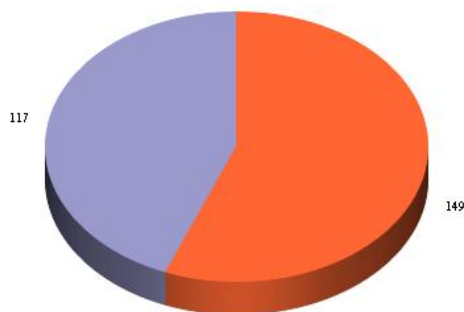Philosophy 123, Koopman
Winter Term 2015

Mutual Friends

What does being friends really entail? Can virtual friendship, such as FaceBook, be of equivalent value to an actual face to face encounter? We believe that in today's society, young people are often so drawn in by the marvel's of today's technology, and perhaps even the feeling of virtual popularity, that they forget to exercise caution and skepticism, and are willing to relay trust to people whom, in the streets of the physical world, we wouldn't share nearly that kind of information with.

The experiment began with the creation of a fake FaceBook account: Marissa Fadden. Born August 24, 1996, Marissa Fadden was a freshman at the University of Oregon. She was from Santa Monica, California, had worked at Jamba Juice and Orange County School of The Arts, and liked the Green Bay Packers. The realism of this persona was embellished by images taken from the actual account of a willing volunteer, who will remain unnamed. The experiment entailed the adding of FaceBook friends with this fake name, within an established timeline (Feb 23-Mar 2) to measure rates at which male, female, and all college age students would accept a request based solely on mutual friendship, or the fake profile given.

The project was bound, or in other words limited by strictly adding an initial control group (30 friends to start with) in order to make the profile believable, and then from then on, people who had mutual friends with the account. Afterward, the data of how many acceptances, and the male to female ratio was measured. Direct contact or communication with anyone was excluded, and the only method of interaction was via friend request.
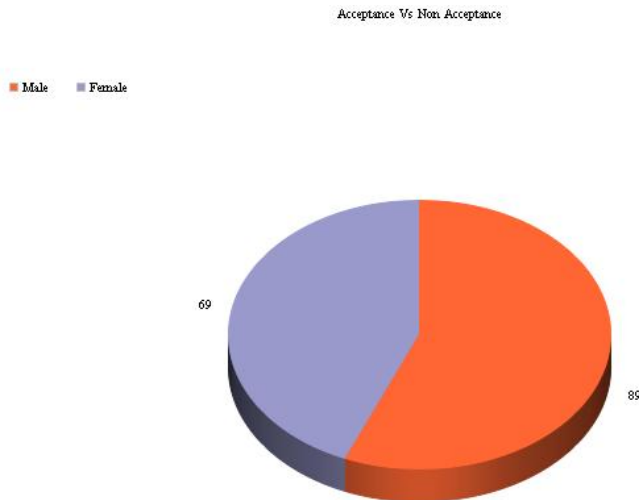
Acceptance Vs Non Acceptance

■ Accepted   ■ Did Not Accept

The above chart reveals the number of friend requests given: A total of 266 requests sent by the Marissa Fadden account. Of these, 149 accepted by the acceptance deadline of Wednesday, March 4, while 117 did not. In other words, 56% of those who received a request accepted, while 44% did not. This was a relatively substantial majority, and was far different from our initial expectation. We had expected upon beginning the experiment that most of them would deny our request, but the opposite turned out to be true. A majority accepted.
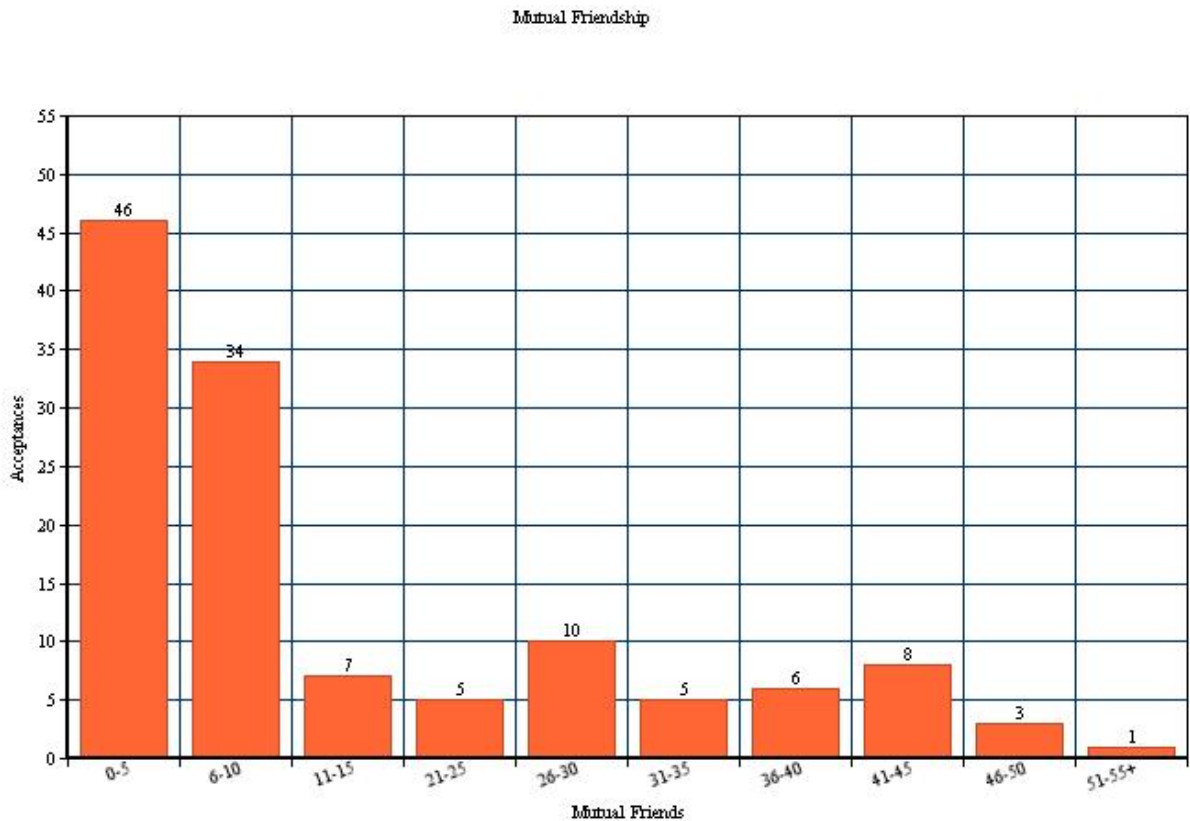
Of these 149 acceptances, 89 were male, and 60 were female, as evidenced by the chart below.

Acceptance Vs Non Acceptance

■ Male   ■ Female

Males made up roughly 60% of the acceptance rate, while females made up roughly 40%. The distribution of male to female requests was roughly 50-50, which shows that males were more likely to add Marissa Fadden than females. This can potentially be attributed to the fact that, objectively speaking, the girl we utilized as the face of Marissa Fadden could be considered attractive, and males would therefore be motivated to accept the request, thinking that they know this girl, who took her time to seek them out. So, then, how would one explain the female acceptances? One might conjecture that they either accepted because of a blind trust of requests, and to add to the feeling of virtual popularity via a head count, or that they truly believed they had met the girl somewhere previously. Perhaps it was a desire to fit in, or perhaps it was just carelessness. Short of asking each person, who would be doubtful to recall the moment of adding Marissa Fadden, there is no real way of discerning their motives beyond mere speculation.

Another variable, of course, is the mutual friends themselves. Our expectation was that it would be difficult at the beginning to get people to accept, because they would see an account with few friends and it would raise their suspicions. We hypothesized then that later,

as the account gathered more friends, more people would accept our requests. The results of this are found in the chart below.

Mutual Friendship

So, what happened? As it turns out, we received the most acceptances at anywhere between zero and five mutual friends. A total of 46, compared to only 1 when at the highest numbers, fifty one to fifty five or higher mutual friends. Our largest acceptance rates were in the 0-5 and 6-10 ranges. After that, it was more or less the same, with only slight variation, and one very low acceptance rate at the high end.

We considered at first the idea that, perhaps, we'd simply had a much more energetic adding spree at the start. That is, we'd simply added more people at the beginning, and then faltered in how many people we added per day toward the end of the project. Looking back, however, that couldn't have been the case. While we did lose steam in the middle compared to in the beginning, at the very end we added just as many, if not even more people compared to the beginning. Our speculation could only be that what happened was dependent on other circumstances. Perhaps we just got lucky on the acceptance rate of people at the beginning, and then it died down on the rest. Maybe on an average scattering of days, all of them would look something like the rest. There's no way of telling for certain.

That being said, our conclusion came out to be that over 50% of people accepted our request, and many of them did so at the start, when we had almost no mutual friends. This alone demonstrates clearly that there are many people who will add others on FaceBook blindly and carelessly, knowing nothing about them. Perhaps it's just college boys seeking an opportunity to flirt with a pretty girl. Perhaps people are simply absorbed in their social media and the feeling of virtual popularity that it can grant. Either way, this shows that people should be far more careful. After all, what if someone you add is a potential employer trying to get access to your information to evaluate you? What if someone you add is a stalker? An NSA agent, for you conspiracy theorists out there. There are many dangers associated even with a very familiar platform such as FaceBook. In fact, if it's this easy to create a fake person on FaceBook, maybe the movie "Catfish" is a pretty plausible premise too.

In short, we have decided that we will be more careful when on the internet and encountering strangers, and we encourage others to do the same. There are all sorts of different people on the internet and on the web especially, and anyone surfing around should exercise caution, and teach to their juniors and children to exercise that very same degree of care.