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Social Media Helps with Friendships

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Abstract: In recent years, social media has saturated every aspect of life. Social media has gradually become one of the primary ways for people to construct and continue different interpersonal relationships. There is always a debate on social media's effect on friendships. This study surveyed the social media platform WeChat to explore whether the effect is positive or negative. Through qualitative and quantitative data analysis, we found the positive effect of social media on friendships.

Keywords: social media, friendship, positive.

1. Introduction

Caroline pointed out that friendship is a human activity of significance because we are social animals [1]. Friendships and social bonds help humans survive in the world [2]. Not only is friendship critical for human social needs, but friendship also plays an indispensable role in mental and physical health. Friendships can give people a sense of belonging and purpose, Friendships help individuals overcome traumas, like violence, divorce, the death of loved ones, and unemployment. Because friends make them realize they are not alone. Friendships also increase confidence and self-values, making people feel positive about their life. Friendship brings people happiness and releases stress. Happiness and low stress are not only crucial for mental health but also critical to physical health and preventing illnesses, like heart diseases, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and asthma [3].

Thanks to the rapid development of communication technologies, human interactions and the construction and continuation of friendship have changed since the debut of social media. In-person interactions are not necessary for the construction: you can meet people through Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok and directly talk to them through chat. Moreover, social media platforms like Bumble and Tinder have multiple functions for people to make friends for different purposes like BFF (best friends forever), date, and business friends. Instead of frequent offline meetings, social media becomes a better tool for people to share lives because it breaks geological boundaries that used to impede friends who are far away from each other. When it comes to social media, mobile phones play a huge role in social media's thriving because the prevalence of mobile phones makes social media accessible to billions of people. Mobile phones have become a necessity for most people, and social media is one of the most prevalent platforms for people to do social networks. Hence, social media plays an influential role in friendships too. Especially due to the pandemic, social media has become a primary way for people to make friends and catch up with their extended friends during

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the lockdown. However, there is always a debate on whether the effect of social media on friendships is positive or negative.

This study surveyed to find whether social media helps with friendship or not. The third part of this paper summarizes this survey, discusses its results, notes the limitations of this research, and makes suggestions for future work.

Sixty-five respondents from China and the US completed the friendship survey via the social media platform WeChat. The results revealed a positive relationship between social media and friendships in quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Nonetheless, more studies are needed to investigate the effect.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Friendship

Friendship is a meaningful and highly significant human activity [1]. The philosopher Aristotle defined friendship as one spirit dwelling in many bodies and others have noted that humans are social animals: "friendship is a meaningful and highly significant human activity" [1][4]. Despite the profound experience of friendship. Few individuals in everyday life explicitly defined friendship [1] Dictionary.COM defines friendship as "a personal attachment based on affection or personal regard for another person" [5]. Thus, friendship is a state of being together and associating with each other[6]. According to Caroline [1], there are some salient attributes that distinguish friendship from other kinds of social relationships: "being voluntary, primary, enduring, possible across the life span, and with no fixed legal or social norms, with limits, and with a reciprocal quality of exchange that in-ludes intimacy and love". Hoyt and Edmonds [7] provide one kind of meaning of friendship as a relationship involving two critical dimensions – interdependence and voluntary participation in friendship. One person will have several friends for multiple needs and different purposes during a lifetime. Therefore, there are various kinds of friendships – some are lesser friendships, whereas others are high-quality ones. Aristotle categorized three types of friendship: utility friendship– the one that highlights the usefulness of that friendship; pleasure friendship – the one that focuses on the company and pleasure of that friendship; virtue friendship – the one values each other as good in themselves [8]. The former two refer to lesser friendships. Among these three branches of friendship, virtue friendships are the most valued friendship and the most time-consuming and rarest due to the scarcity of reasonable and responsible people compared to the accessibility of someone helpful or cheerful [8].

2.2. The Development of Social Media Platforms

In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg invented Facebook (now Meta), which is considered one of the most significant social networks in the world and has 2 billion active users monthly [9,10]. Twitter was established in 2006 by Jack Dorsey. Twitter is one of the most well-known social media platforms globally, which provides people with the short message service (SMS), allowing people to publish up to 280 words of text message and send photos, videos, audio, and Internet links. In 2010, Instagram, a photo-sharing social media platform similar to Facebook and Twitter, debuted. Later, Facebook (now Meta) bought Instagram, and it has developed Ins story and Instagram short videos functions. Snapchat, which is extremely popular among young people, was started in 2011. Snapchat has exceptional functionality, which has attracted many people to use it. Snaps (the things you sent to another person, e.g., messages, photos, videos, etc.) will disappear shortly after receiving them. Whenever a user tries to save, screenshot or record anything in the chat, another user will know these actions. This functionality protects users' privacy on social media, making

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Snapchat a massive threat to Facebook (now Meta). Further, Vaynerchuk [11] points out that one of the reasons why Snapchat is so popular among young people is their preference for being on a platform without their parents.

2.3. WeChat

Canadian social media platform Kik Messenger allowed asynchronous contact with others, let users know their contacts had read the messages and streamed music and videos to friends. Inspired by it, a senior manager of Tencent Inc., Zhang, Xiaolong suggested his boss Ma, Huateng (aka "Pony Ma") launch a similar social media platform. Ma agreed with Zhang's proposal and responded quickly by launching "WeChat" in late January 2011[13].

WeChat could be downloaded free of charge.Like Kik Messengers and WhatsApp, WeChat enables users to send free short messages or SMS, and avoid charges from Chinese mobile phone companies [13]. Tencent also took advantage of its other social media platform QQ, which has 840 million monthly active users in 2014, to gain users from QQ by allowing users to create or login to their accounts only by using their QQ accounts rather than their phone numbers[13][14][15]. WeChat firstly experiences slow developments, and this led it only had 4 to 5 million users in May 2011[15]. Hence, Tencent added a few more new features to WeChat subsequently like "Look Around", which enabled users to find nearby friends, "Shake" and "Drift Bowl", which enabled users to match friends or send voice messages to strangers; "Voice Message", which enabled users not to type to send a message; "Moments" and "Photo Album", which enables users to share their pictures and like or comment on others' posts; "Video Call", which was similar to Skype; and "Recall", which enabled users to recall their messages or photos within 2 minutes[13]. In 2015, WeChat had 650 million users[16]. Nowadays, WeChat has 1.2883 billion users and a large part of them are Chinese [17].

Since China government has blocked the most popular foreign social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, WeChat has become the first choice for Chinese people to communicate with their friends on mobile phones. Further, sending messages, voice messages, photos, files, and video calls are free of charge on WeChat but will be charged through your mobile phone's message function, Chinese people always choose WeChat instead of Message to touch with others.

2.4. Social Media's Influence on Friendship

Social networking platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Wechat, and Tiktok break geographic boundaries and time-zones, allowing people to contact and connect with anyone regardless of time, location, and cultural background. At the same time, social media also increase people to share their lives with others. With the rapid development and prevalence of social media, people's ways of making friends changed. Instead of exclusive face-to-face communication and one-on-one friends-making, social media enables people to simultaneously communicate and make friendships with more than one person.

It is hard to reach a consensus on whether social media positively or negatively influences friendship – people of different ages, personality traits, gender, and cultural backgrounds have different needs for and expectations of friends. Social media has a significant effect on friendships—for instance, it is convenient for connection. Nonetheless, many people believe that social media degrades the quality of friendship: Thomas [18] implied that friendship could not thrive without the capacity to confide in secrecy. These are several reasons why scholars are concerned that social media cannot let people have high-valued friends due to the low confidence in secrecy on social media platforms. Bloomfield also highlights that on social media, users can

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communicate with plenty of other users simultaneously, and this made those interactions superficial [19]. Rich conversation with specific friends, which would constitute sharing a life, is difficult or unlikely.

Social media's effect on friendship can be disparate based on the type of social media that people use, people's habits of using social media, and their willingness to disclose themselves on social media. Moreover, the easiness of making deceptive claims about oneself either deliberately or subconsciously [20][21] makes many friendships ill-grounded. Physical isolation or distance can also lead to a low-quality friendship (e.g., utility friendship and pleasure friendship). However, Elder [8] argued that social media help people obtain virtuous friendships. Firstly, he claimed utility or pleasure friendship could convert into virtue friendship. " [friendship] need not be grazing in the same field, like cattle" . Elder [8] stated that people do not need to be present in-person to share their life with friends. Also, Elder [8] emphasized that valuable friends are precious because they share their lives and, in doing so, become "another self" to each other. Social media is a platform to help people share their lives with their loved ones regardless of time and geography. When it comes to inauthentic self-present and deception on social media, Elder [8] pointed out that fraud and editing of one self-present to acquaintances is also commonplace in real-life interactions among friends. Thus, face-to-face communication can be vulnerable and deceptive as well.

2.5. Social Enhancement and Social Compensation Hypotheses in Social Media

Popularity on social media have multiple meanings and interpretations. Bukowski [21] defined popularity as acceptance by one's peer group members or as being widely liked, while others think popularity means that one is "socially dominant" [22]. There are two rival hypotheses in social media regarding popularity: the social enhancement hypothesis and the social compensation hypothesis. The social enhancement hypothesis indicated that for those with a more robust and better offline social network, social media can enhance them with a more extensive online network [23][24]. Conversely, the social compensation ("Poor Get Richer") hypothesis implies that those who have inadequate offline social networks will compensate with an online social network [25]. Zywica and Danowski's study [26] found support for the social enhancement and compensation hypothesis. Both social enhancement hypotheses and social compensation hypotheses blueprinted the way social media can help people of different personalities construct and continue a good relationship. For those who have an overall extrovert personality and are good at socializing, social media can be used as a bonus for them to extend their network and construct long-term, deep, and colorful friendships on social media. On the other hand, for those who might find it hard to make friends or maintain friendships due to their personality and habits, social media then become a robust tool for them to make friends and interact with friends in a way that they feel comfortable.

2.6. Social Connection, Belongingness, Psychological Well-being, and Social Media

According to "quantitative and qualitative social appraisals and relationship salience", social connectedness is a "short-term experience of belonging and relatedness"[27].It is a well-established theory that the sense of social connection is the basis of a strong, long-lasting interpersonal bond [12][28] With the rapid development of social media, more and more people engage in online communication, so there is a great possibility that an individual's offline network can contact online Ryan et al [29] then assumed that this trend changes "how the need for social connection is established, maintained and thwarted." Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe [30] stated that social media could be a helpful tool to increase social capital.

Baumeister and Leary [12] argued that human has an inborn psychological drive to belong to a group and participate in meaningful social interactions. The authors stated that "belongingness can

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/3/2022556

be almost as compelling a need as food and that human culture is significantly conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness" [12]. It is reasonable that digital mediums can enhance belonging, given that a sense of belonging refers to the extent of the feeling that one is a part of one or more social groups .[31]. However, gender might lead to a mixed effect .

In summary, most recent scholars have argued that social media can increase individuals' feelings of social connectedness and belonging. Feelings, in turn, have a positive effect on one's psychological well-being and friendship.

3. Methodology

The research is going to adopt the survey method. To appropriately analyze the data gathered from the survey, both Excel and RStudio quantitatively and qualitatively data analysis were adopted.

3.1. Participants

A total of 65 participants voluntarily completed the survey online through WeChat. Of 65 participants, 50 were female, and 15 were male. Four of them were under 18 years old (6%), 30 participants were aged between 18 and 24 (46.%), 9 participants were between 25 and 30 (14%), 8 participants were between 31 and 40 (12%), 13 of them were among the age group from 41 to 50 (20%), and only one participant was older than 50 years old (2%). Around 74% of participants (48 people) had an undergraduate degree, 17% of participants (11 people) held high school degrees or equivalents, 3 participants held master's or Ph.D. degrees (5%), and left 3 participants did not graduate from high school (5%). Sixteen percent of participants were among LGBTQ+ groups (10 out of 65).

3.2. Survey Design

The survey was written by wjx.cn (https://www.wjx.cn/) so that the survey could be directly linked and posted on WeChat – the primary social media platform used by our target participants. The survey link was shared in chats and group chats on WeChat, and the link was also posted on WeChat moment. The survey was designed to explore social media's influence on friendship. Participants' gender, age, personality, and educational background were possible moderators for this effect. Thus the first section of the survey aimed to get data about these. The second section of the survey used multiple-choice, short answer, and polar questions to get participants' experiences, feelings, and mentality about social media use and friends making or maintaining. The survey also included an MBTI personality test (16Personalities.com, Retrieved from 2022) for participants to test and get more comprehensive personality test results voluntarily.

The whole survey adopted multiple-choice questions, polar questions, and text entries. Multiple choices are mutually exclusive, and such answers provide easy-to-analyze data. Polar YES/NO questions are the most succinct, so they are time-saving for respondents. Polar questions typically make participants feel less exhausted while doing the survey, which can decrease the possibility of THEIR quitting the study. Text-entry questions leave participants a space to add answers or details that can convert into valuable data for researchers but are the most time-consuming for respondents.

3.3. Monetary Reward

To ensure the careful completion of the survey, participants were told that there would be a random reward ranging from ¥1-¥10 after finishing the survey.

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4. Results

4.1. Definition of Friendship

For many questions in the survey, multiple answers could be checked.

Among 65 participants, 57 (88%) thought friends should share similar interests or values, and 36 (56%) thought friends were those who they can hang out with. Forty-three percent of participants thought friends were those with whom they could chat.

Almost all respondents believed that Respect (97%) and honesty (87%) are the two most essential attributes of friendship More than half of the respondents chose the following five attributes as crucial in friendship: tolerance (79%), understanding (71%), happiness (70%) righteousness (59%), and support (51%).

More than a quarter of participants believed friends were those who knew a lot of their secrets (29%). Roughly a quarter believed friends could only be called “friends” if they had known them for a long time (27%).

Therefore, respondents did have different definitions of friends.

4.2. Participants’ Social Media Usage

Twenty-eight out of 65 participants (43%) used social media 2 to 4 hours a day, 16 participants (24.61%) used social 5 to 8 hours per day, and 6 participants used social media more than 8 hours a day. The three most frequently used social media functions were chat/facetime (88%), social media post (79%), and likes/ comments/ following (56%). The four most popular activities on social media among 65 participants were connections with families and friends (92%), study or work (88%), entertainment (60%), and sharing oneself (51%). Of those who shared themselves on social, more than a half would share their daily lives (89%), studies or Work-life (64%), and Emotions (54%). Moreover, nearly half of the participants (49.23%) would like to post their photos or selfies on social media. Fifty-six percent of participants had a closer relationship after seeing their friends’ posts on social media. After viewing their friends’ posts, 78% of participants reported that they felt happy, and 40% said they felt connected with their friends, and their feelings of belonging increased.

4.3. Participants’ Self-Reported Personality Traits

Seventeen of 65 participants self-reported social phobias, five self-reported as highly social, and 43 participants reported that their social ability was average. Forty-one out of 65 participants (63.08%) reported that others considered them to be an extrovert; 46 participants (71%) said they did not like to be around many people that much. According to the result, a highly social personality is not necessary for a person to be considered an extrovert by their friends. Most respondents reported that personal space and being alone were really important to them, but they also needed friends at the same time. Thus, social media was a helpful tool for them to meet both of these needs.

4.4. Personality Traits and Participants’ Scores

The average score of participants with extrovert personality traits on social media ‘s effect on friendship is 4.83 out of 7, and of participants with introvert personality traits is 4.86 out of 7. There is only 0.03 apart from both scores. Both scores exceed the median of the total score. Hence, participants report a positive effect of social media on friendship regardless of personality traits.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/3/2022556

4.5. Positive Interactions on Social Media

Fifty-four respondents (83%) somewhat agreed (26 people), agreed (19 people), or extremely agreed (9 people) that social media made it easier to find someone who shares the same interests as theirs. Fifty-two respondents (56%) somewhat agreed (28 people), agreed (17 people), and extremely agreed (7 people) that it was easier to find ones who share the same values as theirs on social media. Interests and values were considered one of the most essential attributes of a highly-valued friendship.

Nearly all respondents (88%) of participants somewhat agreed, agreed, or extremely agreed that it was easier to chat with others on social media. Seventy percent of respondents tended to share themselves more on social media. Seventy-six percent of respondents thought social media was helpful to their self-disclosure. Communication and Sharing are two huge components of friendship as they help people know each other better. Also, people need to give some parts of themselves to get a good friend, and sharing themselves is a way. Forty-four out of 65 respondents (68%) believed that social media provided topics for conversations with friends, and 59 (91 %) agreed that social media helped with friends-connection. Nearly all respondents (91%) somewhat agreed, agreed, or extremely agreed that social media helped with friendship maintenance. Further, 63 out of 65 participants (97%) had received support, compliment, encouragement, or help from their friends via social media. These interactions are all beneficial to the construction and continuation of friendship. Eventually, the mean grade of social media's influence on friendship is 4.62 out of 7.

4.6. Age and Social Media's Effect on Friendships

Age revealed a negative significant correlation with the overall score of social media's effect on friendships. R=-.20, p< .01 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Age and Overall Score.

Subjects	average	sd	age	
Age	2.98	1.34	1	
Overall score	4.62	1.34	-0.20	1
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

4.7. Gender and Social Media's Effect on Friendships

Gender revealed a significant correlation with the overall score of social media's effect on friendships. R= .09, p< .01(see Table 2).

Table 2: Gender and Overall Score.

Subject	mean	sd	gender	Overall score
Gender	1.77	0.42	1	
Overall score	4.62	1.34	0.09	1
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/3/2022556

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary

Despite of critiques on social media's effect on friendship, Elder [8] objected to these views, and his reasons were persuasive.[8] Firstly, he said in-person interactions are not prerequisites for a good relationship [8]. Secondly, he pointed out that social media does help people share life with their friends, which is beneficial to the construction of affectional bonds with friends [8]. Lastly, Elder [8] also emphasized that deceptions among friends not only occur on social media, and friends also can be deceptive in person if they decide to be inauthentic to you.

Meanwhile, the Social Enhancement hypothesis and the Social Compensation hypothesis support that networks on social media help with friendship.[25][26][27] Further, social media is a helpful tool to increase one's social capital and enhance belongingness. [30][31] All mentioned above can enable social media, in turn positively influence friendship.

This study sought to explore social media usage's influence on friendship. A survey was designed and posted on Chinese social media Wechat to investigate the relationship between social media and friendship.

5.2. Discussion of Results

According to survey respondents, they use social media to connect, share their lives, study or do business, get information, recreate themselves, and so forth.

The survey results also indicated that social media provides topics for people to discuss with friends. Moreover, people feel more comfortable disclosing and sharing themselves on social media – self-disclosure and sharing life are also crucial in constructing and continuing a good friendship. The result also showed that social media increases participants' sense of connectedness and belonging. More participants will feel more comfortable talking with people they just met online (e.g., through social media) rather than face-to-face. The results also report that social media helps find someone who shares similar interests or values and are catalysts for a good friendship. However, social media has a less positive effect on older people's friendships compared to young people. Further, females' friendships are more likely to be positively influenced by social media than mele's.

Although worrying about over-expose of privacy and deception on social media never ends, respondents also score a high grade on social media's effect on friendships. Just as Elder [8] declared, deception and privacy issues never only exist on social media – if a person plans to cheat, that person is deceptive in any interaction, like in-person interactions[8]. Privacy is a significant problem on social media, but platforms try their best to protect users' friends yearly [8]. Elder [8] also emphasized that making friends means that people have to give up some parts of their privacy because they have to share themselves to create affectional bonds with others to build a friendship [8]. Therefore, sacrificing some of your privacy is inevitable and necessary for any form of making friends.

To sum up: the survey shows an overall positive influence of social media on friendships.

5.3. Limitations and Recommendations

The survey summarized in this paper found a positive effect of social media on friendships. The survey results against many earlier discussions but complies with many more recent studies. Perhaps, social media changes people's social habits, and then the change of social habits changes the role social media plays in friendships. This might be another direction for future studies on the same topic. Also, age and gender could mediate or moderate this effect, and more systematic data

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analyses are required to prove it. Self-disclosure, belongingness, and communications can also mediate or moderate this effect, so more sophisticated models, more systematic studies, and more quantitative analyses are needed to testify to them.

The survey was conducted in an uncontrolled environment, so the accuracy of the result can be influenced by some unknown issues. The number of respondents was also only 65, and the ethnicity of the participants is all Chinese. A bigger sample pool with more diverse backgrounds is also needed for further studies. Binary questions were also a part of the survey, which might not articulate participants' actual views or answers to some questions. For the personality inquiry, self-report might not be accurate because some participants might not know themselves as well as they expected, or they provided some unauthentic personality traits in the study. Hence, future studies also can adopt a better study in a controlled environment to get accurate personality traits from participants.

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Appendix 1: Survey questions

English Version: https://www.wjx.cn/vm/tJ96rnx.aspx

Chinese Version: https://www.wjx.cn/vj/w500vXf.aspx