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 AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM, 2010).* AAAI Press. Forthcoming.

**Theoretical Perspective**

The author seeks to examine whether social media can expand an individual’s social networking, as well as how and why that may occur. The study further explores whether social networking success is related to a user’s prior experience and/or attitudes toward making friends. Lastly, the study approaches the ability of online friendships to evolve into face-to-face friendships.

The focus of Tufekci’s study is both timely and insightful, as people increasingly invest time and energies into building connections through online communication. Some say this broadens social opportunities, allowing access to communities and cultures that would otherwise fall outside of our experience base. Others argue that online relationships are one-dimensional and do not translate into full and beneficial friendships in the physical world. As individuals navigate these new community-building technologies, it’s important to question whether these tools are advancing human relations, as is their intent, or if we’re actually substituting the appearance or feel of community for actual human relationships.

The author connects his central questions to a wide range of relevant studies about social networking and relationship formation, dating from 1975 to the year this study was published. He acknowledges and critiques their findings, reaching further to deconstruct and define the issues raised. The author concedes that, “Overall, social networking (or network) sites (SNS) have been found to enrich users’ social capital” (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007) but then goes on to ask “who gains new friends from social media and how much impact do individual beliefs have on the social benefits gained”? These are appropriate and insightful follow-up questions to existing research.

**Research Design and Analysis**

The study was designed with an integrated approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative feedback mechanisms. The scope of questions was broad enough to uncover relevant concerns about online socialization, as well as the perceived attributes of these same offerings. Additionally, follow-up questions were used to further quantify and explore overall positive versus negative perceptions regarding the effectiveness of building true friendships via online social networking.

The sample population was sufficient, including 617 completed surveys and representing comparable numbers of male versus female participants, averaging 19 years of age. Racial categories showed a predominance of white participants, followed closely by Asian Americans, and considerably smaller percentages of Black, “other”, and Hispanic participants. This is appropriate, given the author’s statement that the sample closely matched the demographics of the school. This setup also allows for generalizability to schools with similar demographics, but careful attention should be used when applying to the K-12 setting (or post-college age populations) due to the narrow age-range of study participants.

The data collection measures were thorough, including questions regarding time spent online, amount of “sociality” online vs. offline, occurrence of friendships formed online, and pre-existing attitudes toward social networking sites (SNS). Data was collected using surveys and follow-up questions based on the responses given. The study also differentiated between time spent on the internet versus time spent specifically using SNS. The author also made distinctions based on time spent with online resources designed for “instrumentally communicative use as opposed to general sociality”. These distinctions are important in quantifying and categorizing the data by eliminating offerings that are not perceived to offer relationship-building functionality.

The study utilized several mechanisms to analyze survey results, including t-tests, chi-square and ANOVA analyses. They further applied logistic regression to make predictions about new formation of relationships online. This was carried-out via four models, each using a different dichotomous variable and reference category. Each of these models utilized differing numbers of predictors including: number of years on the Internet, age of the respondent, whether or not the respondent uses instant messaging, the number of friends, time spent on social networking sites, and whether the respondent believed online-originated friendship to be possible. This logistic regression yielded p-values less than 0.05, showing statistical significance in most categories, with the exception of Asian Americans in models I and II, which were 0.1.

In addition to the quantitative data analysis, Tufekci gathered qualitative information that was delineated based on attitudes inferred from survey responses. For respondents indicating that online friendship is not possible, common comments addressed trust, the need for face-to-face interactions, body language, emotions and shared experiences. For those who indicated that online friendship is possible (and even preferable for some), remarks referenced personal connections with decreased societal judgment, the ability to bond without sharing a physical space, conversation, honesty, and experience.

**Interpretation and Implications of Results**

The author states that the odds of having met a new friend through social media use is primarily related to three factors: belief in the possibility of online friendship, time spent on social media such as social networking sites, and being African-American. These conclusions seem to follow the data collected and analyzed; however, there is little discussion regarding whether or not these correlations are causal. This is a vital distinction to make, especially when attributing social skills or interactions to specific racial groups. Further investigation is warranted to explore why this correlation exists between African Americans and successful relationship-building through social networking sites, as well as how that may be generalized to other racial and cultural groupings.

An interesting question raised by the author references intentional segregation and/or intentional diversification with regards to friend selection through social networking sites. Social networking can be used to segregate, meaning choose to communicate and build relationships with individuals who share your experiences, racial identity, or other qualifiers. This could help facilitate an individual’s desire to build a social support network that is free from the constraints of geographical location. On the flip side, some individuals may use social networking sites with the opposite intention, to meet people who are have different life experiences, values or other qualifiers. Again, this enables people to seek a friendship base that may not be reflected in their local population. These trends have strong implications regarding formation of social constructs and could potentially affect community cohesiveness, political climate and even societal norms.

According to the study, personality traits, communicative style and online behavior directly affect willingness to acquire close friends through online interactions. The author also points out that gender was not a significant variable and attributes that to either weak social differences within that age group or a gender-equalizing effect of the Internet. Another interesting factor addressed is that women use social media more to keep in touch with existing friends while men are more likely to seek new connections. This presents another causal question. Is this part of a social/gender construct demonstrating that females are more likely than men to form friendships in a physical environment, or perhaps a reflection of how men and women define friendship differently? For example, it may be that women form a comparable number of new connections via social networking to that of men, but don’t place the same value on these relationships. Therefore, the self-reporting measure utilized may have high face validity, but low criterion-based validity.

Tufekci concludes that the likelihood of meeting a new friend through social media is independent of almost all demographic variables, except being an African-American. Rather, the formation of these online-originated friendships are primarily tied to the belief in the possibility of online friendship, followed by time spent on social media such as social networking sites. These conclusions mesh well with the quantitative and qualitative findings and appropriately demonstrate that social networking is a useful tool in forming new friendships. The study also demonstrates a clear correlation between optimism concerning social networking functionality and perceived resultant success.

The use and societal acceptance of social networking sites is soaring in current culture. Many young people spend the majority of their online hours engaged in conversation, sharing jokes, discussing social issues, and searching for emotional support through social networking sites. This speaks to a changing tide: away from conventional relationship-building that is dictated by physical proximity and face-to-face interaction, and toward intentional and pointed interactions based on interests and commonalities. The findings of this study could be a springboard for research related to racial and cultural impacts on SNS use, further investigation into gender differences related to relationship building via social networking sites, and transferability from new online friendships to face-to-face friendships. Further, marginalized students could be better served through a working knowledge of the potential impact of SNS on community-building and support networking. This has the potential to bridge the gap for many young people who might otherwise suffer academically and emotionally from perceived exclusion and solitude.