include photographs, friends' comments and status updates, allowing for multiple ways of evaluating people. Overall, social networking (or network) sites (SNS) have been found to enrich users' social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007).

Whether referred to as the digital natives, the Millennials, or the netizens, the current generation of young adults and adolescents are often seen as seamlessly integrating social media into their lives. Such totalizing discourse may hide important differences in modalities of use, levels of skill, comfort with, or simply attitudes towards online sociality.

## Rich Get Richer

The question, is, then, who gains new friends from social media? Previously, researchers posited that that there

might be a “rich get richer” model applicable to online sociality (McKenna, Green, and Gleason 2002; Kraut et al. 2002; Vergeer and Pelzer 2009; Buchanan 2002), whereby those already doing well socially would reap the most benefits from Internet use:

A “rich get richer” model predicts that those who are highly sociable and have existing social support will get more social benefit from using the Internet. Highly sociable people would reach out to others on the Internet and use the Internet especially for communication. ... If so, these groups would gain more social involvement and well-being from using the Internet than those who are introverted or have poor network relations (Kraut et al. 2002).

Research on sociality generally finds that women have a higher number of social ties than men and women are heavier users of social networking sites (Thelwall 2008; Hargittai 2008). Similarly, White people generally have more social contacts than African-Americans and other minorities (Marsden and Campbell 1984; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006). In a rich-get-richer scenario, we would expect to find those groups benefiting more from social media use.

### **Social Compensation**

Alternatively, a “social compensation” model would predict that those who are introverted or otherwise have difficulty in maintaining offline social networks might benefit disproportionately from Internet sociality (Kraut et al. 2002). This would be consistent with Walther’s model of hyperpersonal communication which posits that the reduced cues of the Internet environment as well as lack of copresence might actually aid people who might otherwise become anxious, self-conscious or be judged on appearances and thus have less success offline.

### **Seek and Ye Shall Find**

Neither the rich-get-richer nor the social compensation model takes user beliefs and motivations into account. Just as a rich and flexible medium like the Internet cannot be expected to have a uniform effect on the population, it is unrealistic to assume that all people will be similarly affected by Internet use (Tufekci 2008c). While there are clearly many personality variables that might influence online sociality, this paper starts with a simple, direct question: what is the impact of the person’s belief about the possibility of online friendship on actual relationship formation through social media?

This “seek and ye shall find,” model assumes that, for a variety of reasons, people conclude that online sociality is real or “faux”—hence the never-ending debate among pundits. While it might be assumed that, among the general population, people who reach the negative conclusion would simply not engage in online social interactions, this is not true among college students for whom online social media use is practically a norm (Tufekci 2008c) (surveys indicate around 90 percent adoption of social networking sites). What, then, happens, when people who may not

believe in online friendship find themselves in a situation where they interact with people through social media? Do the socially rich get richer? Do the disadvantaged catch-up? How much impact do individual beliefs have?

## **Methods**

### **Sample Population**

This study was undertaken in a mid-sized public research university in the mid-Atlantic during 2007-2008. The participants were students enrolled in multiple sections of an introductory social science course over the course of a year and a half. Of the 817 usable surveys we collected, 733 used social networking sites, a 90% adoption rate. Of those SNS users, 617 had no missing data relevant to this study and were included in the sample. Demographic characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1. The university is a diverse school with amicable race relations and is nationally-renowned for high levels of minority participation across disciplines as well as high academic standards. 16 percent of the student body is African-American (compared to 14 percent of the sample). The course in question is a popular choice to fulfill graduation requirements and draws from majors across the school.

The sample was fairly diverse, with sizable White, Black and Asian populations as well as a smaller Hispanic group. The sample was evenly split between men and women and closely matched the demographics of the school.

### **Variables**

Basic demographic variables such as race and gender were included in the analyses. Years on the Internet and age were controlled for to account for possible differences in exposure to online environments. The sample was 19 years of age on average and had been on the Internet between eight to nine years.

The Internet has a variety of uses, ranging from the most social to informational or otherwise individual pursuits. To distinguish the social web from the general Internet, I controlled for amount of time spent on the Internet as well as the amount of time spent on social networking sites. The amount of time on the Internet was measured in increments of half an hour using a Likert scale, starting with less than 30 minutes for a value of 1, and topping at more than for hours at a value of 9. The average amount of time on the Internet was 5.74 on the scale, corresponding to almost 150 minutes a day. Amount of time on social networking sites was measured with a Likert scale in increments of 15 minutes with 1 corresponding to less than 15 minutes and topping out at 7 for 2 hours or more. The average time spent on an SNS was 3.60 on the scale, corresponding to 30-45 minutes a day. In order to control for instrumentally communicative use of the Internet, as opposed to general sociality, respondents were queried about instant messaging; IM is widely used to exchange information but is not integrated with profile information and expectation of full social interaction as are SNS (Quan-Haase 2008).

To account for offline sociality, this question was asked: “How many friends do you keep in touch with on a regular basis, meaning you see them or talk with them at least once

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a week?" The mean number of friends contacted at least once a week was 15. Respondents were asked if they had met new friends through using social networking sites. The options were dichotomized into "have met new friends" versus "never met any new friends".

Last, there was a qualitative component asking people why or why not they thought it was possible to meet new friends online. A total of 175 respondents provided a reason. Qualitative data was coded and analyzed using N\*VIVO software, with deductive and inductive passes.

**Table 1. Descriptive Variables**

	Online Friendship		Total
	Not Possible	Yes Possible	
	N / percent		
Male	141 54.15	151 45.85	292 47.33
Female	176 48.29	149 51.71	325 52.67
White	134 56.30	104 43.70	238 38.57
Black	45 51.72	42 48.28	87 14.10
Hispanic	14 60.87	9 39.13	23 3.73
Asian-Ame.	97 45.33	117 54.67	214 34.68
Other	27 49.09	28 50.91	55 8.91
		<b>Mean</b>	
Yrs on Net	8.65	8.83	8.74
Age	19.37	19.61	19.49
No. Friends	15.62	14.54	15.10
Time on Soc. Netwo. Sites	3.00	3.13	3.06
Time on Web***	5.36	6.14	5.74
Total	317 51.38	300 48.62	617 100

## Analyses

Table one also includes comparisons between those who believe in online friendship and those who do not. T-tests, chi-square and ANOVA analyses were run as appropriate for the categories and only one variable was statically 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. Remarkably, there was no difference between gender, race, age, number of offline friends, etc. between the two groups. Those who found online relationships to have the possibility of turning into close friendships and those who did not had been on the Internet for almost equal number of years, spent similar

amounts of time on the Internet, and had similar number of offline friends with whom they were in weekly contact.

However, in spite of being mostly matched demographically and otherwise, about half the sample population does not think it is plausible to gain new friends through social media. This is a combined dataset spanning over one and a half years and this ratio held steady throughout the period suggesting a stable characteristic that the demographic variables are not measuring.

Table two shows the results of a logistic regression predicting the odds of ever having met a new person through social networking site use. In model one, gender, with female as a dichotomous variable and male as the reference category, race, with Black, Hispanic, Asian and Other as dichotomous variables and White left out as a reference category, number of years on the Internet, age of the respondent, and whether or not the respondent uses instant messaging were included as predictors. Model two added the number of friends, model three added time spent on social networking sites as well as on the Internet in general, and model four added whether the respondent believed online friendship to be possible.

As can be seen through Table 2, the only statistically and substantively significant variables are race, in particular whether the respondent is African-American, time spent on social networking sites, and whether the respondent believes online friendships to be plausible. An African-American has about 67 percent higher odds of having met a new friend through online social media compared to a white person. The relationship is partially mediated by amount of time spent on the Internet and belief in the possibility of online friendship as the addition of those variables reduces the size of the coefficient. No such effect occurs for other racial groups although being Asian is marginally significant until time on SNS and belief in online friendship is taken into account.

Gender is not significant statistically or substantively (since this is a logistic regression, the coefficients reported are odds ratios, a factor-- a factor of one indicates no effect). While age at first appears to be significant, it later sinks below the conventional cut-off for significance as time spent on social networking sites is included, meaning that it is not age but social media habits that matter.

Contrary to expectations from the rich-get-richer hypothesis, the number of offline friends with whom respondents stayed in touch weekly had no influence on whether or not respondents met new friends through social networking sites. On the other hand, belief that it was possible to acquire such friends and time spent on social networking sites were the strongest--and only non-demographic-- predictors of having met new friends.

Neither Internet use in general, nor instant messaging use in particular were statistically or substantively significant, once again highlighting the importance of a differentiated analysis of the Internet (Zhao 2006), and distinguishing between social and general use as well as between instrumentally communicative (in the case of instant messaging) and more social use such as SNS.

**Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting Ever Having Met New Friends through SNS Use**

	Model 1 Exp(b) /se	Model 2 Exp(b) /se	Model 3 Exp(b) /se	Model 4 Exp(b) /se
Female	0.987 (0.167)	1.001 (0.171)	0.870 (0.156)	0.891 (0.160)
<b>Black</b>	<b>1.908*</b> (0.511)	<b>1.909*</b> (0.512)	<b>1.706*</b> (0.467)	<b>1.677*</b> (0.462)
Hispanic	0.735 (0.330)	0.734 (0.329)	0.620 (0.288)	0.636 (0.298)
Asian	1.448+ (0.283)	1.463+ (0.287)	1.353 (0.273)	1.305 (0.266)
Other Race	0.989 (0.299)	0.999 (0.303)	0.910 (0.283)	0.897 (0.281)
Years on Web	0.997 (0.036)	0.995 (0.036)	0.998 (0.037)	0.995 (0.037)
Age	0.905* (0.046)	0.908+ (0.046)	0.944 (0.049)	0.936 (0.049)
Uses IM	1.655* (0.394)	1.647* (0.392)	1.472 (0.362)	1.431 (0.355)
No of Friends		1.003 (0.006)	1.001 (0.006)	1.001 (0.006)
<b>Time on SNS</b>			<b>1.261***</b> (0.069)	<b>1.264***</b> (0.070)
Time on Web			1.016 (0.041)	1.002 (0.041)
<b>Belief in Online Friendship</b>				<b>1.522*</b> (0.265)
_cons	5.353 (5.515)	4.774 (5.024)	1.300 (1.434)	1.416 (1.570)
N	617	617	617	617
Chi2	19.812*	20.092*	42.568***	48.428***
ll	-409.789	-409.649	-398.411	-395.481

+ p<.10, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

### Qualitative Analysis

The themes that emerged from qualitative analysis have been coded thematically and are separately summarized by frequency of occurrence in Table 3 for those who did not believe in online friendship and in Table 4 for those who did, and discussed with examples in this section.

**Table 3. Reasons Online Friendship is Not Possible**

	Percent	N
Lack of Trust	40.2	43
Need Face-to-Face	29.9	32
Lack of Body Language	11.2	12
Can't Express Emotion	6.5	7
Need Shared Experiences	5.6	6
Can't Know the Person	4.7	5
It's Weird!	2	2

### Why Online Friendship is not Possible for Some

This section pertains to those who thought online friendships were not possible. Table 3 shows a list of all the reasons given by those respondents. Lack of trust was the leading reason, indicated by 40 percent. Another 30 percent stated that they needed face-to-face interaction without which they did not feel a real connection. About 11 percent mentioned body language while 6.5 percent

discussed lack of conveyance of emotions and intimacy as a barrier to online friendships. About 6 percent stated that they needed do things together in order to feel close.

**Trust:** Formation of trust online in general and through social media in particular is a recurring topic in academic work. Many college students remain distrustful of online expressions of identity:

“Too much is hidden online”

“Most of the time, people are not what they pretend to be online”

“It’s hard enough to tell if people are lying in person”

“People can make themselves out to be whomever they want online”

“How do you know if someone is not playing games with you?”

**Need Face-to-Face Interaction:** Many respondents expressed a need for co-presence and face-to-face interaction. This category was separated from those who specifically mentioned body language or gestures. For some, physical co-presence is a *sine-quo-non* of close friendship. Respondents typically stated the following:

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“You need face-to-face interaction to become close to someone.”

“A face-to-face connection is different. It’s absolutely essential”

“You cannot create a friendship without face-to-face interaction”

Simply put, for about a third of the respondents, there is something about face-to-face interaction that cannot be replaced through any of the mechanisms available through online sociality.

**Body Language:** About 11 percent of the respondents specifically mentioned body language:

“You need to see faces and hear tones in voices”

“Part of knowing somebody involves seeing body language and knowing what your friend looks like”

“Human interaction and body language is essential to all relationships – observing mannerisms, gestures and other non-verbal methods of communicating allow you to get to know someone better”

“Physical contact and experiencing their mannerisms face-to-face cannot be gained through plain words.”

**Emotions and Shared Experiences:** Respondents also mentioned inability to communicate emotions or experience intimacy, and also the need for shared experiences to cement such intimacy. Some typical comments were as follows:

“You need to hang out with them”

“There is more to close friendship besides talking. You need to experience things together, and I believe this requires physically being in the same place.”

“Online conversations lack emotion”

“You don’t know how they react to real situations. You’ve never seen them express emotion”

### **Why Online Friendship is Possible --or Even Preferable-- for Some**

This section pertains to those who thought online friendships were possible. Table 4 lists reasons indicated for why this was possible – and even preferable.

**Table 4. Reasons Online Friendship is Possible**

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>N</u>
Hyperpersonal	30.9	21
Bonding is possible	17.6	12
Conversation is key	16.2	11
I have experienced this	10.3	7
Maybe for others	8.8	6
If honest and open	10.3	5
Stranger on a train	2.9	2
Games / shared interest	2.9	2

**Deeper: Hyperpersonal Connections and also Social Compensation.** Very interestingly, the top reason

indicated by third of the respondents who believe online relationships were possible harkens back to a theme from one of the earliest analyses of the Internet which posited that lack of cues might be an advantage for relationship formation (McKenna et al. 2002; Walther 1996). Accordingly, respondents identified online interactions as allowing for more honest, truer communication:

“Sometimes not being face-to-face makes it easier to share information”

“You do not feel embarrassed to say certain things”

“It may even be easier online as it is all dialogue and no physical characteristics are involved”

“When one is disabled in ‘real life’, activities can become difficult. Using IM or voice-over-Internet telephony, if one is a good communicator, is less strenuous, thus freeing up energy to be a friend.”

“Because you are more open minded online”

“Some people are more willing to share personal thoughts online rather than face-to-face”

“The most important part of friendship is communication. In fact, I’ve found for myself and others that is much easier to be open and candid online, making for even closer relationships.”

“Of course. When you are talking to a box on your computer, there is less pressure than face to face communication. And boxes on a screen don’t judge you the way someone face-to-face does.”

“There are no preconceived judgments. You feel open to say anything and be yourself.”

“Because you can connect and share problems and feelings with them without the risk of facing their reaction or judgment.”

As can be seen from the comments, these respondents did not only believe that friendships through online mechanisms were possible, but clearly thought that some aspects of online sociality were superior to offline interaction. Lack of being judged, lack of dominance of physical characteristics, disabilities, lack of embarrassment and similar themes emerged indicating that some felt more free online ‘to be themselves.’

**Bonding is Possible:** Many respondents said that bonding through online communication was possible. Their responses indicated that the importance of physical presence was, in their opinion, overstated and given the right conditions, people could become friends. Unlike the people in the previous category who almost seem to prefer online sociality, these respondents saw online interaction as one possibility on par with face-to-face under certain conditions. A few typical comments:

“If there is a connection it doesn't matter.”

“The idea that every online personality is a lie is simply untrue.”

“Proximity does not necessarily mean being physically close to one another. With instant messages, proximity can be as real as having the person next to you.”

“Because they could get to know each other well without seeing each other physically”

**Conversation is the Key:** For about 16 percent of the respondents, closeness directly emanated from conversations, and they saw online conversations as allowing real friendship:

“While you cannot see each other, conversation is one of the best ways to get to know someone. If you trust them, it can become a deep and meaningful relationship”

“Stories and secrets and sympathy can be exchanged, and these are important for friendship”

“They can if they talk often and are completely honest. Physicality is not absolutely necessary”

“Conversation is key for close relationships.”

“Being good friends doesn’t mean you have to be face to face. You can share things and know almost everything you can know about a person by talking to them online.”

**If Honest and not Using the Internet as a “Shield”:** About 10 percent of respondents thought that this would depend on whether people made an effort to use the Internet as means of honest communication.

“If It Is Honest Then It Is Possible”

“It can be possible if both are open and not using the Internet as a shield”

“If they trust that person they can become very close no matter by what means they use”

“Just because you don’t see them face-to-face does not mean you can’t know the person online -- unless you are faking which is wrong.”

Clearly, these respondents had the possibility of fraud and dishonesty – the main obstacle for those who do not believe in online friendships – in the front of their minds, but did not think that this was inevitable; rather, it was the choices made by people which determine the outcome.

**Experience: Seeing is Believing.** Some respondents simply indicated that they had either personally experienced close friendship online, or had witnessed others who did. For these respondents, their opinion was from derived directly from their experiences:

“I indeed have a few close friends that I talk to on a regular basis and know quite well”

“I only say yes because it happened to me twice.”

“Anything is possible. I know people that have met their spouse through the Internet.”

“I know a lot of people who get to know their friends, boyfriend or girlfriend through some websites”

**Stranger on a Train: Not So Much.** “Stranger in a train” effect refers the relative ease with which someone can talk about important matters to a person encountered in a transient setting, such as a train. In such a case, there is no reason to fear repercussions and entanglements from the disclosure (Rubin 1975). This effect is sometimes predicted for the Internet (Kang 2000; McKenna et al. 2002). While this did come up, it was rare:

“I wouldn’t want to meet the person but having someone to talk to about personal things who doesn’t know anyone else you know is an advantage”

“It’s good because then odds are that person doesn’t know any of your friends and they can’t slip and say something”

This doesn’t necessarily really speak to whether such an effect is rare, but more likely that these subjects saw Internet friendships as stable connections rather than a transient interaction such as a train encounter.

**Limitations:** The most important limitation is that this is a college population and the results are specific to college students. It is quite likely that social habits of older cohorts will be very different. Since the study is cross-sectional, causality cannot be firmly established. However, the sample was heterogeneous with regard to race, gender, and major.

## Discussion

This study finds that the odds of having met a new friend through social media use is independent of almost all demographic variables, except being an African-American, the number of offline friends, time spent on the Internet, use of internet for instrumentally communicative purposes such as instant messaging. It is related foremost to the belief in the possibility of online friendship, followed by time spent on social media such as social networking sites and being African-American.

The combined quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that variance among people in personality traits, communicative style and online behavior culminate into differences in willingness to acquire close friends through online interactions. This underlying trait appears to be orthogonal to offline sociality.

The quantitative results are not supportive of either the rich-get-richer hypothesis or of the social compensation hypothesis, as having either more or fewer friends in weekly contact had no effect on acquisition of new friends online. Qualitatively, there was mild support for the social compensation hypothesis as some respondents indicated that internet communication might be easier for someone who was otherwise not outgoing. However, that was rare and more implied than explicitly stated.

These answers suggest that some of them do not view online versus offline interactions through the prism of the

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introvert/extrovert dichotomy, but simply as spheres which emphasize different modalities of social interaction. Those who emphasized the “hyperpersonal” characteristics of online sociality did not appear to view them as either inferior or as substitutes for lack of offline skills, but rather as a form of communication that spotlighted a different kind of interaction, one based on conversation and sharing of thoughts rather than being judged on physical appearances. Although many online interactions include awareness of physical appearance through pictures, it seems that the word can be more important when physical copresence is not an option.

The prevalence of responses indicating the “hyperpersonal” nature of cyberspace as an affordance of close friendship suggests that this factor has not faded from importance even though the Internet has changed greatly since it was first proposed by Walther (1996). The results indicate that that some young people are still looking for refuge from the demands of physical appearance and are seeking to make deep connections through conversations. On the other hand, there is a group of people who absolutely cannot imagine intimacy or close social interactions unless they are regularly in the corporeal copresence of the other person.

Gender was not a significant variable, suggesting that either gender differences in sociality are weak among college students, or that Internet use has transformed this landscape. While previous research has found that women are heavier users of social networking sites (Tufekci 2008a), and that women have more friends on their (public) Myspace profiles (Thelwall 2008), those findings do not directly pertain to the question of obtaining new friends via online interaction. In fact, research finds that women use social media more to keep in touch with existing friends while men are more likely to seek new connections (Tufekci 2008b). Gennaro and Dutton (2007) also found that men were not more likely than women to make new online friends (but slightly more likely to subsequently meet their new friend in person).

An interesting result appeared with regards to race, and particularly African-Americans. The results show that black respondents were far more likely to acquire new friends online. There has been a lot of discussion of racial segregation among different social networking sites (Hargittai 2008; boyd, 2010). However, social networking sites can also be used to self-segregate, seeking friends who are demographically or otherwise similar. This may apply in the case of a minority such as African-Americans who may look beyond their physical environs to connect with other African-Americans. However, social media can also be used in the opposite direction in order to diversify social networks. 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. The school in question does suffer from strained racial

relations within, majors are not segregated by race, and the school is quite diverse in terms of its student body.

National data shows that while there is no gender digital divide, there remains a significant divide between African-American and White households in terms of Internet access and computer ownership. Yet African-Americans are more likely to access the Internet through mobile media, which suggests a more intrinsic connection between the Internet use and sociality (Horrihan 2009). More research is necessary to examine the racial dynamics with regards to online sociality.

## Conclusion

New friends came by those who both believed it to be possible, and invested time in social media. Holding everything else constant, people who believed in online friendship had about 52 percent higher odds of acquiring new friends online, compared to those who did not believe in this possibility. This study contradicts the idea that people who are more social offline are more social online, as well as the notion that it is only the social misfits who use social media to make new friends. This suggests that online friendship might partially be a self-seeking prophecy: seek and ye shall find. It’s also possible that causality runs in the other direction: people may have decided that online friendship was not possible after trying and failing to acquire new online friends. This is cross-sectional research so the question cannot be answered; however, it is likely that this is a self-reinforcing process with causal relations in both directions. A clear confounding factor for the direction is the possibility that people who had established online friendships were the ones who indicated that they believed such friendships to be possible. However, only 10 percent of the respondents who indicated belief in online relationships said that they based this on having witnessed such encounters. This makes it less probable that the belief is merely post-hoc, and subsequent to experience, and more probable that initial openness to acquiring friends online was the key to acquisition. One implication is that the frequent suggestions in media and popular culture that online friendships are “faux” friendships may actually make it less likely that some people will seek social contact online.

Finally, it appears that there are some personality traits, attributes and personal characteristics that make some people more likely to accept online friendship formation as possible, or even desirable, while for others, face-to-face interaction has inimitable features that simply cannot be replicated or replaced by any other form of communication. It is possible that preference for or avoidance of online sociality brings to the fore certain personality attributes that were simply not as crucial in the pre-Internet era and are thus not neatly measured by existing measures and not reflected cleanly in traditional demographics. At a time when there is much concern about declining social networks of Americans (Hampton 2009; McPherson et al. 2006) and the possible role of the

Internet in this decline, it is important to understand the factors that enable, or inhibit the formation of close social ties through online connections.

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