

The Politics of Disconnection: A Systematic Review of Politically Motivated Unfriending

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Recent years have seen a surging scholarly interest in disconnective political behaviors on social media, commonly termed “politically motivated unfriending.” This study presents a systematic review of 28 articles (34 studies) on this topic. Through content analysis, it provides a robust synthesis of the trend, contexts, and focuses of the research, the scale and prevalence of politically motivated unfriending, and its antecedents and consequences. Through inductive thematic coding, it identifies 3 recurring themes with regard to the conceptualizations of politically motivated unfriending—it is understood as selective avoidance under the normative framework of the public sphere, self-care following the logic of personal spaces, and a means to create safe spaces within unequal social structures. This systematic review highlights the importance of understanding the political implications of social media through the lens of disconnectivity, demonstrates the democratic paradox of disconnection, and offers recommendations for future research.

Keywords: politically motivated unfriending, disconnective behaviors, social media, selective avoidance, safe space, systematic review

Existing scholarship on the political implications of social media has been largely situated within the discourse of connectivity. It argues that by expanding online social networks and facilitating information flow across geographic and demographic boundaries, social media can increase political diversity, encourage connective actions, and promote networked publics and counterpublics (e.g., Barnidge, 2017; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012; Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). However, this central logic of connectivity does not necessarily reflect people’s lived experiences. Network expansion brings information overload, social uncertainty, and unwanted encounters (Dunbar, 2016; Thorson, 2014), which encourage disconnective behaviors such as unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking (generally referred to as “unfriending” in this article). Disconnection has been an option since the dawn of social media, allowing users to constrict the boundaries of their online networks and engage in post hoc content filtration (Bode, 2016; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017). As Light (2014) put it, “Connection cannot exist without disconnection,” and as such, “it is just as fundamental to our understanding of what SNSs can be and how we make sense of them” (p. 195). Therefore, I argue that disconnectivity is an essential element in people’s

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social media practices; it provides an important lens to understand how people engage in politics on social media and its democratic implications.

Unfriending refers to “a conscious act by a person to end the dyadic relationship and manifests itself through the removal of a link between the dyad” (Sibona, 2014, p. 1677). It allows users to socially disconnect from others by dissolving or suspending digital ties after they have been established.¹ Early research suggests that in apolitical everyday life, people usually refrain from cutting ties for fear of losing a social contact completely (Karr-Wisniewski, Wilson, & Richter-Lipford, 2011; Krämer, Hoffmann, & Eimler, 2015). They value social resources embedded in weak and diverse ties, overestimate their similarity with one another, and downplay the importance of politics (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010; Grevet, Terveen, & Gilbert, 2014; Mutz, 2006). However, in times of political contest, these conditions that once nurtured network heterogeneity tend to encourage disconnection as diverse networks can breed and expose people to disagreements, conflicts, and other negative interactions (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). The nature and implications of disconnective behaviors are paradoxical: They not only shield people from political disagreements and challenges that are critical to deliberation but also protect them from social sanctions that are important to personal well-being (Barnidge, Peacock, Kim, Kim, & Xenos, 2022; John & Gal, 2018; Zhu & Skoric, 2021). While unfriending is a form of social exclusion and allows people to disengage from the “other side,” it also empowers individuals—especially minorities—to express their views and identities (John & Agbarya, 2021; Zhu & Skoric, 2022). The question thus arises: How will disconnectivity as such shape the democratic implications of social media?

To answer this question, recent years have seen a burgeoning research interest in disconnective behaviors such as unfriending and unfollowing for political reasons, commonly termed “politically motivated unfriending.” This phenomenon has been studied in dozens of countries and regions with differing political and cultural institutions and against a variety of political backgrounds ranging from political downtimes to routine politics (e.g., elections) and heated conflicts (e.g., wars). Quantitative research has focused on a wide range of factors in explaining the phenomenon, including individuals’ political orientations and sociopsychological traits, network and content characteristics, and cultural orientations among others. Qualitative research has presented a rich account of users’ lived experiences and constellations of meanings associated with the disconnective practices.

This growing body of literature thus offers an opportunity to systematically examine the scale, tendencies, implications, and meanings of politically motivated unfriending. To do so, this study presents a systematic review of the existing literature on politically motivated unfriending. It aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How can we characterize the current state of research on political unfriending regarding its development over time, political contexts, methodological undertakings, and research focuses?

¹ This study examines social disconnection via tie dissolution or suspension (e.g., unfriending, unfollowing) on social media, which is different from the digital disconnection studies that largely focus on media nonuse.

RQ2: What is the extent of politically motivated unfriending? Does it evolve over time and vary across political contexts, and if yes, how?

RQ3: What are the common antecedents and consequences of politically motivated unfriending?

RQ4: What are the main understandings and conceptualizations of politically motivated unfriending?

To answer these questions, I combine quantitative and qualitative analyses in conducting the systematic review, employing content analysis and inductive thematic coding (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

Methods

Literature Search and Selection

To collect studies that examined politically motivated unfriending, a search was conducted on May 11, 2022, on Web of Science and EBSCOhost. This is in line with previous systematic reviews and meta-analytical studies (e.g., Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). In particular, Web of Science is a leading scientific multidisciplinary database that is widely used as a research instrument (Li, Rollins, & Yan, 2018; Zhu & Liu, 2020). A combination of the following keywords was used to conduct the search: "unfriend," "defriend," "unfollow," together with "politic" and "social media." It yielded 31 articles and was complemented with a similar search on Google Scholar, which identified five additional published articles. Following the literature search, a manual selection was carried out based on the following criteria: (1) empirical research, (2) politically motivated unfriending as the main focus, (3) peer-reviewed journal articles, and (4) written in English. This resulted in a corpus of 28 articles published between 2015 and early 2022, which in total included 34 studies with distinct samples.² The literature search and selection process are summarized in Figure 1.

² The data set can be found in the appendix:

https://osf.io/rjk4p/?view_only=9ada23150bc54ef0a2c1a2b94cc08082

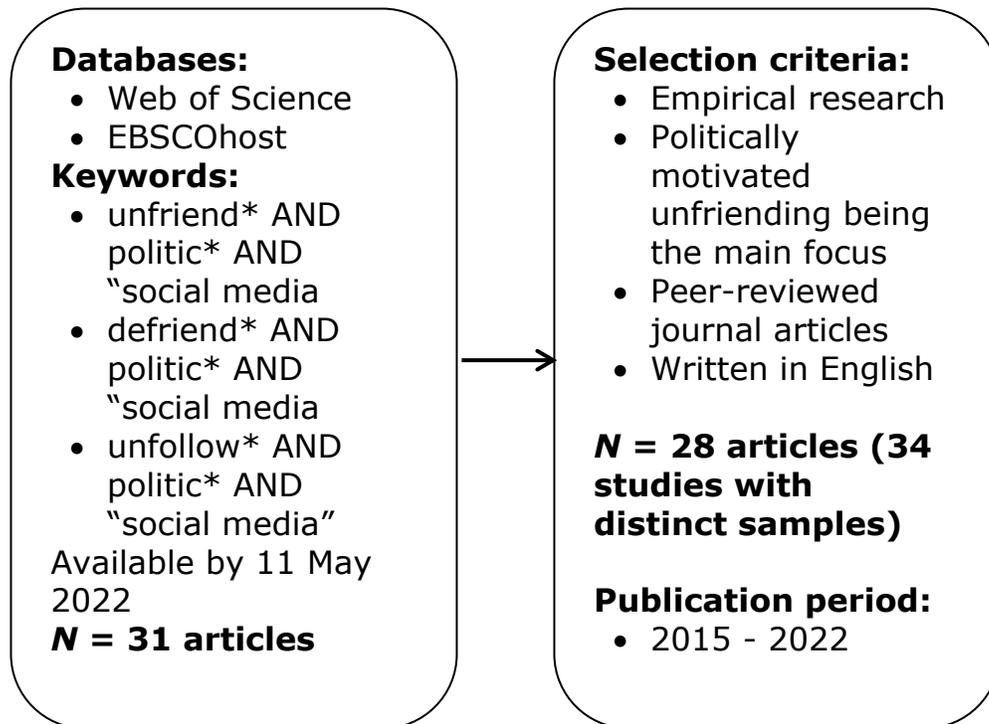


Figure 1. Literature search and selection procedures.

Analysis

The 34 studies were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. To answer RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, a content analysis was conducted. Each study was coded regarding its publication year, data-collection period, research context, and method. Following that, the analysis zoomed in on the subsample of quantitative studies to code research focuses and the extent of politically motivated unfriending. The coding manual is listed in Table 1.

To answer RQ4, inductive thematic coding was performed, which identified the overarching themes regarding how politically motivated unfriending is understood and conceptualized. This involved three rounds of coding, including (1) initial open coding, which provided descriptive labels to summarize the key findings and arguments from each article, (2) a following round of focused coding, which merged the open codes into more abstract categories, and (3) theoretical coding, which integrated the categories to form a larger theoretical scheme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process generated three main themes, which are described in the following section.

Table 1. Coding Manual.

Categories	Codes, Definitions, and Coding Rules	Examples
<i>1. For all studies, code the following:</i>		
Publication year	The year in which a study was published. For early-access/online-first articles, the online publication year is recorded.	2017
Data-collection period	The period in which the data were collected.	May 16, 2020–June 1, 2020
Country/region	The country or region in which a study was conducted.	The United States, Hong Kong
Regime type	The regime type of each country/region: <i>1 = liberal democracies</i> <i>2 = nondemocratic regimes</i>	The United States: Liberal democracy Hong Kong: Nondemocratic regime
Political background	The political context in which a study was conducted, such as an election or protest, which is categorized into the following four groups: <i>1 = election period</i> Broadly defined as electoral processes, including general elections, referendums, and legislative decisions. <i>2 = political conflict</i> Including armed conflicts or wars, social movements, protests, coup d'état, etc. <i>3 = routine time</i> Absence of major political events as listed in 1 and 2. A study is coded as "routine time" if it does not report an election or conflict as its research context and the data are collected at least three months before or after a political event. <i>4 = unknown</i> A study is coded as "unknown" if it does not report a research context or data-collection period.	<i>Examples of election period:</i> The 2016 U.S. presidential election, the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, the approval of the same-sex marriage bill by the Legislative Yuan in Taiwan in 2019 <i>Examples of political conflict:</i> The 2014 Gaza War, the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement 2014, the 2016 Turkish coup d'état attempt <i>Examples of routine time:</i> A study conducted in the United States in June 2017, eight months after the 2016 presidential election
Research method	The method a study adopted to collect data: <i>1 = survey</i> <i>2 = experiment</i> <i>3 = in-depth interview</i> <i>4 = focus group</i> <i>5 = others</i>	

2. For survey and experimental studies, code the following:

Research population	The population that a study examines	The U.S. adult social media users
Sample size	The number of participants included in a sample (<i>N</i>)	<i>N</i> = 1,210
Research focus	<p><i>1 = antecedent to political unfriending</i> Factors that predict/explain politically motivated unfriending.</p> <p><i>2 = consequence of political unfriending</i> Political unfriending as the predictor influencing individuals' attitudes, feelings, and behaviors.</p> <p>If a study investigates both, it is coded as 1 and 2.</p>	<p>A study that examines how political disagreement influences unfriending is coded as 1.</p> <p>A study that examines how political unfriending influences participation in protest is coded as 2.</p>

If research focuses = 1, further code the following:

Antecedent	<p>Use observed effect as the unit of analysis. An effect here means the estimated relationship between a predictor and political unfriending, as indicated by, for instance, the regression coefficient. A study can contain multiple effects. Demographic variables are not coded.</p> <p><i>1 = individuals' political orientations</i> Examples: Political interest, political extremity, partisanship, political participation</p> <p><i>2 = social media related factors</i> Examples: Intensity of use, political use of social media, social use of social media</p> <p><i>3 = network characteristics</i> Examples: Size of social networks (e.g., number of Facebook friends), size of political discussion networks, tie strength such as discussion with weak ties, network diversity including political diversity and structural diversity</p> <p><i>4 = content related factors</i> Examples: Political disagreement such as exposure to cross-cutting content, uncivil comments, perceived credibility of posts/comments</p> <p><i>5 = individuals' psychological traits</i></p>	<p>A study included political interest, number of Facebook friends, use of Facebook for election information, party affiliation, ideological extremity, and basic demographic variables in its regression model predicting political unfriending. In this case, there are five effects, which can be categorized into 1 (including political interest, partisanship, ideological extremity), 2 (including use of Facebook for election information), and 3 (including number of Facebook friends).</p>
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	Examples: Need to belong, need for cognition, fear of social isolation, fear of missing out	
	<i>6 = intergroup dynamics</i>	
	Examples: Minority status, perceived out-group threat	
	<i>7 = cultural orientations</i>	
	Example: Collectivism	
	<i>8 = others</i>	
<i>If research focus = 2, code the types of consequences:</i>		
Consequence	<i>1 = political expression</i>	
	Expressing one's political view or discussing politics	
	<i>2 = political participation</i>	
	Examples: Voting, participating in protests	
	<i>3 = information consumption</i>	
	Seeking election information or information about politics and public affairs in general	
	<i>4 = others</i>	
<i>3. For survey studies code the following:</i>		
Extent of politically motivated unfriending	The percentage of participants in a study who reported having unfriended, unfollowed, or blocked others for political reasons.	13.07% (meaning 13.07% of the participants in a study reported having engaged in politically motivated unfriending)
	Only studies that use binary items (yes/no) to measure politically motivated unfriending are included. Studies using Likert scales (e.g., 10-point scale, 1 = "never" and 10 = "all the time") are excluded.	

Results

Content Analysis Results

Research Trend, Contexts, and Focuses

To answer RQ1 regarding the current state of research on the topic, I first looked at its development over time, using the number of publications in peer-reviewed journals as an indicator of academic interest. On average, 3.5 articles were published each year between November 2015 and May 2022, with a standard deviation of 4. As shown in Figure 2, the interest level remained low in the first six years, until 2020 (Min = 0, Max = 4, $M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.33$, Sum = 13). However, in 2021 we see a drastic increase, as 13 articles on the topic were published that year alone (including early-access publications).

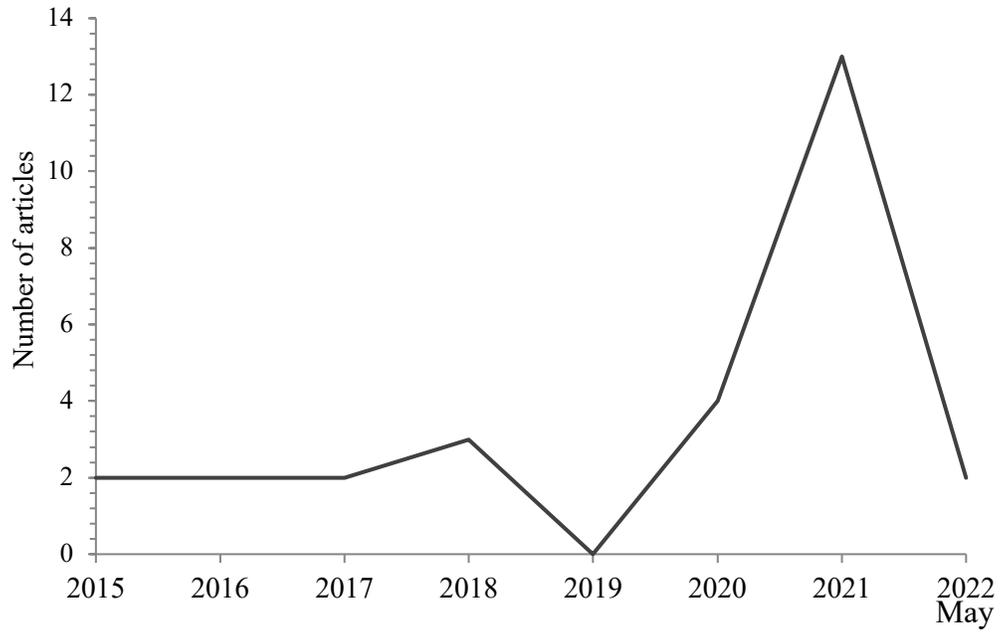


Figure 2. Publication by year.

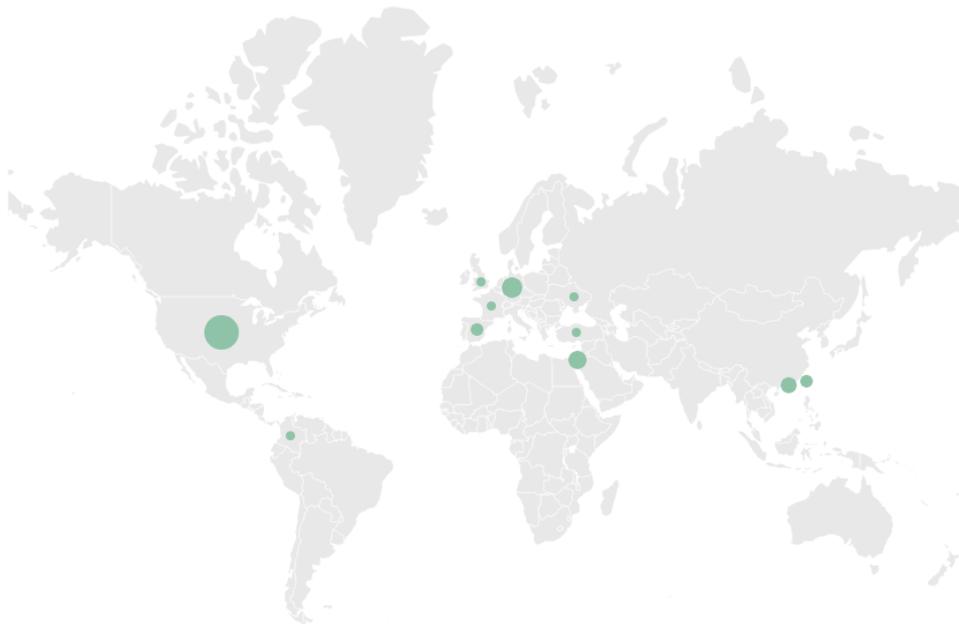


Figure 3. Countries/regions in which politically motivated unfriending has been studied.

Table 2. Research Contexts and Scales of Politically Motivated Unfriending Across Countries/Regions.

Regime Type	Country/Region	Number of Studies	Political Background (<i>n</i>) ^a	Political Unfriending (%) ^b	
				<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>n</i>
Liberal democracies	The United States	13	Election period (7)	24.66 (10.75)	5
			Routine time (5)		
			Unknown (1)		
	Germany	5	Routine time (5)	—	—
			Israel	4	Political conflict (4)
	Spain	2	Election period (1)	—	—
			Routine time (1)		
	Taiwan	2	Election period (2)	10.84	1
	France	1	Election period (1)	11.73	1
	The United Kingdom	1	Election period (1)	16.97	1
Nondemocratic regimes	Hong Kong	3	Political conflict (1)	12.83 (2.90)	3
			Election period (1)		
			Routine time (1)		
	Colombia	1	Routine time (1)	19.6	1
	Ukraine	1	Political conflict (1)	—	—
Turkey	1	Political conflict (1)	—	—	
Total		34		18.22 (8.56)	13

Note. ^a "n" in parentheses indicates the number of studies conducted in a given political context in each country/region.

^b If a country/region has multiple studies, the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) are estimated. The number of studies (*n*) is also reported.

Table 3. Scales of Politically Motivated Unfriending Across Political Contexts.

	Number of Countries/ Regions	Number of Studies	Politically Motivated Unfriending (%) ^a		Politically Motivated Unfriending (%), ^a Excluding the U.S. Samples	
			<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>n</i>
United States vs. other countries						
United States	1	13	24.66(10.75)	5	—	—
Other countries	10	21	14.20(3.38)	8	—	—
Regime type						
Democracies	7	28	19.88(9.67)	9	13.89(3.05)	4
Nondemocracies	4	6	14.52(4.13)	4	14.52(4.13)	4
Political background						
Routine time	5	13	18.11(8.73)	4	16.34(4.62)	2
Election period	6	14	18.99(10.28)	7	12.34(3.19)	4
Political conflict	4	7	15.8(0.28)	2	15.8(0.28)	2

Note. ^a If there are multiple studies, the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) are estimated, and the number of studies (*n*) is reported.

Second, the studies were conducted in diverse contexts. In total, 11 countries/regions were studied, including places from North America and Western Europe, Southern and Eastern Europe, East Asia, and South America (see Figure 3). Seven of the countries/regions are liberal democracies (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Israel, and Taiwan), and four are nondemocratic (mostly hybrid) regimes (Hong Kong, Ukraine, Turkey, and Colombia). Notably, the early research that pioneered this field was mainly conducted outside the Anglo-American context: These studies examined politically motivated unfriending in Israel during the 2014 Gaza War (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Schwarz & Shani, 2016), Hong Kong during the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017), and the political division in Colombia (Yang et al., 2017). However, despite the diverse geographical and political contexts, the United States is still the most researched country, accounting for 38.24% ($n = 13$) of the total studies. More studies were conducted in liberal democracies ($n = 28$) than in nondemocratic regimes ($n = 6$; see Tables 2 and 3).

Third, in terms of political backgrounds, these studies were relatively equally distributed between election periods ($n = 14$; 41.18%) and routine times ($n = 13$; 38.24%), followed by seven (20.59%) studies conducted during political conflicts (see Table 3). Nonetheless, the distribution differs across political systems (see Table 2). In liberal democracies, political unfriending was primarily studied during election periods ($n = 12$; 42.86%) and routine times ($n = 11$; 39.29%) except for those conducted in Israel during the 2014 Gaza War ($n = 4$; 14.29%). In contrast, studies in the context of nondemocracies focused more on unfriending during political conflicts ($n = 3$; 50%), including the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014 (Zhu et al., 2017), the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014 (Baysha, 2020), and the coup d'état attempt in Turkey, 2016 (Bozdag, 2020). They can be characterized as clearly demarcating events and peak moments of polarization that deepened the already existing fault lines of a society.

Lastly, as for the research methods and focus, the majority of the studies employed quantitative methods including surveys ($n = 21$; 61.76%) and experiments ($n = 4$; 11.76%) to examine the antecedents and/or consequences of politically motivated unfriending. The rest followed a qualitative approach to understand the meanings associated with the disconnective practices through in-depth interviews ($n = 7$; 20.59%) and focus groups ($n = 1$; 2.94%).

The Extent and Trend of Politically Motivated Unfriending

To answer RQ2, 13 studies conducted in seven countries/regions reported the percentage of participants who engaged in politically motivated unfriending. Together, they generate an average rate of 18.22%, meaning on average 18.22% of the participants across studies reported having dissolved or suspended digital ties with others for political reasons. Political unfriending is substantially more prevalent in the United States (24.66%) than in other countries/regions (14.20%; see Table 3). When excluding the U.S. data from the sample, the unfriending rate becomes relatively stable such that there is little difference between democratic (13.89%) and nondemocratic countries/regions (14.52%).

Is there a rising trend of politically motivated unfriending? To shed light on this question, I focus on survey studies conducted in the United States as multiple studies measured the percentage of political unfriending over the years (see Table 4). First of all, I note that there is no consistent measure of political unfriending as it varies substantially in the time span (e.g., in the past 12 years, in the past 14 days) and disconnective behaviors (unfriending, unfollowing, muting, and blocking are often lumped together), which makes it hard to compare. However, despite these inconsistencies, a drastic increase in political unfriending is rather evident in 2017 (29.75% in the 12 months before the survey, compared with 10% in the entire social media use history in 2012) arguably because of the divisive 2016 presidential election (Bode, 2016; Skoric, Zhu, Koc-Michalska, Boulianne, & Bimber, 2022). The number further rose to 37% in 2018 during the midterm elections (Barnidge et al., 2022). Kim, Jones-Jang, and Kenski (2021) and Neely (2021) reported lower percentages during the 2018 midterm elections and the 2019 presidential election, which, however, might be because of the shorter time span they measured ("in the past 14 days" and "in the past three months," respectively).

Table 4. U.S. Studies: Politically Motivated Unfriending Over Time.

Data-Collection Period	Source	Political Context	Political Unfriending Measure ^a	Politically Motivated Unfriending (%)
2012 (Jan–Feb)	Bode (2016)	Routine time	Whether a participant had ever blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because they posted too much about politics, posted things one disagreed on, argued about politics with oneself, disagreed with oneself, or posted something that was offensive.	10
2017 (Jun)	Skoric et al. (2022)	Routine time	In the past 12 months , whether a participant had <i>unfriended or unfollowed</i> others over their support for a candidate or issue that they disagreed with.	29.75
2018 (Sep)	Barnidge et al. (2022)	Election period	In the past 12 months , whether a participant had <i>unfriended</i> someone because of disagreement or hate speech.	37
2018 (Oct–Nov)	Kim et al. (2021)	Election period	In the past 14 days , whether a participant had <i>unfriended, unfollowed, or muted</i> someone (Note: A two-wave panel survey, political unfriending percentage was estimated by taking the mean of percentages from both waves.)	17.55
2020 (Oct)	Neely (2021)	Election period	In the past 3 months , whether a participant had <i>unfriended or unfollowed</i> someone because of their political posts on Facebook.	29

Note. ^aThe measures of politically motivated unfriending are inconsistent across studies in terms of (1) time span, (2) disconnective behaviors (although most studies lumped together different disconnective behaviors such as unfriending and unfollowing), and (3) specifications of “politics” (e.g., political disagreement, political posts).

The Antecedents and Consequences of Politically Motivated Unfriending

To answer RQ3, the majority of the 25 quantitative studies examined antecedents ($n = 23$, 92%), namely factors that could explain or predict politically motivated unfriending. Among them, individuals’ political orientations are the most frequently researched predictors as 17 studies examined political extremity, political interest, partisanship, political participation, and democratic values. Fourteen studies estimated the influence of social media use related factors (i.e., use intensity, political use) and network characteristics (i.e., network size, network diversity, tie strength). Ten studies looked into content-related

factors in their explanations, namely, political disagreement, perceived credibility, incivility, and moral violation. Additionally, very few studies delved into individuals' psychological traits (e.g., need for cognition, fear of missing out; $n = 3$), intergroup dynamics (e.g., minority status, out-group threat; $n = 2$), and cultural orientation (e.g., collectivism; $n = 1$). The following section provides a summary of the observed effects of the main predictors (i.e., regression coefficients; see also Table 5).

Among the individual political orientation factors, political extremity (including ideological extremity, partisanship strength, belief strength, and affective polarization) is the most researched predictor ($n = 15$). Among the 15 observed effects, 86.67% are positive (66.67% are also statistically significant), offering some robust evidence that political extremity is associated with a higher likelihood of political unfriending. Political participation, although less often researched ($n = 2$), is also a consistently positive predictor. In contrast, political interest ($n = 13$) shows a mixed pattern—46.15% of the effects are positive, whereas 53.85% are negative. The negative effects were mostly identified in Western democracies including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France during elections or political downtimes (Barnidge et al., 2022; Goyanes, Borah, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015; Kim et al., 2021; Skoric et al., 2022; Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021), and none of them are statistically significant. In comparison, the positive effects—mostly statistically significant—were observed primarily in contexts of drastic political shifts and conflicts such as Hong Kong during and after the Umbrella Movement (Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018; Zhu & Skoric, 2021; Zhu et al., 2017), with one exception from Germany (Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2021).

Regarding factors related to social media use, both use intensity ($n = 10$) and political use of social media ($n = 13$) are frequently researched and consistent predictors. Among the effects of use intensity, 72.73% of them are positive (54.55% statistically significant), suggesting that heavy users of social media are more likely to cut ties for political reasons arguably because they are more literate with social media platforms and more likely to encounter political content and interact with others. The political use of social media is another consistent predictor, as 92.31% of the effects are positive (76.92% are statistically significant). This is in line with the abovementioned finding that political participation consistently predicts a higher likelihood of politically motivated unfriending.

In terms of network characteristics, 75% of the effects regarding network size ($n = 16$) are positive, suggesting that those with larger social or discussion networks are more likely to unfriend others for political reasons. In relation, the number of weak ties or the frequency of discussing politics with weak ties is a consistent predictor; all of the related effects ($n = 7$) are positive and statistically significant. Similarly, network diversity ($n = 5$) is also consistently and positively associated with political unfriending, as 80% of the effects are positive and statistically significant.

When it comes to content-related predictors, political disagreement is the most frequently examined factor ($n = 6$). It is consistently found to be positively associated with unfriending as all of the six effects are positive, and four (66.67%) of them are statistically significant. Additionally, perceived credibility of the content ($n = 2$) is an inhibitor of unfriending, whereas incivility ($n = 1$) and moral violation ($n = 1$) are identified as contributors.

Table 5. Summary of Antecedents to and Consequences of Politically Motivated Unfriending.

Factors	No. of Effects (<i>n</i>)	Positive Effect		Negative Effect	
		No. of positive effects (%)	No. of positive and statistically sig. effects (%) ^a	No. of negative effects (%)	No. of negative and statistically sig. effects (%) ^a
Political orientations					
Political extremity	15	13 (86.67)	10 (66.67)	2 (13.33)	0 (0)
Political interest	13	6 (46.15)	5 (38.46)	7 (53.85)	0 (0)
Political participation	2	2 (100)	1 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Democratic values	1	0	0	1	0
Social media use					
Social media use intensity	10	8 (80)	6 (60)	2 (20)	0 (0)
Political use of social media	13	12 (92.31)	10 (76.92)	1 (7.69)	0 (0)
Network characteristics					
Network size	16	12 (75)	8 (50)	4 (25)	0 (0)
Weak ties	7	7 (100)	7 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Network diversity	5	4 (80)	4 (80)	1 (20)	0 (0)
Content-related factors					
Political disagreement	6	6 (100)	4 (66.67)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Perceived credibility	2	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (100)	2 (100)
Incivility	1	1	1	0	0
Moral violation	1	1	1	0	0
Psychological traits					
Fear of missing out	1	1	1	0	0
Fear of social isolation	1	0	0	1	0
Willingness to self-censor	1	1	0	0	0
Need for cognition	1	0	0	1	0
Need to evaluation	1	0	0	1	0
Psychological reactance	1	1	1	0	0
Intergroup dynamics					
Opinion minority status	1	1	0 ^b	0	0
Perceived out-group threat	1	1	1	0	0
Cultural orientations					
Collectivism	1	1	1	0	0

Note. ^a Statistically significant as $p < .05$.

^b Although it is not a statistically significant predictor of politically motivated unfriending, perceived opinion minority status is a significant moderator of the positive relationship between political disagreement and political unfriending (Zhu & Skoric, 2021).

Compared with antecedents to politically motivated unfriending, only three of the 25 quantitative studies examined the consequences. However, they consistently found political unfriending to be associated with increased political expression and participation. Specifically, using data from two-wave panel surveys conducted in Hong Kong and the United States during election periods, researchers found a positive and statistically significant effect on political expression on social media (Kim et al., 2021; Zhu & Skoric, 2022) but not political information seeking (Zhu & Skoric, 2022). It is also predictive of participation in street protests during political conflicts (Zhu et al., 2017).

Thematic Analysis Results

To answer RQ4 regarding how politically motivated unfriending is understood and conceptualized, three main recurring themes were identified through inductive thematic coding: (1) Political unfriending constitutes a form of selective avoidance under the theoretical framework of the public sphere. (2) Political unfriending is a tool for self-care, following the norms and logics of personal spaces. (3) Political unfriending is a means to create safe spaces within the social structure of unequal power differentials.

Political Unfriending as Selective Avoidance in the Public Sphere

Existing research has primarily understood disconnective practices as mechanisms for post hoc content filtration (Goyanes et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017) to manage political exposure (Hayes et al., 2015) and to intentionally avoid certain information (Bode, 2016; Kim et al., 2021; Wu, 2021; Zhu et al., 2017). Following this conceptualization, the question thus arises: What kind of content is culpable? While oversharing (e.g., posting too much about politics) is the main reason for unfriending as reported by social media users (Bode, 2016), most research so far has primarily focused on political disagreement (also as the content analysis results demonstrate). In other words, scholars are mainly concerned that unfriending may thwart exposure to oppositional political views and lead to the formation of echo chambers. This concern is consistent with the dominant normative expectation in the field of political communication that contact with cross-cutting viewpoints is a critical aspect of deliberative processes in a public sphere (Barnidge et al., 2022; Habermas, 1991; Mutz, 2002).

Existing research consistently finds that encountering disagreeable political content from those holding opposing ideologies is associated with a higher likelihood of unfriending. This is evident in various political contexts, such as the United States before the 2012 presidential election, the Israel-Gaza armed conflict in 2014, and Hong Kong before the 2017 chief executive election (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Kaiser, Vaccari, & Chadwick, 2022; Zhu & Skoric, 2021). Weighing in on the debate on whether the Internet is facilitating a turn toward avoidance (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013), the abovementioned findings suggest that disconnective political behaviors constitute a form of selective avoidance. That is, they allow social media users to deliberately avoid counter-attitudinal information following initial exposure by cutting ties with the sources (Zhu & Skoric, 2021; Zhu et al., 2017).

Why would people engage in selective avoidance via unfriending? There are three main explanations so far. First, following the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), unfriending can function as a strategy of dissonance reduction, specifically, by removing sources of disagreement from one's

social media environment. Neubaum, Cargnino, and Maleszka (2021) find that politically motivated unfriending is an affective response to dissonance, that is, an aversive state of psychological discomfort induced by counter-attitudinal exposure. Kim and colleagues (2021) further specify that politically motivated unfriending is driven by the conflicting needs to defend one's political stance and to process information accurately. Second, political disagreement is relational. Weak ties that transmit novel information and differing views are most susceptible to dissolution (Barnidge et al., 2022; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Skoric et al., 2018, 2022) because they lack the kind of relational closeness and rapport that inhibit people from doing so (Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter et al., 2021). This is amplified by context collapse on social media that renders individuals feeling accountable for the content in their own newsfeeds (John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). Third, political disagreement is associated with or perceived as norm violations. Existing research shows that disagreements that violate fundamental moral values, are deemed disrespectful and uncivil, or are perceived to spread falsehood are culpable (Baysha, 2020; Goyanes & Skoric, 2021; Goyanes et al., 2021; Jordá, Cañedo, Bene, & Goyanes, 2021; Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, et al., 2021; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). In-depth interviews often find participants describing someone they unfriended or a comment that triggered unfriending as "crossing the line"—going beyond what is considered to be the limits of acceptable discourse, such as offensive derogatory terms, hate speech, and comments that stir conflicts with close ones (Baysha, 2020; John & Gal, 2018; Jordá et al., 2021; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). This is accelerated in times of emotionally charged political conflicts as each side considers "some forms of expressions as offensive and unacceptable sacrilege and some words as taboos" (Schwarz & Shani, 2016, p. 393).

Based on this string of findings, many caution that politically motivated unfriending may increase homogeneity in the socio-informational environments on social media, sort individuals into enclaves of similar political beliefs and moral values, and create online gated communities that shield people from the outside world (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Kaiser et al., 2022; Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2017). However, recent research advances that unfriending does not exclude political differences completely as many have feared; rather, people use it as a tool to sustain a manageable level of political diversity as online social networks expand drastically (Barnidge et al., 2022; John & Gal, 2018). In other words, while unfriending targets fundamental incongruence in worldviews and identities, it still leaves room for disagreement to be aired and discussed in an arguably friendlier and more supportive social setting. This thus raises questions about the extent to which unfriending is actually an obstacle to political deliberation as many have cautioned.

Political Unfriending as Self-Care in Personal Spaces

While research often evaluates the democratic implications of social media according to the normative theory of the public sphere, accounts of users' lived experiences consistently suggest that these digital spaces are perceived to be deeply personal, domestic, or at least semiprivate. Participants of in-depth interviews often described social media as an extension of their homes, such as "my home," "my neighborhood," "my wall," and "my world" (Bozdag, 2020; John & Gal, 2018; Jordá et al., 2021; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). Thus, these digital spaces are associated with a strong sense of ownership. John and Gal (2018) proposed the concept of "personal public sphere." It describes that social media users see themselves as having power in deciding who is allowed to be inside the sphere and who is kept outside and bearing the

responsibility for what others may encounter in these spaces. Accordingly, disconnection is “the exercise of sovereignty over the personal public sphere, and specifically as a form of social exclusion” (John & Gal, 2018, p. 2982).

Moreover, in deciding or justifying whom to exclude, people often follow the norms that govern personal spaces, such as personal interests and preferences, instead of the collectively shared values of the public sphere. In-depth interview studies consistently find participants citing the violations of personal preferences, rather than disagreement, as the reason for unfriending (Goyanes & Skoric, 2021; John & Gal, 2018; Jordá et al., 2021; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). For some, vulgar, barbarous, provocative, and inciting comments are boundary-marking content; they are experienced as a “symbolic contamination” of one’s personal space and hence these spaces need to be “cleansed” (Schwarz & Shani, 2016). Some describe extreme posts and comments as emotionally exhausting and distressing and feel that they have the right to protect themselves from such utterances (John & Gal, 2018). Others report that since the personal spaces are primarily used as a domain for entertainment, they feel entitled to content that pleases them; hence content that is not to their liking, such as opinion-challenging and offensive posts and those that distribute fake news, is considered “out-of-place” and marked for rejection (Jordá et al., 2021).

Overall, taking a bottom-up approach to make sense of the reasons and meanings associated with politically motivated unfriending, this string of research highlights that it is a means to regulate the social boundaries of one’s personal space and to mold its content and discourse according to personal liking. As John and Gal (2018) point out, “The rhetoric here is of personal taste, and the obligation is to one’s personal well-being” (p. 2978). Barnidge and colleagues (2022) further make sense of this in the “emerging cultural logic of self-care” that recent public sentiment is “more concerned with encountering too much political disagreement, which could negatively affect psychological well-beings over time” (p. 17).

Political Unfriending to Build Safe Spaces Within an Unequal Social Structure

While existing research has primarily examined politically motivated unfriending as a function of individual and network characteristics, three studies highlight that we should also understand it within the context of structural power differentials (John & Agbarya, 2021; Zhu & Skoric, 2021, 2022). As John and Agbarya (2021) point out, “Acknowledging structural power differentials between groups of Facebook users requires us to rethink the meaning of unfriending when carried out on someone higher up a social hierarchy” (p. 12). Specifically, John and Agbarya (2021) look at the minority-majority power dynamics, and highlight that the experiences of Arabs living in Israel are largely shaped by their position as a national minority with a deficit of rights. Zhu and Skoric (2021, 2022) examine the role of opinion minority status in post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong, which is associated with heightened fears of state and social surveillance and sanctions.

First of all, survey results show that minorities have a higher propensity than their majority counterparts to unfriend those holding challenging views arguably because they have a clearer self-concept, are more likely to perceive oppositions as provocative or threatening, and have a stronger need to belong and be validated (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). This is consistent with findings from in-depth interviews where Arab Israelis report unfriending Jewish Israeli Facebook friends to avoid getting abusive messages, turn away

from confrontations, and circumvent social surveillance that can lead to real-life sanctions (John & Agbarya, 2021). Moreover, political unfriending can encourage minorities to express otherwise suppressed opinions and marginalized identities. In a panel survey conducted in Hong Kong, Zhu and Skoric (2022) find that politically motivated unfriending predicts increased political expression on social media over time, but only among self-perceived opinion minorities. This is corroborated by findings from in-depth interviews. A central theme that emerged from Arab Israelis' stories of unfriending is that, as a national minority, unfriending allowed them to exert control over audience reception and express their views and identities more freely without worrying about potential risks and repercussions (John & Agbarya, 2021).

Based on these findings, scholars argue that politically motivated unfriending should be understood as a means toward digital safe spaces (Zhu & Skoric, 2021, 2022). That is, in response to the systematic exclusion, disconnection can help minorities build spaces that are safe from sanctions and safe for expression. Some also see unfriending as a way to "punch up," protest against the hegemony of a dominant majority, and return the provocative assault on their marginalized identities (John & Agbarya, 2021). While this seems empowering, scholars also caution that the creation of such safe spaces may further distance minorities from the centers of power and run the risk of reinforcing the existing structure of inequality (John & Agbarya, 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study presents a systematic review of disconnective political behaviors on social media, namely, politically motivated unfriending. In doing so, it provides a robust synthesis regarding the scale, tendencies, implications, and meanings of unfriending in the context of politics. Through the lens of disconnectivity, this study contributes to the understandings of how people engage in politics via social media and its democratic implications. Based on the findings, I offer the following takeaways and recommendations for future research.

First, the geographical and political contexts in which politically motivated unfriending has been studied are diverse, which suggests that disconnective political behaviors are rather universal and inherent to political contestation. Across the studies, on average, about 18% of social media users reported having engaged in some form of politically motivated unfriending. On the one hand, it suggests that disconnection is not a dominant tendency. On the other hand, compared with unfriending in everyday settings (Karr-Wisniewski et al., 2011; Krämer et al., 2015), it is much more prevalent when concerning politics. As Schwarz and Shani (2016) put it, "During emotionally laden wartime the mundane is suspended (Smith 2005) and moral collectives summon individuals (Tavory 2016), demanding them to choose a side" (Schwarz & Shani, 2016, p. 8). It is also a time when many openly express their strongly held political beliefs and are confronted with questionable views within their online social networks (John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). Moreover, this finding suggests that although social media can easily expand weak ties connecting those from different political backgrounds, such weak ties maintained on social media are not enough to promote meaningful cross-cutting interactions and understandings that can bridge the long-standing social divide (Bozdag, 2020; Schwarz & Shani, 2016).

Second, there is a rising trend of politically motivated unfriending over time, as seen in the U.S. samples. This arguably reflects the intensifying hostility between Republicans and Democrats, particularly during the highly divisive 2016 and 2020 presidential elections where between-party animus reached levels unseen in prior elections (Finkel et al., 2020). However, it remains unclear whether the rising trend is generalizable globally. For example, among the three studies conducted in the context of Hong Kong politics over the years, the unfriending rate ranged between 15.6% in 2014 among university students during the Umbrella Movement (Zhu et al., 2017) and 9.81% in 2017 among the adult population during the chief executive election (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). Here, we do not see the rising trend as shown in the U.S. data despite the deepening division between the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps in Hong Kong. Arguably, this points to the so-called "American exceptionalism" that the United States remains a global outlier when it comes to political polarization and "affective or even hostile political engagement online" (Skoric et al., 2022, p. 1252). At the same time, cultural factors may be also at play here. For example, collectivist orientations in societies like Hong Kong and Taiwan could discourage drastic measures such as cutting ties in dealing with political disagreement (Skoric et al., 2018). However, I caution that the pattern outlined here is based on only a handful of studies. More longitudinal or trend research is needed to make a robust claim.

Third, who is likely to engage in politically motivated unfriending, in which context, and for what reasons? The content analysis identified the consistent predictors among the quantitative studies. In general, heavier social media users who are more politically extreme and active and have larger and more diverse social networks are more inclined to unfriend others often because of political disagreements, particularly those that are perceived as uncivil, violating moral codes, or lacking credibility. Overall, this strand of research conceptualizes politically motivated unfriending as a form of selective avoidance and regards it as democratically problematic because unfriending can lead to the formation of echo chambers and prevent people from hearing the "other side." This approach is largely influenced by the normative theory of deliberative democracy that citizens ought to participate in deliberative processes, for which contact with oppositional views is critical. However, it overlooks how from a user perspective, disconnection can be both necessary and desirable. As the qualitative research suggests, people cut ties to maintain sustainable social boundaries and manage their well-being rather than creating homogenous political surroundings.

Fourth, how and why people engage in disconnective political behaviors is largely shaped by their positions in a social structure. Following Fraser's (1990) notion of subaltern counterpublic, I highlight that for those on the margin of a society, unfriending is not merely a tool that shelters them from disagreements but also a response to the exclusions undertaken by the dominant forms of deliberation. It creates "safe spaces" of withdrawal and at the same time bases for antagonistic politics. While existing research on counterpublics emphasizes leveraging digital connectivity to advance the networks of resistance (Castells, 2012; Jackson et al., 2020), I argue that disconnection is essential to the formation of counterpublics as well. Moreover, by adopting and theorizing the metaphor of safe space to study disconnective political behaviors, we can better understand the emotional and discursive struggles of the marginalized in their search for safety and resilience within an unequal power structure. This can also help us unravel what safe spaces entail and in which context the creation of safe spaces is democratically beneficial.

While this systematic review provides a comprehensive insight into politically motivated unfriending, it has the following limitations. First, it focuses solely on peer-reviewed articles, which may introduce publication bias or file-drawer problem. Second, although the study identifies the common factors that consistently predict politically motivated unfriending, it does not estimate the weighted average effect size as in meta-analyses. Thus, it is not possible to know the magnitude of the relationships. However, this is largely due to the inconsistent measures, which makes comparison impossible.

In conclusion, this systematic review of politically motivated unfriending contributes to the literature on the democratic implications of social media through the lens of disconnectivity. On this basis, I offer the following recommendations for future research. First, we need a consistent measure of disconnective political behaviors and longitudinal studies to estimate more accurately the scale and trend of politically motivated unfriending. Second, cross-country comparative research is crucial to understand the cultural, institutional, and social conditions of disconnection. Third, existing research often considers politically motivated unfriending as democratically problematic because it reduces political diversity or argues that it is desirable because unfriending is self-care and empowers marginalized groups. I urge future research to delve into this democratic paradox by seeing disconnection as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, engaging and disengaging. In doing so, we need to move beyond the normative frameworks to further theorize about disconnection and understand the boundary conditions under which disconnection produces democratic consequences.

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