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Preference effects on friendship choice: Evidence from an online field experiment

Siyu Yu, Yu Xie

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings have an intrinsic need to form and maintain interpersonal social bonds (Freud, 1930). In the words of British poet John Donne, “No man is an island” (1975)[1624]. Of all forms of association in modern society, friendship is perhaps one of the most socially significant. In contrast with other important forms of association (i.e., family kinship, coworkers, etc.), friendship is unique in being personal, voluntary, and flexible. Due to its informal nature, friendship is a good indicator for measuring social distances (Gonzalez et al., 2007; Huckfeldt, 1983; Kinzler et al., 2009; Verbrugge, 1977; Vigil, 2007; Zeng and Xie, 2008).

However, the causal effect of personal preferences on friendship choice cannot be distinctly identified in observational data, because observed friendship patterns result from the combined forces of personal preferences and structural constraints (e.g., Zeng and Xie, 2008). In this paper, we investigate the causal role of preference in friendship choice in terms of two dimensions: (1) preference for shared group identity and (2) preference for high status. We empirically tested the preference effects with an online field experiment on one of the largest social network service (SNS) websites in China. The results of our study confirm that people prefer to befriend others sharing greater overlaps of place of origin and those from high status institutions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Uncovering Unconstrained Friendship Preferences Confounded by Structural Constraints

Friendship is widely observed, but it does not necessarily reflect individuals' genuine preferences. For example, suppose that most in-school friends of black students in a U.S. high school are blacks. We cannot simply conclude that black students in this school prefer to have blacks as friends. If most of the students in the school are black, even when students are color-

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