Coworkers and Supervisors on Facebook?
Effect of Workplace Friendship, Trust, and Sex

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ABSTRACT. Few studies have examined Facebook® users’ attitude toward Facebook friending with people from the workplace. The first part of the present study investigated whether Facebook users liked to become Facebook friends with coworkers and whether their decisions were affected by their perceived workplace friendship, trust toward coworkers, and sex. The second part of this study examined whether supervisors’ intention of friending subordinates on Facebook generated a feeling of inappropriateness and whether men and women differed in their perceptions. Data were collected through online surveys (N = 399, 74% women). Results showed that the majority of Facebook users liked to become Facebook friends with coworkers, $\chi^2(3) = 106.69, p < .001$. Those who perceived a higher level of workplace friendship reported less unwillingness to friend coworkers on Facebook, $r(380) = -.30, p < .001, r^2 = .09$. Even with high perceived workplace friendship, users still felt more comfortable friending highly trusted coworkers compared to moderately or lowly trusted coworkers on Facebook, $F(2, 232) = 195.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .63$. Furthermore, although in general Facebook users felt it inappropriate for supervisors to send them friend requests, $\chi^2(3) = 115.94, p < .001$, women were more likely to view this friending intention as inappropriate than men, $t(381) = 2.05, p = .039, d = .25$. This study provided important implications about how understanding the factors that influence users’ attitude toward Facebook friending with coworkers and supervisors can benefit both individual career advancement and organizational outcomes.

Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors worldwide. As of June 2012, Facebook had over 955 million active users, ranking first among all social networking websites (Carlson, 2012). The popularity and prevalence of this new networking platform has aroused the interest of many psychology researchers.

Previous studies have examined user characteristics, motivations for using Facebook, identity presentation, the role of Facebook in social interactions, as well as privacy and information disclosure (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). However, the majority of the literature has concentrated on the profile owners themselves (Back et al., 2010; Carpenter, 2012) and their Facebook connection with families, school friends, and current or past significant others (Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011), who tend to be more involved in their private sphere. Few studies have focused on users’ Facebook relationships with people from a more public sphere, the workplace, until the Yale Daily News reported that numerous employers have utilized Facebook to seek information about potential employees (Balakrishna, 2006). Moreover, although a growing
number of research articles have examined the association between individuals’ offline and online network (Park, Lee, & Kim, 2012), limited studies have explored the offline relationships with certain characteristics that tend to be maintained in virtual communities. Research has documented that networking, especially with people from the workplace, is becoming more and more important for career advancement (Forret, 1997). Maintaining connections with coworkers on Facebook can become a new strategy to facilitate relationship development and thus benefit a person’s career (Gerard, 2012). It would be helpful to know what elements increase the chance for people to become Facebook friends with their coworkers. In the first part of this study, we investigated whether Facebook users liked to become Facebook friends with their coworkers and whether their decisions were affected by three possible factors: their perceived workplace friendship, trust toward work friends, and sex.

In addition to coworkers, supervisors compose another important group in a career network. However, individuals may feel uncomfortable when supervisors want to become their Facebook friends because exposing their Facebook profiles to supervisors can bring risks to their employment. In the second part of our study, we examined whether subordinates felt it inappropriate for supervisors to want to become their Facebook friends and whether their decisions were affected by three possible factors: their perceived workplace friendship, trust toward work friends, and sex.

### Friending Coworkers on Facebook

As part of their social network, coworkers play an important role in most employed individuals’ careers and lives. Shanock, Roch, and Mishra (2012) found that coworker support enhanced employees’ positive attitudes toward their employers, increased their altruistic behavior, and improved their productivity at work. Warner (2012) showed coworkers to be an important source of support for employees’ work-family balance efforts: higher levels of perceived coworker support predicted lower levels of work-family conflicts. Coworker support was also found to alleviate turnover intentions (Karatepe, 2012), reduce stress (Sloan, 2012), and improve job satisfaction and work well-being (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995). These positive effects of coworkers encouraged us to expect that individuals would be very happy to become Facebook friends with their Facebook users in general would like to become Facebook friends with their coworkers. However, other factors could also influence whether a person wants to have coworkers as Facebook friends. We proposed that the perceived workplace friendship and trust toward coworkers were two factors that would affect employees’ decisions on friending coworkers on Facebook.

### Perceived workplace friendship

Multiple studies have confirmed that the major motivation for people to use Facebook is to support existing relationships or keep in touch with friends (Jjoinson, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Tosun, 2012). People who are more relationally close are more likely to engage in Facebook communication (Ledbetter et al., 2011). In addition, in a study examining relationships on the Internet, Whitty (2008) found that online connections depended on whether an individual anticipated a long- or short-term relationship with the other person. These findings suggested that, in general, friendships on Facebook come from real-life relationships, especially those that are intimate and expected to grow. The workplace, like other offline social environments, allows individuals to establish friendships with people encountered. Good friendships established at work are often expected to continue in other aspects of life including the Facebook community. However, if the friendships acquired are not satisfying, people may feel reluctant to maintain the relationships on private Facebook pages, as implied by previous studies (Ledbetter et al., 2011; Whitty, 2008).

On the other hand, people’s workplace and online friending (i.e., making friend requests and becoming friends with others in virtual communities like Facebook) behavior can be a function of both the organizational structure and their personalities. Riordan and Griffeth (1995) studied workplace friendship and found that the job structure itself including long hours and low or unfair pay could lead to low levels of perceived workplace friendship and could push close workplace friends apart. For example, if individuals received lower salaries than their good friends at work who were in comparable positions, their friendships would likely be influenced. Moreover, unpleasant work structures often result in high stress and low job satisfaction (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995), which may tend to decrease communication among coworkers both offline and online.

In addition, previous research has suggested that personality plays a role in workplace and online friendships. Studies investigating the relationship
between the Big Five personality factors and Facebook usage found that extraversion and openness increased social media use (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010) and the number of Facebook friends (Moore & McElroy, 2012). Meanwhile, Moore and McElroy (2012) found that extraverted people tended to approach and interact with others more easily and intensively. Besides the Big Five factors, Sheldon (2008) also examined people who were unwilling to communicate offline. Instead of being more active in an online community, people who are fearful of communication offline tend to be quiet and have fewer friends online as well. Furthermore, Zywica and Danowski (2008) have established that the Rich Get Richer hypothesis, which states that people who are popular offline are more active online, received more empirical support than the Poor Get Richer hypothesis, which states that individuals who are unpopular offline are more active online. Therefore, introversion and shyness could result in both lower levels of friendship in real life and fewer friends on Facebook. These findings have indicated that both organizational (e.g., unfair pay) and personality (e.g., introversion) factors may result in individuals perceiving less workplace friendship and having fewer friends from work on Facebook at the same time. Accordingly, we conjectured the second hypothesis of our study: Facebook users who perceive less workplace friendship would report not wanting to have Facebook friends from work. This hypothesis can be viewed as an extension of Zywica and Danowski’s (2008) Rich Get Richer hypothesis.

Trust toward coworkers. Although workplace relationships share similar characteristics with relationships formed under other circumstances, they are more complicated because they are directly related to work, where supervisors have the potential to terminate one’s employment. Therefore, when people decide whether to include coworkers in their more private Facebook network, they may take into account elements other than merely friendship. Research has demonstrated that social surveillance is another major motivation of Facebook usage (Joinson, 2008), which suggests that coworkers in one’s Facebook network could engage in surveillance behavior and report any negative messages posted to the supervisor. In fact, Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) studied information disclosure and control on Facebook, and found that 76% of the participants reported the ability to control who sees their information on Facebook is important. Moreover, further research found that the negative messages Facebook friends posted on a person’s wall would reduce that person’s social attractiveness and credibility (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Some coworkers may not only conduct surveillance but also post negative messages on their colleagues’ Facebook sites. Consequently, individuals are likely to only friend-request coworkers who they trust most on Facebook, even though they have experienced a high level of workplace friendship. Taking these findings together, we developed the third hypothesis: Facebook users who perceive a high level of workplace friendship are more willing to have work friends they highly trust as compared to those they moderately or lowly trust on Facebook.

Sex differences. The effect of sex should not be overlooked. However, the results from the limited amount of existing literature on sex differences in workplace friendship and Facebook usage posed some challenges in generating hypotheses about sex differences in the relationships between the variables in our study. Winstead (1986) and Aukett, Ritchie, and Mill (1988) found that women tended to have more intimate friends and place more importance on friends than men. In this regard, women would be more likely to friend coworkers on Facebook than men when they perceive a high level of workplace friendship. Nevertheless, in a research study about sex differences in perception of benefits from workplace friendship, Morrison (2009) found that women tended to perceive the benefits as social and emotional support and men tended to perceive it as having functional and career-related benefits. Given that friending coworkers on Facebook provides a good opportunity to strengthen the connections with them and increase career-related benefits, men are also likely to become Facebook friends with coworkers when they perceive a high level of workplace friendship. In addition, women were found to have more privacy concerns and were more likely than men to set their online profiles to private (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Because of their higher privacy consciousness, women were more inclined than men to friend coworkers they trust most on Facebook. However, as a result of men’s focus on career-related benefits, they also tend to friend coworkers who they believe will help them. Therefore, men and women are likely to place an equal amount of emphasis on trust levels toward coworkers in their Facebook friending decisions. Consequently, trust is valued in all types of relationships by individuals, regardless
of whether they are women or men. In this study, we examined sex differences within each of our first three hypotheses, but because friendship and trust tend to be important for both women and men in deciding whether to friend coworkers on Facebook, we expected no significant sex effect on these relationships.

**Facebook Friend Requests From Supervisors**

Compared to coworkers, the decision of whether to add supervisors as Facebook friends is more complicated. Having supervisors as friends on Facebook provides opportunities to build a stronger personal connection, which can be beneficial to one’s career development. Conversely, it brings about a larger risk of losing jobs because supervisors could easily notice when an employee posts inappropriate information. Employees may feel more insecure about their jobs when supervisors become their Facebook friends. This sense of job insecurity tends to increase if supervisors initiate the friend requests because employees are likely to think that supervisors want to monitor them even if supervisors just want to strengthen their relationships. Research has provided evidence that job insecurity is associated with increased turnover intentions and worse well-being (Stiglbauer, Selenko, Batinic, & Jodlbauer, 2012). To avoid these potential misunderstandings and negative effects, it is important to understand how employees perceive supervisors when supervisors initiate friend requests on Facebook. In the second part of our study, we investigated whether individuals felt it inappropriate for supervisors to want to become their Facebook friends and whether there were sex differences in this perception of inappropriateness.

When supervisors initiate Facebook friend requests, we speculated that subordinates tended to believe supervisors want to monitor their behavior rather than to maintain or improve relationships. Moreover, having supervisors as their Facebook friends may diminish employees’ freedom and force them to be more disciplined and restrained on the site. Therefore, we developed our fourth hypothesis that Facebook users in general would feel it inappropriate for supervisors to want to become their Facebook friends.

With respect to the perception of supervisors’ Facebook friend requests, we expected strong sex differences. Morrison (2009) examined the sex differences in the perceived benefits from workplace friendship and found that men focused more on the career-related benefits than women. Research examining sex differences in Facebook usage showed that women focused more on self-presentation and relationship maintenance when using social networking sites (SNS), and men concentrated more on task-focused activities and forming new friendships (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). In addition, significantly more women than men reported feeling closer to Facebook friends than friends they see every day and that Facebook helps them express feelings more easily (Thompson & Lougheed, 2012). Thus women may be more reluctant to have supervisors as Facebook friends because supervisors prevent them from disclosing fully on Facebook.

The general personality differences between men and women may affect their perceptions of the Facebook friend requests from supervisors. Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2000) found that women using social functions of the Internet displayed higher levels of introversion and neuroticism. Because of this, women may feel less comfortable than men having supervisors as Facebook friends. Interestingly, in a study with college students, the researchers found sex differences in attitudes toward accepting university faculty as Facebook friends. Hewitt and Forte (2006) reported that men were twice as likely as women to feel comfortable about faculty presence on Facebook. Other reasons that could cause this higher level of discomfort among female employees are the historical underrepresentation of women at work and the frequency of sexual harassments from supervisors (Lafontaine & Tredeau, 1986; McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012). The historical underrepresentation of professional women leads women to have less confidence and perceive larger power differentials at work. The frequent news on sexual harassments occurring between supervisors and female subordinates generates more tension and caution among women. Statistics from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (US EEOC, 2013) indicated that, in 2011, there were 11,364 sexual harassment charges in total; 83.7% of them were filed by women. According to a 2008 telephone poll by Louis Harris and Associates of 782 female and male U.S. workers, 43% of the female employees who had been harassed were harassed by a supervisor (Sexual harassment in the workplace, 2009). In line with these studies, we devised the fifth hypothesis: women, as compared to men, are more likely to feel it inappropriate for a supervisor at work to want...
to be their Facebook friend.

Method

Participants
Three hundred ninety-nine participants were in the current study, and the sample consisted of 102 (26%) men and 297 (74%) women. All participants were 18- to 30-year-old ($M = 22.73$, $SD = 3.17$) Facebook users living in the United States, who held a part-time (46%) or full-time job (54%). Of the 399 participants, 65% identified themselves as White, 8% Black, 9% Hispanic, 9% Asian, and the remaining 9% as multiracial or other. Sixty percent of the participants were currently enrolled in college, and 15% had a master’s degree or higher. The majority of the participants used Facebook multiple times a day (71%) and had been using Facebook for more than 3 years (76%). On average, each participant had 496 friends on Facebook.

Measures

Workplace friendship. Respondents’ perceptions of workplace friendship were accessed by the 12-item scale developed by Nielsen, Jex, and Adams (2000). Example items included “I have the opportunity to get to know my coworkers,” “I have developed good friendships at work,” and “One of the reasons for working is to see these coworkers.” We used a 5-point Likert-type scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree to measure the responses. The last item, which stated “I don’t believe anyone who works with me is a true friend,” was reversed scored. We calculated a total score for each individual. Total scores can range from 12 to 60. Higher total scores indicated greater perceived workplace friendship. The internal consistency coefficient was adequate ($\alpha = .92$).

Trust. Participants were asked to indicate how likely they were to become Facebook friends with coworkers for whom they had low, moderate, or high levels of trust. Five-point Likert-type scales from not at all likely to very likely were coded as 1 to 5. The higher the score, the more likely participants would friend coworkers with whom they had the corresponding trust level on Facebook.

Attitude toward coworkers and perception of supervisors. Participants were also asked to respond to two questions. First, “Would you rather not have coworkers as friends on Facebook?” Second, “Do you feel that it is appropriate for a supervisor to want to be friends on Facebook?” A 4-point Likert-type scale was used for each of the questions ranging from not true at all/not appropriate to very true/very appropriate, thus a higher score indicated less willingness to have coworkers as Facebook friends and a greater feeling of appropriateness toward supervisors wanting to become Facebook friends. We used 4-point scales here in order to avoid the selection of neutral.

Procedure

Upon approval from the college’s institutional review board, we administered the questionnaire using an online survey program (i.e., SurveyMonkey®). We created a separate secure link asking for participants’ e-mail addresses which would be used for prize notification. Twenty-eight research assistants recruited individuals through personal connections, e-mail flyers, and social media. To be considered for the study, individuals had to be 18 to 30 years old, live in the United States, have Facebook accounts, and have access to the Internet. Power analysis demonstrated that the sample size needed for this study was 100 (Murphy & Myors, 1998). Each participant received a website link to the survey and a secure link asking for their e-mail addresses. Participants were asked to complete the survey online.

In the surveys, we asked about demographic information. Participation was voluntary, but those who participated were entered into a drawing to win a $50 Amazon® gift card. This project was part of a larger project completed by an undergraduate research class investigating Facebook.

Results

We first investigated participants’ attitudes toward friending coworkers on Facebook. A chi-squared goodness of fit test was calculated to compare the frequency of each type of responses to the question “Would you rather not have coworkers as friends on Facebook?” including not true at all, mildly true, somewhat true, and very true. A null hypothesis that each of the four responses would occur an equal number of times (25%) was set (Greenwood & Nikulin, 1996). Significant deviation from the hypothesized value was found, $\chi^2 (3) = 106.69$, $p < .001$. Among the 385 participants who responded to the question, 168 (44%) selected not true at all, 116 (30%) selected mildly true, 67 (17%) chose somewhat true, and only 34 (9%) chose very true, indicating that the majority of participants would like to become Facebook friends with coworkers. Our first hypothesis was supported. We also conducted a chi-squared test of independence to compare men’s and women’s responses. No
significant relationship was found, $\chi^2(3) = 2.26$, $p = .52$, which suggested that participants’ sex did not influence their attitudes toward friending coworkers on Facebook.

To test the second hypothesis, that Facebook users who perceived less workplace friendship were more likely to be unwilling to have Facebook friends from work, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between participants’ scores of perceived workplace friendship and their scores of not wanting to have coworkers as Facebook friends. A significant, medium-sized ($\text{Cohen}, 1988$), and negative correlation was found, $r(380) = -.30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .09$. Therefore, the second hypothesis was supported. In addition, we performed a Pearson correlation analysis for men and women respectively to examine if there were sex differences in this correlation. For both groups, we found a significant, medium-sized, and negative correlation; $r(94) = -.32$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .10$, for men and $r(284) = -.29$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .08$ for women. This result indicated that both male and female participants with greater perceived workplace friendships were more likely to want coworkers to become their Facebook friends. A complete result regarding this hypothesis was shown in Table 1.

For the third hypothesis, that Facebook users who perceived high workplace friendship would be more comfortable friending coworkers with whom they had high levels of trust than those with whom they had low or moderate levels of trust on Facebook, the participants were grouped into one of three categories (high, medium, or low) on the basis of their perceived workplace friendship total scores. The grouping was determined according to the 33rd and 67th percentiles so that we could have three relatively evenly distributed groups. Participants with scores below the 33rd percentile (total score of 43), between 33rd and 67th percentiles (total score between 43 and 49, inclusive), and above the 67th percentile (total score of 49) were considered to have low, medium, and high perceived workplace friendship respectively. To test this hypothesis, only the 119 participants with high perceived workplace friendship were examined. A repeated-measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the participants’ scores of comfortableness with friending coworkers with whom they had low, moderate, and high levels of trust on Facebook. A significant effect of participants’ trust levels toward coworkers was found, $F(2, 232) = 195.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .63$, which represented a large effect size (Tatsuoka, 1993) for trust for coworkers. Follow-up paired-samples $t$ tests revealed that participants with high perceived workplace friendship felt significantly more comfortable with friending highly trusted coworkers than moderately trusted, $t(116) = -10.14$, $p < .001$, $d = .94$, and low trusted coworkers, $t(116) = -16.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.54$, which indicated that the third hypothesis was also supported.

To examine if sex differences existed, we conducted a $3 \times 2$ mixed-design ANOVA, which tested the effects of both the trust levels (high, moderate, and low) and sex (men and women). No significant trust levels x sex interaction was present, $F(2, 230) = .63$, $p = .53$, $\eta^2 = .01$, and the main effect for sex was not significant, $F(1, 115) = .69$, $p = .41$, $\eta^2 = .01$. However, the main effect for trust levels was significant, $F(2, 230) = 154.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$. In order to better understand the effect of trust levels, we also examined the 126 participants who perceived a low level of workplace friendship and the 138 participants who perceived a medium level of workplace friendship.

We performed two repeated-measures ANOVAs and found a significant effect of trust levels for both groups: $F(2, 248) = 92.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .43$ for the low-level group and $F(2, 272) = 187.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .58$ for the medium-level group. Follow-up paired-samples $t$ tests revealed that participants in the low-level group liked to become friends with highly trusted coworkers more than moderately trusted, $t(124) = 8.34$, $p < .001$, $d = .75$, and low trusted coworkers, $t(124) = -10.76$, $p < .001$, $d = .96$, and participants in the medium-level group also preferred highly trusted coworkers to moderately trusted, $t(136) = -10.47$, $p < .001$, $d = .89$, and low trusted coworkers as Facebook friends, $t(136) = -15.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.35$. The means and standard deviations of participants’ scores were displayed in Table 2. A 3

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<th>Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient of Workplace Friendship and Unwillingness to Friend Coworkers on Facebook</th>
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Note: $r =$ correlation coefficient; $R^2 =$ coefficient of determination (measure of strength of relationship): $p < .05$, “$p < .01$,” “$p < .001$.”
x 2 mixed-design ANOVA was also conducted for each group to examine the sex effect. No significant main effect for sex was found for either group: $F(1, 123) = 0.31, p = .58, \eta^2 = .00$ for the low-level group and $F(1, 135) = 2.72, p = .10, \eta^2 = .02$ for the medium-level group, and no significant interaction was found for the low-level group, $F(2, 246) = 1.61, p = .20, \eta^2 = .01$. A significant trust levels x sex interaction was found for the medium-level group, $F(2, 270) = 4.09, p = .018$, but the effect size was small, $\eta^2 = .03$. Furthermore, the effect of trust levels was significant for both groups: $F(2, 246) = 55.85, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31$ for the low-level group and $F(2, 270) = 119.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .47$ for the medium-level group. Therefore, for all employed individuals, regardless of sex and perceived workplace friendship, highly trusted coworkers were more likely to become their Facebook friends than moderately trusted and lowly trusted coworkers.

In the second part of this study, we examined participants’ perception of supervisors’ Facebook friending. We performed a chi-squared goodness of fit test again to compare the frequency of each type of responses to the question “Do you feel that it is appropriate for a supervisor to want to be friends on Facebook?” including not appropriate, somewhat appropriate, appropriate, and very appropriate. With the null hypothesis that each of the four responses would occur an equal number of times (25%), we found a significant difference between the observed and hypothesized values, $\chi^2(3) = 115.94, p < .001$. Among the 383 participants who responded to this question, 152 (40%) selected somewhat appropriate, 133 (35%) selected not appropriate, 82 (21%) chose appropriate, and only 16 (4%) chose very appropriate. This result suggested that most people feel uncomfortable when supervisors want to be their Facebook friends. Our fourth hypothesis was supported. A chi-squared test of independence was also calculated to examine the sex differences. We found a significant result, $\chi^2(3) = 7.80, p = .05$. Major differences appeared in the responses of not appropriate and appropriate. Thirty-eight percent of women and 26% of men selected not appropriate, and 18% of women and 31% of men chose appropriate, indicating that men generally would feel more comfortable with supervisors’ friend requests.

An independent-samples $t$ test comparing the mean scores of female and male participants’ feelings toward supervisors wanting to become their Facebook friends was performed. This was used to test the fifth hypothesis that women, as compared to men, were less likely to feel it was appropriate for supervisors at work to want to become their Facebook friends. The result showed there was a significance effect for sex, $t(38) = 2.05, p = .04$, although the effect size ($d = .25$) was relatively small (Cohen, 1992). Women ($M = 1.90, SD = 0.86$) were significantly more likely to feel it inappropriate for supervisors to want to become their Facebook friends than men ($M = 2.11, SD = 0.83$). Therefore, the fifth hypothesis was supported.

**Discussion**

All of the five hypotheses in this study were supported. In general, Facebook users liked to friend coworkers on Facebook but tended to feel it inappropriate for supervisors to want to do the same. The perceived workplace friendship and trust toward coworkers had a significant effect on people’s decision about whether to be Facebook friends with coworkers, although no sex differences were found. People who perceived a higher level of workplace friendship were more likely to have coworkers as their Facebook friends. Among those who perceived a high level of workplace friendship, highly trusted coworkers allowed them to feel more comfortable to become Facebook friends with than moderately and lowly trusted coworkers. This relationship held for people who perceived a low and medium level of workplace friendship as well. Sex differences appeared in the feeling of inappropriateness toward supervisors’ Facebook friending invitations. When supervisors wanted to become Facebook friends with subordinates, female employees were more likely to feel it was inappropriate than male employees.

The results of our study reflected and confirmed findings from previous research on Facebook. For example, our result that those who perceived higher workplace friendship offline were more likely to have coworkers as their Facebook friends provided more evidence for the Rich Get Richer hypothesis (Zywica & Danowski, 2008) and
indicated the phenomenon that individuals who are people-oriented offline tend to be more active online may also be observed in the workplace. In addition, the significant role that trust has played in Facebook friending coworkers, as established in this study, was consistent with the finding of Christofides et al. (2009), which stated that Facebook users did not want certain people to view the information on their private profiles.

Furthermore, the sex differences found in the perception of inappropriateness on supervisors’ Facebook friending requests confirmed our theoretical conjecture that the historical under-representation of women in the workplace results in women perceiving larger power differentials at work, and the potential threat of sexual harassment renders women to have more concerns when supervisors want to become their Facebook friends. However, the lack of sex differences in the relationships between Facebook users’ perceived workplace friendship, trust toward coworkers, and their willingness to friend coworkers implies that the Rich Get Richer hypothesis (Zywica & Danowski, 2008) applies for both women and men in the workplace. Trust-worthy friendships appear to be valued by every individual in all types of contexts including virtual communities such as Facebook.

Important implications can be drawn from the current research. Currently, networking and connections are becoming ever more important for career development. Within a person’s network, current or past coworkers and supervisors play a significant role for this function. Research has showed that Facebook acts as an extension of face-to-face interaction and can facilitate the social networking process (Kujath, 2011). Therefore, becoming a member in coworkers’ or supervisors’ Facebook friend lists can potentially improve relationships with them and bring about unexpected advantages. To increase the chance of becoming coworkers’ or supervisors’ Facebook friends, an employee could help enhance the perception of workplace friendship and develop trust with people at work by engaging in more organizational citizenship behaviors like voluntarily providing coworkers with physical or emotional support, being a more genuine listener, and assisting supervisors with tasks outside job requirements (Tawiah, 2013).

However, becoming friends with coworkers on Facebook does not always bring positive results. As noted before, coworkers that are not trustworthy can post negative information on others’ Facebook profiles (Walther et al., 2008), share personal information inappropriately, and jeopardize others’ employment using Facebook. Therefore it is important for individuals to assess their coworkers’ integrity before adding them as Facebook friends.

Furthermore, because women tend to see supervisors’ friend invitations on Facebook as inappropriate, women are more likely to experience negative feelings if their supervisors request their friendships on Facebook. They may experience higher levels of stress and lower levels of job satisfaction, which as literature has documented, could worsen an employee’s job performance, lower commitment, and harm the organization’s profitability (Nielsen et al., 2000). Therefore, supervisors should be more careful in their Facebook friending behavior toward women subordinates. Specifically, supervisors can set up groups including all subordinates on Facebook instead of friending them individually. This approach allows supervisors to strengthen coworkers’ relationships and at the same time avoid causing unfavorable feelings. Alternatively, supervisors can refrain from sending friend requests to subordinates. They should instead convey to subordinates that they would be amenable to becoming Facebook friends with subordinates if they initiate friend requests and want to connect. In this way, supervisors allow proactive subordinates to build personal networks and do not place any employees in difficult situations.

Implications can be derived for organizations as well. Because connecting with each other on Facebook can strengthen relationships between coworkers, which is beneficial for both employees’ job satisfaction and organizational outcomes, companies can encourage workplace friendship and promote mutual trust (e.g., through fair pay and regular happy hours) to increase the chance for employees to become Facebook friends. In addition, organizations should establish formal regulations on Facebook friending between coworkers and between coworkers and supervisors to prevent unwelcoming behaviors such as sexual harassment.

This study had several strengths. First, we examined Facebook friending behavior regarding people from work, which has not been documented in existing literature. Second, the results of our study provided important insights about what factors influence people’s willingness to friend coworkers on Facebook and whether supervisors’ Facebook friend requests would generate a feeling of inappropriateness among female and male employees. Third, our study had a relatively
large sample size, which allowed the results to be representative. Another strength of the study is that the questionnaire used was based on scales with established reliability and evidence for validity.

Limitations of this study can be noted as well. First, the measures included in our questionnaire were not counterbalanced. We created the questionnaire using SurveyMonkey and the format was established. Future research that counterbalances the measures would provide more accurate data and results (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). Second, this study relied on data from self-report surveys, which might be inconsistent with participants’ actual behavior. For example, an indication of wanting to have Facebook friends from work may not mean that the participants will actually friend coworkers on Facebook. Third, most of the participants in this study were women, White, and under 30 years old, which made it difficult to generalize the results to men and other racial and age groups. More importantly, college students composed the largest percentage of participants, which might have yielded biased results because individuals’ relationships with coworkers and supervisors are likely to be different when they are in college and after they leave college. Future research should explore the difference in friending coworkers and supervisors on Facebook between college and noncollege students.

Future studies should investigate whether sex differences in the perception of inappropriateness when supervisors want to become subordinates’ Facebook friends would change if supervisors’ sex is specified. Intuitively, we expect female employees to feel more comfortable when their supervisors are women and hence they would feel it is appropriate for a female supervisor to want to be their Facebook friends. However, further studies are required to test this hypothesis. It would also be interesting to study how often supervisors send friend requests to subordinates and whether this action has led to any unfavorable consequence.

Future research could also examine people in a wider age group (e.g., 22–60) with a more diverse composition because they can better represent people in the workforce. The attitudes toward being Facebook friends with coworkers and supervisors may vary by age, racial and ethnic group membership, sexual orientation, and national origin. These are all interesting topics that are worth studying.

Finally, future studies can expand the literature on workplace and Facebook usage by assessing whether other variables such as organizational structure and culture affect employees’ decisions on friending coworkers or supervisors on Facebook. Studies can also be conducted to investigate whether supervisors and employees like becoming Facebook friends with each other, and whether becoming Facebook friends with people from work does indeed benefit career development, increase job satisfaction, and improve organizational profitability. By understanding people’s attitudes and behaviors in Facebook usage with others from work, individuals can utilize the social networking site to more effectively benefit both themselves and their organizations.

References


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