

How Facebook Users Experience Political Disagreements and Make Decisions About the Political Homogenization of Their Online Network

GERMAN NEUBAUM¹

MANUEL CARGNINO

JEANETTE MALESZKA

University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

Research has documented that social media allow individuals to encounter political disagreement, potentially fostering deliberation in democratic systems. Another strand of studies has indicated that individuals tend to actively homogenize their network by removing (unfriending) political dissenters. To shed light on the psychological connection between encountering political disagreement online and acting in response, this study presents results from in-depth interviews with 20 German Facebook users. In line with cognitive dissonance theory, we found that users engage in different intrapsychic and behavioral strategies to reduce the dissonance provoked by political disagreements, such as mentally discrediting the source or legitimizing the existence of alternative viewpoints. Decisions about drastic measures, such as unfriending the source, are conditional on whether individuals perceive the disagreements as relatively severe or the relationship to the dissenter as relatively close. These findings inform literature on cross-cutting exposure and the political homogenization of online networks.

Keywords: political unfriending, political disagreement, social media, homogeneity, selective avoidance

Exposing oneself to the other side, that is, being confronted with non-like-minded views and deliberating based on political diversity, is considered a cornerstone of vital democratic systems (Habermas, 2006). When individuals encounter dissimilar political viewpoints, they supposedly become more aware of their own stance, better comprehend the argumentation behind opposing views, and are more willing to tolerate cross-cutting views (Mutz, 2006; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). A public debate referring to so-called echo chambers and filter bubbles has suggested that contemporary communication technologies jeopardize the

German Neubaum: german.neubaum@uni-due.de

Manuel Cargnino: manuel.cargnino@uni-due.de

Jeanette Maleszka: Jeanette.Maleszka@gmx.de

Date submitted: 2020-04-02

¹ This research was supported by the Digital Society research program funded by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (Grant Number: 005-1709-0004), Junior Research Group "Digital Citizenship in Network Technologies" (Project Number: 1706dgn009).

Copyright © 2021 (German Neubaum, Manuel Cargnino, and Jeanette Maleszka). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

democratic ideal of political diversity (Bruns, 2019; Sunstein, 2017). The selectivity of the user, when it comes to consuming political information and creating his or her interpersonal network, is presumed to homogenize individuals' social online environment because individuals—allegedly—surround themselves exclusively with information sources and network ties that merely confirm, but never challenge, their political views.

This concern, however, has met with limited empirical corroboration. A series of studies has shown that while users are more likely to be digitally acquainted with information sources and interpersonal ties that are politically like-minded, a fair share of their online information environment is filled with people and messages with which they politically disagree (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Boutyline & Willer, 2017; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Eady, Nagler, Guess, Zilinsky, & Tucker, 2019; Matuszewski & Szabó, 2019; Vaccari et al., 2016). An explanation for this may be that people are not in full control of their digital communication environment because they are not always aware of the political orientation of certain sources or contacts and often become incidentally exposed to so-called cross-cutting messages (Bruns, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Heatherly, Lu, & Lee, 2017).

According to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), individuals might regain control over their uncongenial online environment by dissolving digital relationships with people and sources they disagree with (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). What has been termed *political unfriending* represents a very specific form of political homogenization in terms of post hoc filtration of contacts once the network has already been created.² Previous research has already provided evidence regarding *who* is more likely to unfriend *whom* in *which topical contexts*: Users who perceive large numbers of disagreements in their networks and who hold ideologically extreme positions are more likely to terminate digital relationships with political dissenters, especially if these differently minded contacts are weak ties (e.g., acquaintances) who violate moral values that are important to the unfriender (Bode, 2016; Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, & Dvir-Gvirsman, forthcoming; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017). But when it comes to unfrienders' subjective considerations preceding the dissolution of a digital connection, initial studies also revealed that this is a complex decision associated with thoughts of political tolerance and interpersonal norms (John & Gal, 2018; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Maoz, 2015). Faced with a political disagreement, individuals may feel the urge to ban a person from their network to prevent future encounters with political dissenters; at the same time, the act of unfriending could have interpersonal consequences, such as conflicts or the loss of a source of support (Neubaum et al., forthcoming). Although previous research has offered initial findings on the psychology behind unfriending decisions, there is still no empirical evidence specifically regarding what users experience mentally when encountering political disagreements on social media and which psychological trade-off they make when thinking about how to respond to a political disagreement.

Therefore, the present study is intended to shed light on the psychological *black box* preceding politically motivated unfriending decisions. To this end, the current work is exploratory in nature and investigates by a qualitative approach: (a) how users experience political disagreements on social media,

² The study's focus is *unfriending* in terms of the termination of a consensual connection between two users on Facebook. However, users can exert control over the (informational) composition of their online networks in other ways—for instance, *unfollowing* someone in terms of withdrawing from a unidirectional connection with another user.

(b) what encourages them to unfriend a person, and (c) which perceived costs inhibit them from dissolving a digital connection. The networking service Facebook appears to be the ideal forum to examine these questions because this platform is one of the primary social media spaces for young people to learn about and discuss political issues (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020), and these political activities occur in a network consisting of interpersonal contacts from many different backgrounds (close friends, acquaintances, coworkers; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). On this platform, one is able to observe how users deal with tensions concerning their interpersonal relationships in light of political dissent.

Political Disagreements on Social Media

Political disagreement has been conceptualized as the lack of political consensus—on either an objective (i.e., the actual lack of agreement between two opinions) or a subjective (i.e., the perception of disagreement) level (Barnidge, 2015; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2006). Since the emergence of social media technologies, concerns have been expressed that users may (either consciously or unconsciously) homogenize their online networks on a political level in terms of being connected only to those who are or think alike (Cargnino & Neubaum, 2020; Colleoni et al., 2014; Vaccari et al., 2016). This would eventually lead to a decline in the political disagreements that are considered a crucial part of deliberative processes (Habermas, 2006). Empirical research, however, has documented that more frequent social media use goes hand in hand with encountering political disagreements (Barnidge, 2015, 2017; Kim, 2011; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). In addition to this association, studies also identified factors that facilitate becoming exposed to political difference: Users who are more likely to encounter political disagreements also (a) are more politically interested (Lu & Lee, 2020), (b) consume news via social media (Barnidge, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Diehl, 2018), (c) hold politically more diverse (offline) networks (Lu & Lee, 2020; Vaccari et al., 2016), and (d) actively engage in political discussions (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Thus, these activities diversify people's social networks and communication environments, increasing the likelihood of stumbling (in many cases incidentally) upon views that oppose their own.

Likewise, a body of studies has focused on the potential effects of encountering political disagreements. Research has claimed theoretically and shown empirically that cross-cutting exposure can foster (a) learning processes in terms of enabling individuals to scrutinize their own point of view and get to know alternative arguments, as well as (b) a demand for further information that prompts individuals to seek more news on a topic (Lu & Lee, 2019; Mutz, 2002; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004). At the same time, a series of studies indicated that being confronted with uncongenial opinions on social media is often accompanied by negative emotions such as feeling anger and anxiety and perceiving a certain level of hostility (Lu, 2019; Lu & Myrick, 2016; Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). With regard to the effects on political participation, some studies found that cross-cutting exposure via social media inhibits people's willingness to discuss political issues (Vraga et al., 2015) or to engage in political participation in terms of attending a political demonstration, sharing political news with friends, or publishing a comment that argues against the position (Lu, 2019; Lu, Heatherly, & Lee, 2016); others found no relationship or even the opposite to be true (e.g., Lane, Kim, Lee, Weeks, & Kwak, 2017; Lu & Myrick, 2016). A recent meta-analysis examining the association between cross-cutting exposure and political participation (both online and offline) was not able to provide cumulative evidence for the existence of this relationship (Matthes, Knoll, Valenzuela, Hopmann, & von Sikorski, 2019). In light of these findings, scholars have

argued that it is more worthwhile to focus on situational and motivational variables at work when political disagreements arise instead of expecting a direct connection between encountering political disagreements and behavioral outcomes (Matthes et al., 2019; Vaccari et al., 2016).

Drawing on these empirical results, the present study argues that individual responses to political disagreements on social media can be more subtle than participating more (or less) politically or unfriending a person with whom one disagrees. Unraveling the variety of psychological and behavioral responses people can show when they are exposed to political disagreements on social media is key to understanding the emergence of politically homogeneous communication clusters, how these evolve, and how they are linked to interpersonal dynamics in contemporary technologies.

In terms of theoretical approaches that could explain psychological and behavioral responses to political disagreement, the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) informs our line of argumentation. According to Festinger (1957), encountering information that is not in line with our cognitions in the sense of opinions and preferences induces so-called dissonance, that is, a state of psychological discomfort and frustration. Inevitably, individuals are motivated to terminate this aversive state and are believed to engage in certain psychological and behavioral responses to do so. Dissonance reduction can occur by different strategies, such as changing a behavioral cognitive element (e.g., adapting one's opinion to the one exposed), changing the environment (e.g., removing the source of disagreement from one's network by dissolving the digital relationship), or adding a new cognitive element (e.g., reflecting on the norm that political disagreements are desirable, and robust friendships should withstand disagreements). Drawing on these different strategies proposed by Festinger, social psychological research has documented a variety of modes people use to reduce dissonance, such as distracting oneself, trivializing the issue, or disparaging the source of dissonance (Bochner & Insko, 1966; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995; Zanna & Aziza, 1976). This line of experimental research, however, has met with the criticism that experiments commonly prescribe specific ways to individuals to reduce dissonance instead of addressing spontaneous dissonance reduction strategies (McGrath, 2017). When encountering political disagreements in online networks, different forms of dissonance reduction are conceivable: As behavioral responses to political disagreements, users may take advantage of the platform's affordances, such as unfriending/unfollowing the source (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), writing a private message, or formulating a public comment to challenge the original political statement. But users might also engage in a variety of cognitive responses to alleviate the aversive state of dissonance, such as questioning the trustworthiness, expertise, or integrity of the source, justifying the legitimacy of the counterattitudinal statement, or denying the importance of the issue (McGrath, 2017). To cover the full range of different cognitive and behavioral responses, the present work asks on an exploratory level:

RQ1: How do users respond to political disagreements in online networks?

The Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Unfriending Decisions

A behavioral response to political disagreement in the form of unfriending the source of the dissent is such a drastic measure that only a minority of users seem to choose this option. Across different nations, the percentage of unfriending is between 10% and 22% (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum et al., forthcoming; Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). That this behavioral response

is relatively rare indicates that it may require major efforts by an individual to make this ultimate decision. Indeed, early studies on the unfriending phenomenon showed that people refrain from unfriending in order to *save face*, maintain harmonious relationships (Lopez & Ovaska, 2013), and avoid negative interpersonal consequences (e.g., face-to-face confrontation; Krämer, Hoffmann, & Eimler, 2015). It seems plausible to assume that social media users engage in a mental process of balancing what they would gain against what they would lose by banning the dissenting source from their online network.

Social exchange theory (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) suggests that the course of a relationship, the decisions that are made therein, and, ultimately, the perceived value of a relationship are a function of a utilitarian reward–cost evaluation. More specifically, individuals calculate the worth of an interpersonal relationship by subtracting the costs from the rewards they experience in that particular relational constellation. Costs represent investments in a relationship, elements of value that are sacrificed—for instance, time and energy. Rewards, in contrast, represent the fulfillment of basic needs in relationships in the form of being loved, receiving social support, and experiencing social approval (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Based on the subtraction of perceived costs from perceived rewards, interaction partners compare the ultimate worth of this relationship with that of other relational constellations, leading to a higher (or lower) likelihood of maintaining this relationship. Transferring this logic to the scenario of unfriending on social media, the question arises as to what type of benefits and costs users see in keeping or dissolving a digital connection.

Generally, the fact that one dissolves a digital relationship does not necessarily mean that one terminates this (offline) relationship once and for all. Individuals could decide to remove a person as an information source from their online network, yet feel comfortable maintaining the relationship outside digital networks. But what could be the motives for digitally unfriending someone in light of his or her political statements or behavior? Initial evidence has indicated that people are more likely to unfriend a person if they feel that this person publishes unimportant messages too frequently or that these messages are polarizing, inappropriate, disrespectful, uncivil, and/or oppressive of a minority (John & Agbarya, 2020; Peña & Brody, 2014). From a motivational point of view, individuals may be driven by the wish to avoid encountering material that either requires unnecessary attention, time, and energy or leads them to an aversive state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). By making use of the affordance of unfriending, users are able to create, or at least actively shape, their own *personal public sphere* in which they have the sovereignty to control the content shown (and not shown) in their personalized feed (John & Gal, 2018). To unravel the motivational complexity behind digital unfriending decisions, we ask:

RQ2: What encourages users to unfriend someone in their online networks?

At the same time, there might also be factors that keep individuals from engaging in unfriending behavior. When considering the utilitarian approach of a cost–reward analysis within relationships (Barnidge, 2015, 2017; Lu & Lee, 2019), one could argue that individuals who unfriend others could lose the rewards—that is, the gratifications—obtained within interpersonal relations (Krämer et al., 2015). Within contemporary communication technologies, a strong body of research has shown that social media use is associated with building social capital and experiencing social support by one’s network ties (Domahidi, 2018; Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Treppe, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2015). This research revealed that most of a user’s contacts in an online network can be labeled as weak ties: that is, loose relationships in the form of acquaintances who provide the

user predominantly with informational support (i.e., suggestions/recommendations for restaurants or job openings; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Krämer, Rösner, Eimler, Winter, & Neubaum, 2014). However, one's online network also consists of strong ties (i.e., close friends who provide their ties not only with informational but also emotional support in the form of showing empathy and affection, such as in times of personal crisis; Krämer et al., 2014). Both informational and emotional support represent rewards that users receive from their social media ties and that are at stake when users consider terminating the digital connection to a person. Recently, an experimental study indicated that users are more reluctant to unfriend a Facebook tie in the face of disagreement if this tie provides the unfriender with emotional support (Neubaum et al., forthcoming). Thus, forgoing social rewards might be a consideration that makes users refrain from actively intervening in the structure of their networks by unfriending someone. In such situations, users engage in a psychological trade-off between enduring the dissonance induced by political disagreements and giving up potential social rewards. To uncover the psychological inhibitors of political unfriending, this study also asks:

RQ3: What keeps users from unfriending someone in their online networks?

Method

Technological Context

Qualitative interviews were conducted to gain a well-grounded understanding of individuals' reactions to political disagreement and unfriending on Facebook. This platform offers a suitable scenario to investigate our research questions because it not only functions as a venue for political communication among citizens (Newman et al., 2020), but also provides the affordance of association (Ellison & Vitak, 2015), which, in the case of Facebook, means that users need to give mutual consent to connect with one another. In this technological context, the phenomenon of unfriending appears to be particularly worthy of research because the dissolution of a digital relationship commonly excludes both sides from each other's newsfeed and profile. Unfriending may thus be interpreted as a comparatively severe measure of detachment (when compared with *unfollowing*; John & Gal, 2018; Lopez & Ovaska, 2013).

Sample

A total of 20 German participants (12 females, eight males) were recruited. The call for participation was circulated via Facebook, given that an actively used account on that particular platform was a prerequisite for participation. The interviews took place on the local university campus from September to October 2018; an interview took 50.42 minutes on average. Participants received monetary compensation after the interview. Ages ranged between 21 and 42 years ($M = 25.55$, $SD = 4.38$), and all but two of the participants were students (for more detailed information on participants, see <https://osf.io/q8ydh/>). All identifying information was anonymized for interview transcription, and real names were replaced by pseudonyms. The age of participants is provided in parentheses before each quote.

Interview Procedure

Semistructured interviews were conducted within individual interview sessions, which were recorded for later transcription. A question catalogue was prepared that still allowed for flexible adaptation to the different needs of participants so that emerging questions were accounted for. This procedure facilitates the discovery of unknown influential variables and, in particular, enabled us to gain a more in-depth understanding of users' perspectives on political communication on Facebook.

Interviews were thematically structured and contained basic questions that were complemented by situationally emerging questions (for basic questionnaire, see <https://osf.io/q8ydh/>). As a warm-up, participants were asked about Facebook friendships in general and their frequency of use. In line with the idea of following digital traces of individuals during the interview process (Dubois & Ford, 2015), participants were then instructed to view their personal Facebook friends list and select three friends with whom they had different kinds of relationships (e.g., with regard to different degrees of relational closeness). This procedure was used to examine our research questions in light of specific online relationships rather than relying on abstract representations of participants' online contacts. Furthermore, to address reactions to political dissonance, participants were asked to recall situations in which any of their Facebook friends published something that was contrary to their own point of view and to describe how they reacted to this content. Depending on their political views, participants were additionally exposed to a fictitious Facebook posting dissonant to their own point of view and asked to imagine that it had been published by one of their Facebook friends. They were then asked again how they would potentially (internally and behaviorally) react to the posting and whether they would remove the friend from their network.

Data Analysis

MAXQDA2018 was used to transcribe the recordings and to perform inductive category building. Categories were built along the rules of summarizing content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Interview contents were iteratively pooled according to content-related similarities, which resulted in a number of semantic categories. Categories were validated by continuously applying the original interview material to them.

Results

Responses to Political Disagreement

When dealing with political disagreement (RQ1), users seem to engage in both intrapsychic (i.e., cognitive-affective) and behavioral responses. Intrapsychic processes mentioned by participants can be classified as *internal rejection* and *internal acceptance*. Of the behavioral strategies, *withdrawal from interaction*, *expression of disagreement*, and *clarification/discussion* appear to be common. Furthermore, participants also reported unfriending Facebook contacts with whom they disagree.

Intrapsychic Reactions: Internal Rejection

When confronted with disagreement on Facebook, most users tend toward spontaneous and pronounced negative affective responses varying in strength between strong emotions of anger or even hostility, and comparatively lenient responses of cynical humor and negative mood. For instance, Linda (22) described her strong affective response to a disagreement: "The person I'm thinking of almost always has different opinions to mine. We see things differently. And we have to see things differently. Therefore, I always get angry and think that this person is just stupid." In contrast, Carl (24) depicted his comparatively lenient reaction to a specific disagreement on Facebook: "Then it bothers me, and I get in a bad mood and so on. And I [think] 'What use are the people around me if they put me in a bad mood when I see them?'" The intensity of the affective reaction seems contingent on the severity and the specific issue of disagreement. This is well-represented in the following statement:

I mean, honestly, when you're fleeing from war, it's not always possible to take everyone [your family] with you. Do they actually know what war means? This makes me really angry and I become very emotional. I just find it completely stupid to write something like that. (Beth, 26)

In many cases, *hot* affective responses of this kind were accompanied by somewhat *cold* cognitive processes. In particular, interviewees expressed themselves to internally debunk or counterargue others' points of view, devalue opposing arguments, or resign/internally withdraw from future interactions. For instance, when asked about a specific disagreement on the topic of feminism, Kate (27) described her internal opposition to her Facebook friend's stances: "I just thought it was harmful, also for the [feminist] movement. It was just hostile, and I do not want that. Especially within a movement that I support." In addition to these reactions, in some situations, users tend to (internally) withdraw from future interactions—for example, John (24) stated, "[When I read] texts like that, I almost want to give up"). This internal withdrawal is likely a precursor of a factual ending of the (virtual) relationship—for example, Mary (25) said, "I often doubt whether there is any common sense, like in that situation . . . and think that I may reconsider whether I want someone like that in my environment."

Intrapsychic Reactions: Internal Acceptance

Nevertheless, participants did not always respond with rejection toward others' differently minded messages, but in many instances showed acceptance and understanding of them. This acceptance appears to be linked to general political tolerance, characteristics of the relationship, a low degree of disagreement, or avoidance of conflict. Furthermore, some individuals appear to accept disagreement because it prompts them to reconsider their own views. Acceptance through political tolerance became evident in Jenny's (24) assertions: "I also know lots of people that have completely different opinions to mine. This may be based on different experiences that they've had. Then I can accept it, because those opinions are not wrong, they are just somewhat different." In addition to that, for some users, acceptance seems contingent on the kind of relationship they have with the person they disagree with. If politics played no role in a specific relationship, disagreement may also not have. When asked about his reaction to disagreement with one of his Facebook friends, one participant replied,

I take note of it. When he has a different opinion, it does bother me. But it's Facebook and so on. Doesn't play a large part in our relationship because I know him personally. . . . I know how he is [when we interact] personally. (Marcus, 32)

However, for many participants, acceptance ends when certain thresholds of *disagreement intensity* are crossed. For instance, disagreement may only be acceptable when fundamental moral or ethical principles remain untouched—for example, Linda (22) stated, "When it's just different opinions. . . . They can have [different opinions], I don't care. But when it's about human rights and stuff like that, then it's not ok." In contrast, being exposed to a different point of view may in some cases lead to internal acceptance as users' personal views are relativized—for example, Gary (22) said, "My first thought was 'How stupid is that guy?' . . . by the end, when we discussed it, we came to the conclusion that both [of our] opinions were not that great."

Behavioral Strategies

The affective and cognitive responses to disagreement on social networking sites are usually followed by specific behavioral reactions. Our findings suggest that users most commonly withdraw from further interaction with those they disagree with and less frequently engage in further discussions. Some participants expressed their disagreement, for example, by writing a comment and/or endorsing like-minded users' comments. Political expression seems more common within close relationships and on a private communication channel:

If it is a person I am close to, I think I would write that person a private message and give my opinion and my arguments . . . and if it is someone, I am not closely attached to . . . depending on my mood I would maybe comment and then delete that person from my list. (Tom, 24)

Several participants reported that they reacted in particular to uncongenial postings when they felt the need to add more accurate information—for example, John (24) said, "And finally I wrote a text with information from Wikipedia . . . I was annoyed and wrote a long text on how things actually are and also added the references." Furthermore, users seemed to express themselves responding to a disagreeing Facebook posting to understand the motives behind the other's opinion. Jenny (24) said, "If it often happens that I read things I completely disagree with, I would write and ask [that person] 'How is it that you have that opinion now?'"

When it comes to withdrawal from future contact, ignoring a posting that opposes the user's opinions appears to be common. This may be motivated by conflict avoidance, as becomes evident from Alison's (27) assertions: "I don't share that [opinion], but to attack it publicly in a posting, when she's got more than 1,000 followers—that cannot end well." It seems that for Alison, both the publicness of a potential opinion expression and the size of the other user's network in a way made political expression too risky. In contrast, when talking about her encounter with an uncongenial posting on Facebook, Jenny (24) stated, "I think I didn't react at all . . . I read it and thought about it and thought 'Yes, actually, he is right.'" Thus, rather than fearing a conflict, she was persuaded by the other's view and therefore withdrew from discussion.

Factors Encouraging Political Unfriending

A common form of withdrawal from future interaction with a dissenter is to unfriend that person, that is, to remove that contact from one's personal Facebook Friends list (see RQ2). Participants usually unfriend a contact when the *disagreement is perceived as severe* or unresolvable, when *fundamental values are violated*, or when users are *frequently exposed* to rigidly held opinions with which they disagree. Furthermore, *uncivil opinion expression* and *conflict avoidance* may motivate some users to dissociate themselves from a non-like-minded contact. Unfriending is often seen as a last resort and commonly appears to follow initial attempts at dialogue or persuasion:

I usually find it very interesting to talk to people who don't share my opinion because you can test your own arguments. And maybe expand your perspective. . . . When things become unobjective or misanthropic, and when humans are not seen as humans, that's a red line for me. (Tom, 24)

For many participants, politically extreme views and a lack of common (moral) values were central reasons to dissociate themselves from a virtual contact. Often, simple cues—for instance, a connection to an extremist party, Facebook group, or a specific extremist post—are used as indicators of such diverging values. For example, Sandra (26) stated, "Once I also checked which of my contacts followed the AfD [right-wing populist political party in Germany] and then deleted them." Many participants indicated their appreciation of controversial exchanges but dissociated themselves from them when they did not expect a desired outcome—for example, Tim (21) said, "I would remove a person when negative aspects predominate . . . for example, when it becomes too extreme, exhausting, and resistant to discussion. When it's a very rigid opinion." In contrast, some participants see unfriending more as an easy and convenient way to avoid stressful consequences of cross-cutting exposure and conflict—for example, Sandra (26) said, "I'm not interested in [seeing] radically right-wing posts in my timeline. I don't want to either. I prefer to surround myself with people I get on with . . . [On Facebook,] I can remove them with one click."

While *relational closeness* usually appears to protect others from being unfriended, in some instances, disagreement may corrode interpersonal trust and therefore foster the dissolution of close contacts. A severe disagreement with a close acquaintance can have the power to harm the foundations of a relationship, while being arbitrary between more distant acquaintances. One participant depicted this as follows:

It depends on how important it is to me. When it's a friend and I didn't expect it [that opinion], I would maybe confront the person with it and then I would maybe question the friendship as a whole . . . but when it's people I'm not that close to . . . I might just overlook it [the disagreement]. (Dana, 23)

In addition to politics and disagreement, participants provided other reasons for their detachment from Facebook contacts (see Sibona, 2014). Much like political unfriending, unfriending someone for nonpolitical reasons often appears to be based on the perception of deep interpersonal dysfunctionality or detachment:

For example, if I had lent [that person] 5,000 euros and they wouldn't give it back. Then I also don't need that person as a Facebook friend . . . or, if [that person] had beaten up my sister or something like that. That is to say, significant things for which I would also remove someone from my private life. (Sandra, 26)

Factors Inhibiting Political Unfriending

When it comes to political disagreement, there appear to be specific *person-related* and *contextual reasons* that keep individuals from unfriending others (RQ3). When it comes to person-related reasons for keeping a Facebook friendship despite a disagreement, participants mentioned *relational closeness* to a person, *social support*, *similarities* in other (political) areas, and *understanding* for a person's point of view. Most participants reported that they were less likely to unfriend those to whom they felt relationally close; for example, Carl (24) said, "The closer I am to a person, the more extreme that person's opinions would have to be for me to unfriend them." This statement pointedly shows users' inner calculus between benefits originating from relational closeness and costs measured through the extent of disagreement. Like Carl, a number of participants indicated higher levels of tolerance when it comes to relationally close individuals. For many, relational closeness was tightly linked to the amount of offline contact, that is, they are more likely to unfriend individuals with whom they lack offline interactions. This is mainly due to the potential negative social consequences that are perceived as more likely when detaching from closer contacts (see earlier), and due to the higher number of benefits derived and expected from close relationships. The latter are characterized by a deeper emotional connection and attachment that stabilizes them against (moderate) conflicts, whereas this is not the case in more distant ones; for example, Patrick (42) said, "The more superficial [the relationship,] the more likely I would be to terminate it." Accordingly, users may be more willing to "invest" in a controversial discussion with a close friend. Some participants reported being particularly reluctant to unfriend relatives or family members, for instance, because sustained offline contact makes further confrontations and other negative consequences (e.g., family conflicts) more likely. In contrast, connections with relationally distant individuals may be dissolved instantly in some cases—for example, Beth (26) stated, "If that person posted something that is extremely left-wing or right-wing, I would delete her immediately, because she's only an acquaintance." However, for some participants, the kind of relationship does not seem to influence their likelihood of unfriending someone, as stated by Linda (22): "[The kind of relationship] doesn't matter. As long as [the posting] is not . . . agitating, illegal, or radical, it doesn't matter who wrote it, everyone is equal in this regard."

In addition to relational closeness, specific benefits that may be derived from a virtual connection may increase users' reluctance to unfriend a non-like-minded contact. For instance, when asked why she did not unfriend a Facebook friend with whom she disagreed, one participant explained,

Because it's one of those contacts that I expect benefits from in terms of networking. And in this case, I don't mind keeping him as a friend. . . . There are no negative consequences for me [for keeping him], but [instead] I may need him in the future. (Mary, 25)

These statements suggest that instrumental support may prevent a user from unfriending a non-like-minded user, yet not at any cost. Rather, small concessions by the other with regard to the disagreement may be a prerequisite for continued friendship in such cases.

In addition to person-related aspects, there also are contextual aspects that keep users from unfriending. These relate to *perceived social norms*, *fear of negative social consequences*, and mere *convenience*. While normative aspects were expressed only indirectly by a number of participants (e.g., Gary, 22, said, "You should always be open to different opinions"), Beth (26) more explicitly referred to, according to her, "the unspoken rules on Facebook." At the same time, some participants seemed to fear the potential "real-life" consequences that may result from unfriending; for example, Sandra (26) said, "[Whether to unfriend someone or not] depends on, for example, whether I know that person well, whether I see that person regularly. Then I would rather not unfriend them because it would be unpleasant for me." In contrast to this, some participants refrained from unfriending because they perceived it as too much effort. Again, it seems that users weigh costs and benefits when it comes to keeping or removing a contact. For instance, when asked why she did not remove a person who posted politically uncongenial content, Dana (23) replied, "As I said, it's laziness rather than anything else. Something more serious needs to have happened for me to delete someone."

Discussion

During their daily use of social media technologies such as Facebook, individuals encounter political messages—often generated by network ties—that they do not always agree with (Barnidge, 2015, 2017; Kim et al., 2013; Lu & Lee, 2019). Previous studies already revealed who is more likely to stumble upon cross-cutting messages on social media and that this kind of exposure could have various effects, such as inhibiting political expression or obtaining new political information (Lu & Lee, 2019; Vraga et al., 2015). Nevertheless, how individuals deal with political disagreements on social media—for example, covering the variety of potential responses on an affective, cognitive, and behavioral level—has remained largely unexplored, especially in light of particular interpersonal contexts (e.g., when the disagreeing person is a close friend) and given the opportunities to retroactively intervene in the political structure of their network (e.g., by unfriending the source of the disagreement). To unravel these psychological processes, this work offers results from in-depth interviews with Facebook users.

The present findings reveal not only immediate affective responses to encountering political disagreements on Facebook, but also cognitive processes that are at work in the face of cross-cutting exposure. In line with the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), these results show that political disagreements induce states of psychological discomfort that can be accompanied by affective responses such as anger, perceived hostility, and negative mood. This confirms previous findings indicating that users associate negative emotions with being confronted by an exchange of opposing views on social media (Lu, 2019; Lu & Myrick, 2016; Vraga et al., 2015). Following the logic of dissonance theory, these aversive states exert pressure to terminate the state of dissonance. Expanding on previous research, our findings provide evidence for the different strategies that social media users apply to reduce this state of dissonance. As for Festinger's (1957) proposed strategy to change a behavioral cognitive element, some participants stated that, after dealing with disagreeing messages, they reconsidered their own viewpoint, which could lead them

to have an ambiguous opinion toward the political question or even become fully persuaded by the comment (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018; McGrath, 2017). In terms of the dissonance reduction measure “adding a new cognitive element” (Festinger, 1957, p. 21), interviewees showed a diversity of handling strategies: On the one hand, they discredited the dissenter and the legitimacy of his or her viewpoint by adding the information that the latter was either incompetent or uninformed (cf. communicator disparagement; Bochner & Insko, 1966). On the other hand, users seemed to add new information by following the thought that opposing political viewpoints are legitimate and that personal political stances may solely be the outcome of one’s unique biographical experiences. This strategy clearly resembles the idea of practicing political tolerance (Mutz, 2006) in the sense of accepting an alternative political view on a meta-level, which could, in turn, lead to a reduction in cognitive dissonance.

Participants also indicated different ways of handling disagreements on Facebook that are in line with Festinger’s proposed strategy of changing one’s environment as a response to experiencing dissonance. Some interviewees responded by actively voicing their disagreement, either in public or in private communication channels. With this type of response, individuals may aspire to change the dissenter’s opinion and ultimately the opinion climate in their environment (cf. corrective participation; Lu, 2019). Another more drastic way of changing one’s environment is to exclude the dissenter from one’s network by unfriending or blocking that person. This is a measure that was already introduced by previous research (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Skoric et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2017), enabling users to exert more control over the political content they encounter in their newsfeeds (cf. *personal public sphere*; John & Gal, 2018). Our present focus extends this view by presenting factors that encourage and keep users from taking this step and offers new insights into the psychological mechanisms at work. Most strikingly, our results show that politically motivated filtration of one’s network in terms of unfriending is conditional. According to participants’ accounts, the decision to dissolve the digital connection is contingent on the *severity of disagreement*, that is, to what extent the political disagreement indicates discrepancies in fundamental values. Drawing on Festinger (1957), the pressure to reduce the dissonance is higher when individuals perceive the dissonance as relatively strong. Clearly, identifying that a person in one’s network, for instance, neglects moral values such as mutual care between human beings might increase the wish to reduce the state of psychological discomfort and alter the environment by excluding this person from one’s network (Neubaum et al., forthcoming). Likewise, participants revealed another factor that might moderate the relationship between encountering political disagreement and unfriending the source: *relational closeness*. In line with previous findings (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum et al., forthcoming), some interviewees stated that the closer they were related to the source, the less likely they were to unfriend the person because of a political disagreement. At the same time, some participants indicated that relational closeness could increase the likelihood of unfriending if they felt that these discrepancies were unresolvable. There appears to be an interaction between the severity of disagreement and relational closeness that needs to be addressed by future research.

When political messages with which one disagrees are characterized by *incivility*, be it in the form of extremism or verbal attacks, unfriending is more likely to occur (Peña & Brody, 2014). From a motivational point of view, it would seem that severity of disagreement, relational closeness, and incivility, combined with a high frequency of exposure to disagreeing comments, increase the level of dissonance and, ultimately, the motivation to terminate this state by the drastic measure of unfriending. However, our

findings point to a certain complexity in users' unfriending motivation, which manifests itself in considerations of what they gain by keeping these relationships. Through the lens of a cost-reward evaluation (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the costs of enduring psychological discomfort in the form of dissonance are in juxtaposition to the rewards of receiving *social support* from this source (Krämer et al., 2015; Neubaum et al., forthcoming; Trepte et al., 2015) and maintaining *harmony in a relationship*, or even maintaining *collective harmony* in a whole group (by paying attention to social norms). Following this thought, one could argue that these nonpolitical benefits—for instance, in the form of emotional and instrumental support—may be the reason that many social media users decide against politically homogenizing their online network. In other words, nonpolitical rewards may foster the political diversity in online networks. This appears plausible when one considers that users' motives to use social media are not necessarily related to politics or not always connected to political purposes (e.g., gaining social capital, Ellison et al., 2014).

One limitation of this study is that participants' accounts mainly referred to communication on Facebook, which was a very popular social networking platform at the time this study was conducted. Future research needs to examine whether these findings can be replicated not only on other social media platforms (in which political information may be displayed differently), but also taking into consideration evolving communication norms on those platforms. Another limitation lies in the composition of the sample, given that it was relatively young and highly educated: It seems worth investigating whether diverse age and education groups deal differently with political disagreements in online environments. Moreover, as a further limitation, this study outlined a sequence of psychological mechanisms based on interviewees' statements and propositions in the existing literature. Further studies, however, need to corroborate this sequence (e.g., that dissonance motivates cognitive processes) in designs that allow inferences about causality.

To conclude, this study can help to resolve alleged inconsistencies in empirical evidence concerning the effects of cross-cutting exposure. Our findings reveal (a) mediating processes in terms of cognitive mechanisms (e.g., legitimizing the existence of alternative points of views or analyzing the costs and benefits of a relationship) that are triggered when individuals encounter political disagreements, and (b) moderators, that is, that behavioral outcomes such as expressing disagreement or dissolving the digital relationship are contingent on a series of circumstances, such as who the dissident is and how severe the disagreement is. Future research needs to systematically test the explanatory value of these mediators and moderators to find answers on the question of *when* and *why* exposing oneself to the other side can have beneficial versus detrimental effects from a deliberative point of view.

References

- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, *348*(6239), 1130–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>
- Barnidge, M. (2015). The role of news in promoting political disagreement on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *52*, 211–218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.06.011>

- Barnidge, M. (2017). Exposure to political disagreement in social media versus face-to-face and anonymous online settings. *Political Communication, 34*(2), 302–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1235639>
- Bochner, S., & Insko, C. A. (1966). Communicator discrepancy, source credibility, and opinion change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 4*(6), 614–621. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0021192>
- Bode, L. (2016). Pruning the news feed: Unfriending and unfollowing political content on social media. *Research & Politics, 3*(3), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168016661873>
- Boutyline, A., & Willer, R. (2017). The social structure of political echo chambers: Variation in ideological homophily in online networks. *Political Psychology, 38*(3), 551–569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12337>
- Bruns, A. (2019). *Are filter bubbles real?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Cargnino, M., & Neubaum, G. (2020). Are we deliberately captivated in homogeneous cocoons? An investigation on political tie building on social networking sites. *Mass Communication and Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/15205436.2020.1805632>
- Colleoni, E., Rozza, A., & Arvidsson, A. (2014). Echo chamber or public sphere? Predicting political orientation and measuring political homophily in Twitter using big data. *Journal of Communication, 64*(2), 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12084>
- Domahidi, E. (2018). The associations between online media use and users' perceived social resources: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 23*(4), 181–200. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy007>
- Dubois, E., & Blank, G. (2018). The echo chamber is overstated: The moderating effect of political interest and diverse media. *Information, Communication & Society, 21*(5), 729–745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656>
- Dubois, E., & Ford, H. (2015). Trace interviews: An actor-centered approach. *International Journal of Communication, 9*, 2067–2091.
- Eady, G., Nagler, J., Guess, A., Zilinsky, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2019). How many people live in political bubbles on social media? Evidence from linked survey and Twitter data. *SAGE Open, 9*(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019832705>
- Ellison, N. B., & Vitak, J. (2015). Social network site affordances and their relationship to social capital processes. In S. S. Sundar (Ed.), *The handbook of the psychology of communication technology* (pp. 203–227). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118426456.ch9>

- Ellison, N. B., Vitak, J., Gray, R., & Lampe, C. (2014). Cultivating social resources on social network sites: Facebook relationship maintenance behaviors and their role in social capital processes. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(4), 855–870. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12078>
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance* (Vol. 2). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Barnidge, M., & Diehl, T. (2018). Political persuasion on social media: A moderated moderation model of political discussion disagreement and civil reasoning. *The Information Society, 34*(5), 302–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2018.1497743>
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Valenzuela, S. (2011). The mediating path to a stronger citizenship: Online and offline networks, weak ties, and civic engagement. *Communication Research, 38*(3), 397–421. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210384984>
- Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory, 16*(4), 411–426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x>
- Heatherly, K. A., Lu, Y., & Lee, J. K. (2017). Filtering out the other side? Cross-cutting and like-minded discussions on social networking sites. *New Media & Society, 19*(8), 1271–1289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816634677>
- Homans, G. C. (1961). *Social behavior: Its elementary forms*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Huckfeldt, R. R., Johnson, P. E., & Sprague, J. D. (2004). *Political disagreement: The survival of diverse opinions within communication networks*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- John, N. A., & Agbarya, A. (2020). Punching up or turning away? Palestinians unfriending Jewish Israelis on Facebook. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820908256>
- John, N. A., & Dvir-Gvirsman, S. (2015). “I don’t like you any more”: Facebook unfriending by Israelis during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014. *Journal of Communication, 65*(6), 953–974. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12188>
- John, N. A., & Gal, N. (2018). “He’s got his own sea”: Political Facebook unfriending in the personal public sphere. *International Journal of Communication, 12*, 2971–2988
- Kim, Y. (2011). The contribution of social network sites to exposure to political difference: The relationships among SNSs, online political messaging, and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives. *Computers in Human Behavior, 27*(2), 971–977. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.12.001>

- Kim, Y., Hsu, S. H., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2013). Influence of social media use on discussion network heterogeneity and civic engagement: The moderating role of personality traits. *Journal of Communication, 63*(3), 498–516. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12034>
- Krämer, N., Hoffmann, L., & Eimler, S. (2015). Not breaking bonds on Facebook—Mixed-methods research on the influence of individuals' need to belong on “unfriending” behavior on Facebook. *International Journal of Developmental Science, 9*(2), 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.3233/DEV-150161>
- Krämer, N., Rösner, L., Eimler, S., Winter, S., & Neubaum, G. (2014). Let the weakest link go! Empirical explorations on the relative importance of weak and strong ties on social networking sites. *Societies, 4*(4), 785–809. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc4040785>
- Lane, D. S., Kim, D. H., Lee, S. S., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2017). From online disagreement to offline action: How diverse motivations for using social media can increase political information sharing and catalyze offline political participation. *Social Media + Society, 3*(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117716274>
- Lee, J. K., Choi, J., Kim, C., & Kim, Y. (2014). Social media, network heterogeneity, and opinion polarization. *Journal of Communication, 64*(4), 702–722. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12077>
- Lopez, M. G., & Ovaska, S. (2013). A look at unsociability on Facebook. In S. Love, K. Hone, & T. McEwan (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 27th International BCS Human Computer Interaction Conference, HCI 2013* (pp. 1–10). Swindon, UK: BCS Learning & Development.
- Lu, Y. (2019). Incidental exposure to political disagreement on Facebook and corrective participation: Unraveling the effects of emotional responses and issue relevance. *International Journal of Communication, 13*, 874–896.
- Lu, Y., Heatherly, K. A., & Lee, J. K. (2016). Cross-cutting exposure on social networking sites: The effects of SNS discussion disagreement on political participation. *Computers in Human Behavior, 59*, 74–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.01.030>
- Lu, Y., & Lee, J. K. (2019). Stumbling upon the other side: Incidental learning of counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook. *New Media & Society, 21*(1), 248–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818793421>
- Lu, Y., & Lee, J. K. (2020). Determinants of cross-cutting discussion on Facebook: Political interest, news consumption, and strong-tie heterogeneity. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819899879>

- Lu, Y., & Myrick, J. G. (2016). Cross-cutting exposure on Facebook and political participation: Unraveling the effects of emotional responses and online incivility. *Journal of Media Psychology, 28*(3), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000203>
- Matthes, J., Knoll, J., Valenzuela, S., Hopmann, D. N., & von Sikorski, C. (2019). A meta-analysis of the effects of cross-cutting exposure on political participation. *Political Communication, 36*(4), 523–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1619638>
- Matuszewski, P., & Szabó, G. (2019). Are echo chambers based on partisanship? Twitter and political polarity in Poland and Hungary. *Social Media + Society, 5*(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119837671>
- McGrath, A. (2017). Dealing with dissonance: A review of cognitive dissonance reduction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 11*(12), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12362>
- Mor, Y., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Maoz, I. (2015). Political expression on Facebook in a context of conflict: Dilemmas and coping strategies of Jewish-Israeli youth. *Social Media + Society, 1*(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115606750>
- Mutz, D. C. (2002). Cross-cutting social networks: Testing democratic theory in practice. *American Political Science Review, 96*(01), 111–126. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004264>
- Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Neubaum, G., Cargnino, M., Winter, S., & Dvir-Gvirsman, S. (forthcoming). "You're still worth it": The moral and relational context of politically motivated unfriending decisions in online networks. *PLOS ONE*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0243049>
- Neubaum, G., & Krämer, N. C. (2017). Opinion climates in social media: Blending mass and interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research, 43*(4), 464–476. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12118>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). *Digital news report 2020*. Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Peña, J., & Brody, N. (2014). Intentions to hide and unfriend Facebook connections based on perceptions of sender attractiveness and status updates. *Computers in Human Behavior, 31*, 143–150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.10.004>
- Price, V., Cappella, J. N., & Nir, L. (2002). Does disagreement contribute to more deliberative opinion? *Political Communication, 19*(1), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/105846002317246506>

- Scheufele, D. A., Nisbet, M. C., Brossard, D., & Nisbet, E. C. (2004). Social structure and citizenship: Examining the impacts of social setting, network heterogeneity, and informational variables on political participation. *Political Communication, 21*(3), 315–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600490481389>
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sibona, C. (2014). Unfriending on Facebook: Context collapse and unfriending behaviors. In Shidler College of Business (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 1676–1685). Washington, DC: IEEE Computer Society. <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2014.214>
- Simon, L., Greenberg, J., & Brehm, J. (1995). Trivialization: The forgotten mode of dissonance reduction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*(2), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.68.2.247>
- Skoric, M. M., Zhu, Q., & Lin, J. H. T. (2018). What predicts selective avoidance on social media? A study of political unfriending in Hong Kong and Taiwan. *American Behavioral Scientist, 62*(8), 1097–1115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218764251>
- Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Thibaut, J. W., & Kelley, H. H. (1959). *The social psychology of groups*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Trepte, S., Dienlin, T., & Reinecke, L. (2015). Influence of social support received in online and offline contexts on satisfaction with social support and satisfaction with life: A longitudinal study. *Media Psychology, 18*(1), 74–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2013.838904>
- Vaccari, C., Valeriani, A., Barberá, P., Jost, J. T., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2016). Of echo chambers and contrarian clubs: Exposure to political disagreement among German and Italian users of Twitter. *Social Media + Society, 2*(3), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116664221>
- Vraga, E. K., Thorson, K., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Gee, E. (2015). How individual sensitivities to disagreement shape youth political expression on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior, 45*, 281–289. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.025>
- Yang, J., Barnidge, M., & Rojas, H. (2017). The politics of “Unfriending”: User filtration in response to political disagreement on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior, 70*, 22–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.12.079>

Zanna, M. P., & Aziza, C. (1976). On the interaction of repression-sensitization and attention in resolving cognitive dissonance. *Journal of Personality, 44*(4), 577–593. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1976.tb00139.x>

Zhu, Q., Skoric, M., & Shen, F. (2017). I shield myself from thee: Selective avoidance on social media during political protests. *Political Communication, 34*(1), 112–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1222471>