

Social Networking Site as a Political Filtering Platform: Predicting the Act of Political Unfriending and Hiding

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Social networking sites (SNS) seem to have become a political filtering platform that allows users to classify their online friends based on their political ideologies. Hiding and unfriending on social media has turned into a political gesture, discriminating individuals with opposite political views on SNS. Unfriending activities during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and during the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement are two notable examples. Individuals consume politically congenial information and are surrounded by people who share similar views. The formation of echo chambers and the reason for relationship dissolution on SNS can be explained by Social Identity Theory (SIT), assuming that individuals maximize differences between the group they psychologically belong to and the opposition.

Through an online panel survey of 386 SNS users,

this study examined how factors of political ideologies, social media and offline political participation and likeminded exposure on SNS can predict hiding and unfriending/unfollowing on Twitter and Facebook. Results from an ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis revealed that if individuals had been in a politically homogeneous SNS environment, they were more likely to unfriend, suggesting the reinforcement of echo chambers in SNS. Both social media and offline political participations predicted the dissociative, indicating that unfriending and hiding could be regarded as a new form of online political participation to engage in political affairs.

Keywords: political participation, hiding, unfriending, relationship dissolution, likeminded exposure

“If you’re voting for Donald Trump, I will unfriend you.” Thousands of Facebook users publicly claimed they would unfriend each and every Trump supporter on their social networking sites (SNS) after the Republican presidential debates, regardless of — in the exact words of one Trump critic — “how long I have known you or how close we are” (Dewey, 2015). Many studies have found that relationship building and maintenance are key motivations for using SNS, and that SNS use results in stronger bonds with friends and especially acquaintances (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). However, there is a growing trend of people breaking their online ties due to clashing political views. Across the world, controversial political

issues have not only spurred a cacophony of arguments on SNS but also have resulted in a growing online movement asking people to unfriend users who do not agree with their political views. For example, there was a flurry of unfrinding calls in Germany when bloggers asked people to unfriend Facebook contacts who had liked the page of a racist, anti-immigrant organization, Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (CTVNews.ca, 2015); in Hong Kong, the issue of greater autonomy from China reportedly caused arguments among relatives and friends, and some were known to unfriend each other during the Umbrella Movement in late 2014 (Ortmann, 2015). An online survey found the nearly 30% of the Movement participants had unfriended others because of the pro-democracy protest (Lee & Chan, 2016). These examples suggest that SNS serves as a political filtering platform that automatically enables users to classify their friends. The act of unfrinding has gained public recognition as an impactful political gesture (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015).

For politically-motivated SNS users, unfrinding has significant implications. While activists have long championed the Internet as enabling a more networked world that lets users encounter more diverse and opposing views (Holt, 2004; Brundidge, 2006), some evidence suggests that it is not the case (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Mutz & Martin, 2001). People gravitate towards like-minded friends, and they engage far too little with those who hold opposing ideologies (Stroud, 2010; Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014). Therefore, the act of unfrinding on SNS deepens such a divide. Social Identity Theory (SIT), which states that individuals maximize differences between the group they psychologically belong and other psychologically relevant opposition groups (Brown, 2000; Greene, 2004), helps explain this phenomenon. As SNS is becoming an increasingly important arena for political discussion (Mutz, 2002), there are theoretical and practical needs for us to learn about SNS relationship dissolution like hiding and unfrinding, given that one of its consequences is reinforcing the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles. The concept of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) also helps explain this

phenomenon. The concept states that individuals involved in conflicting situations would feel a sense of discomfort. By filtering out oppose opinions and consuming only likeminded opinions, they could ultimately reduce the sense of discomfort and restore balance.

Previous research has explored the negative emotional and cognitive consequences that a person experiences upon discovering they have been unfriended (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012), the reasons that drive people to hide posts or unfriend contacts on Facebook (Sibona & Walczak, 2011; Peña & Brody, 2014), and how personality traits influence users' decision to friend or unfriend one another (Peña & Brody, 2014). Now, some studies have paid attention to factors that promote or prohibit politically crosscutting exposure and the individuals' intentions to filtrate contacts based on their own political orientations, political information exposure, and levels of political participation (Bode, 2016; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017).

Drawing upon data from a national representative survey of 386 participants, this study aims to provide a systematic understanding of how demographic characteristics, political ideology, likeminded exposure, social media and offline political participation can predict users' intention to hide or unfriend others on SNS. The purpose of this study is to investigate the determinants for hiding and unfrnding independently to see if different factors drive different forms of relationship dissolution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship dissolution: Unfriending/unfollowing and hiding on SNS

Ample research has shown that SNS is a tool to promote interpersonal relationship building and maintenance (e.g., Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Reese, & Zin, 2005; Tom Tong & Walther, 2011). Also it enables individuals with social anxiety to interact with others in a more comfortable social environment (Forest & Wood, 2012). However, online friendships on SNS can be relatively fragile and

tenuous. A recent study revealed that 27 % of social media users had hidden or removed friends from their SNS whom they previously mutually agreed to be friends with (Duggan & Smith, 2016). This kind of online relationship dissolution has become so common that it prompted *The New Oxford American Dictionary* to declare “unfriend” as the Word of the Year in 2009. Unfriend is used as a verb and means to remove someone designated as a “friend” and stop his/her postings from showing up in the newsfeed on an SNS. It is considered as a conscious, purposeful, unilateral removal of a link between two individuals (Sibona, 2014). Besides unfriending, Facebook offers the option of hiding, which can be considered as a milder act of relationship dissolution, in which one user ‘hides’ future postings from another, but they can still maintain “friendship.” Twitter also has a feature similar to Facebook’s “hide post” called the “mute button,” which allows users to remove an account's tweets from their timeline without unfollowing them. Though both unfriending and hiding imply rejecting a connection, Peña and Brody (2014) stated that unfriending is a more extreme relational strategy compared to hiding. Unfriended contacts can no longer access each other’s profiles, but hidden contacts still retain access to each other’s information. While users can unilaterally lift a hide, unfriending cannot be easily undone because both partners would need to repeat the “friending” process. Thus, unfriending is akin to a tacit one-sided breakup.

Several studies have looked into the reasons why Facebook users unfriend. Sibona and Walczak (2011) found that unfriending decisions happen more often due to online interactions (e.g., frequently post uninteresting or inappropriate topics) than offline interactions (e.g., changes in the relationship). Alternatively, based on a larger representative sample of 1,865 adults, NM Incite (2011), a Nielsen McKinsey company, found that posting offensive comments was the top reason for unfriending, while not knowing someone very well was the second, and “they were trying to sell me something” came as the third. Moreover, around one-third of SNS

users reported they unfriended or blocked someone in response to flirting actions that made them uncomfortable (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

Political causes are also a major reason for unfriending. A survey conducted by John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) found that 16% of study participants unfriended a friend based on conflicting political comments during the Israel-Gaza conflict. Sibona and Walczak (2011) discovered that 55% of individuals unfriended someone because their posts were polarizing (i.e., dealt with political or religious issues). Specifically, Duggan and Smith (2016) found that 39% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended or hidden someone from posting too frequently about politics that would offend or disagree with their political opinion.

Social identity, political ideology, and unfriending

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a concept to interpret relationship dissolution on SNS. Social identity is defined as the “part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a group together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). It explains how self-perceived membership in a social group can influence the social perception to protect and bolster individuals’ self-identity. Scholars indicate group membership plays a key role in forming and maintaining social identity (Huddy, 2013; Veenstra, Lyons, & Fowler-Dawson, 2016). Cognitive grouping is a result of the social identification process, which entails judgments further leading to exaggerated features between categories. This process ultimately results in the increase of category differences. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argued that individuals try to maximize the differences between in-group and out-group members, and therefore, showing huge favoritism toward in-group members and a derogation toward out-group members. Any group threats can be treated as threats to the self (Smith, 1999), having incentives to protect or enhance themselves. In order to maintain cognitive salience among group members, groups should be supplemented with information that can enhance their identity (Teo, 2014).

Political ideology has been treated as a prominent indicator of group affiliation (Conover & Feldman, 1981) and can be one criterion to distinguish in-groups and out-groups on SNS. Historically, ideology has been defined as a coherent belief system used by individuals to feel and form issue opinions (Veenstra, Hossain, & Lyons, 2014). Political ideology is a set of shared principles that guides the direction of the society and provides a blueprint for a social order (McLellan, 1986). Andersen (1991) argued that a politically ideological group is an imagined community formed by shared beliefs. The most popular political ideological labels are ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’, measured by self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale (Andersen, 1991).

Studies found that conservatives and liberals show psychological differences, which may directly or indirectly lead to different relationship dissociative behaviors. While liberals tend to be open-minded and pursue egalitarian interest, conservatives appreciate their status quo and favor doing things in traditional ways (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway, 2003). Conservatives tend to be more sensitive to group threatening than liberals (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Vigil, 2010), which lead conservatives to consume more politically congruent information to reduce uncertainty and confusion (Jost & Amodio, 2012; Webster & Kruglanski, 1995). On the contrary, liberals are able to accommodate various political ideas (Jost et al., 2003). It is plausible that liberals are more likely to embrace cross-cutting ideas than conservatives, however, several studies found that liberals are more likely to block, unfriend, or hide contacts because of polarizing messages (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Bode, 2016; Fix, 2013). Colleoni et al. (2014) argued that online networks of Democrats are actually more homogeneous than those of Republicans. Even though liberals are known as open-minded to political information, such results suggest plausible evidence for liberals to unfriend others to achieve a homogeneous space. While results from previous research are mixed, this study puts forward the following research question to re-examine the question with a clearer focus that unfriending takes place due to other’s political comments:

RQ1: How is political ideology related to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending/unfollowing others due to political comments on SNS?

Likeminded exposure and unfriending

Though scholars have demonstrated the political utility of SNS as a pivotal arena for political discussion (Williams & Gulati, 2007) and interacting with non-likeminded individuals (Brundidge, 2006), there are studies that have shown that people always gravitate towards like-minded friends and dissociate with others who clash with their own political ideologies (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Fix, 2013).

SNS, such as Facebook and Twitter, make it easy for users to form online information cocoons where they surround themselves with those who share the same views (Himmelboim, Hansen, & Bowser, 2013; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2009). When SNS users select friends and join groups or fan pages, they are more likely to be exposed to information that reflects their own beliefs, interests, ideas, and values (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010). Selective exposure explains that individuals feel positively when they were presented with information that reaffirmed their opinions, but they felt stressed when they were faced with crosscutting information (Festinger, 1962). This selective exposure process is further reinforced by Facebook analytic algorithms that ensure posts from close friends and from news media they favor will rank higher on the newsfeeds. Similarly, the phenomenon of selective exposure exists in Twitter: users prefer to follow political leaders that they support ideologically (Himmelboim et al., 2013; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012), thus increasing the effect of political polarization (Johnson, Kaye, & Lee, 2017). However, other studies suggest structural characteristics of SNS helps expose individuals to inadvertent political information and, therefore, drives them to consume both like-minded and cross-cutting information. SNS usage was positively related to the exposure to politically heterogeneous information (Kim, 2011) and discussions (Kim, Hsu, & de Zúñiga, 2013). Brundidge (2010) stated that individuals with less purposive information

seeking behavior will be exposed to political cross-cutting information inadvertently.

Therefore, SNS users can choose to consume diverse opinions and engage in democratic discussions with others who have crosscutting views. But they can unfriend or hide other contacts with opposite opinions to reinforce their existing political ideologies. Based on this discussion, this study sets the following hypothesis:

H1: The level of exposure to likeminded opinions on SNS is positively related to (a) the frequency of hiding and (b) unfriending/unfollowing behaviors.

Political polarizations and unfriending

Strong ideologues are more likely to practice selective exposure and conform partisan elites' attitudes regarding policy issues (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Zaller, 1992). While party elites have become more polarized and political parties have moved more to the extremes in the past decade (Huddy, Mason, & Aaroe, 2015; Veenstra et al., 2014), this ideological extremism increases in political polarization and fragmentation. There are two basic types of polarization - affective polarization, attitudes toward political parties, and issue polarization, attitudes towards issues (Abramowitz, 2013; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). While scholars are split about whether the public has indeed become more polarized on anything beyond "hot button" issues such as gay marriage and abortion (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2007), there is more support for the claim that the public is afflicted with affective polarization.

Two competing arguments provided different expectations regarding individual's SNS usage for political information. The first argument insisted that individuals are more likely to expose themselves to like-minded ideas while avoiding cross-cutting perspectives in order to maintain cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1962) and efficient information processing (Stroud, 2008). Some scholars insist that individuals who had a strong political ideology relied more on opinion-

reinforcing information sources, supporting the idea that selective exposure and selective avoidance (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly, 2007; Stroud, 2008). Basically, the rise of partisan news sources has greatly increased the amount of partisan information and helped partisans to seek out supportive information, leading them to form a much extreme opinion (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Lawrence, Sides & Farrell, 2010; Stroud, 2008). As a result, society becomes more fragmented and polarized (Stroud, 2010).

The second argument argues the opposite. Individuals are exposed to diverse communication resources and they do not avoid crosscutting information (Garrett, 2009; Garrett, Carnahan & Lynch, 2013; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Massanari and Howard (2011) introduced a theory of omnivores information habits, which explains that a lot of Internet users make active choices to consume political news from multiple media sources. Information omnivores who consume both like-minded and contradictory political information more than less knowledgeable and less curious citizens might be less likely to ignore dissonant information. Such individuals can be aware of the legitimate arguments of opposing perspectives (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Also, exposure to contrasting perspectives increases familiarity with rationales that motivate opposing views, fostering political tolerance (Mutz, 2002). Polarized individuals can be highly motivated information consumers with hardened beliefs, thus they do not feel uncomfortable to consume politically crosscutting ideas. Lawrence et al. (2010) argued that political omnivores in the blogosphere who read both liberal and conservative blogs were rare, but still, such omnivores can exist on SNS.

Based on contradictory arguments related to polarized individuals, this study set a research question to measure the influence of political polarization to conduct user filtration behaviors on SNS.

RQ2: How is political polarization related to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending/unfollowing others on SNS?

Unfriending as a form of political participation on SNS

Political participation is generally referred to as an “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government actions”, either directly (e.g., contacting public officials) or indirectly by influencing citizens (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Brady, 1995, p. 38.). Political participation on the Internet may involve digital versions of traditional forms of participation, such as online protests, boycotting, voting or petition signing, but also new forms of cyber involvement such as politically motivated hacking (Vromen, 2011; Jordan & Taylor, 2004). Such forms of online participation are distinctive from offline participation or protest.

The new form of political participation also involves the use of SNS. With the advancement of the interactivity capacity of SNS, citizens are now able to gain easy access to political information. They can get connected and involved in various political activities, such as liking or following a news organization and a political group. They can express their political preference through content creation, such as sharing a photo, video or sound clip of a public event or changing a profile picture in support of a cause. All these ultimately lead to political mobilization (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).

Across the world, there is a growing online movement calling for people to unfriend contacts who do not agree with their political views. For example, many LGBT Indonesians "unfriend" others in SNS who might disapprove of them; in Hong Kong, 30% of Umbrella Movement participants had unfriended others because of political disagreement on the issue of greater autonomy from China (Lee & Chan, 2016). Unfriending seems to have become a way on SNS for people to express their political beliefs and communicate opposing viewpoints. While John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) have considered unfriending as a political act, there have been few studies that explore how the level of social media or offline political participation is related to the intention to hide and unfriend on SNS. Thus, this study examines:

H2: The level of social media political participation is positively related to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending/unfollowing others.

H3: Offline political participation is positively related to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending/unfollowing others.

METHODS

To test the hypotheses and answer the research questions, a national online panel survey was conducted by the Digital Media Research Program (DMRP) at the University of Texas at Austin in February 2016. Respondents were recruited by Survey Sampling International from a standing panel of the survey participants. To achieve national representativeness, a quota based on age, gender and race/ethnicity was set for the sample to match the distribution of these demographics as reported by the U.S. Census. A total of 386 SNS users (all of whom have at least one Facebook and Twitter friend combined) were subjects of this study. The sample for this study fits with the national sample measured by Pew Research Center's Internet, Science & Technology Project, in which participants ranged from 18- to 65-year-olds ($M = 42.86$, $SD = 13.95$) and both men and women were equally represented in the sample (Male: 49.3%, Female: 50.7%). Among 386 respondents, the most dominant ethnic group was White ($N = 243$, 63%), following by Hispanic or Latino ($N = 62$, 12%), Black or African American ($N = 46$, 12%), and Asian ($N = 21$, 6%). The median income was from \$50,000 to \$99,999. The median education level was some college, as with the national sample.

Dependent variables

Frequency of hiding/unfollowing on Facebook. Respondents rated on a 1 (never) to 10 (all the time) scale in response to the following statement: "How often do you hide or unfollow someone on Facebook because you do not agree with his/her political comments?"

Frequency of unfriending and unfollowing on Facebook and Twitter. Likewise, to operationalize this concept, respondents rated on a 1 (never) to 10 (all the time) scale to the question: "How often do you unfriend on Facebook/unfollow on Twitter someone because you do not agree with his/her political comments?"

Independent variables

Political ideology. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a 1 (strong conservative) to 10 (strong liberal) scale on social issues and economic issues in U.S. politics. The index was computed by taking the sum.

Like-minded exposure. Respondents rated on a 1 (never) to 10 (all the time) scale how often they found that the political opinions on SNS are in line with their own views. This question asked about likeminded exposure to political contents.

Political polarization. Operational definitions from prior research (Stroud, 2010; Mutz, 2002) were used to measure this concept. Survey respondents were asked to rate their favorability or unfavorability of the U.S. Republican Party, the U.S. Democratic Party, the National Rifle Association, and Planned Parenthood using a scale ranging from 1 (unfavorable) to 10 (very favorable). This index was computed by adding up the absolute value of the difference between ratings of the Republican and the Democratic parties, and the absolute value of the difference between the National Rifle Association and Planned Parenthood for each respondent then dividing by two. The higher the scores, the more polarized the respondent. Mean and standard deviation were calculated.

Social media political participation. Based on prior studies (Effing, van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), social media political participation was measured using a 10-item index ranging from 1 (never) to 10 (all the time). Respondents indicated how often they have been involved in the following activities on social media like Facebook and Twitter or blogs in the past 12 months: “posted a link to political stories or articles for others to read,” “created a post for your own blog or social media about current events or public affairs,” “encouraged other people to vote or to take action on a political/social issue that is important to you,” “reposted content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else (sharing a Facebook post, retweeting),” “like or promote material related to political or social issues that others have posted,” “shared a photo, video or sound clip of a public event,” “shared a politician or political party's post,”

“retrieved campaign or candidate information from social media,” “liked, followed, or joined a political or cause-related group on social media,” “liked or followed a news organization, reporter, or commentator (pundit) on social media,” “changed your social media profile picture in support of a cause.” The index was computed by taking the sum (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$).

Offline political participation. Offline political participation was measured using an eight-item index ranging from 1 (never) to 10 (all the time). Respondents indicated how often they have been involved in the following activities in the past 12 months: “attended a political meeting in support or against a particular candidate, party or issue,” “contacted a national, state, or local government official by telephone, mail or in person about an issue,” “contributed money by mailing a check or calling in a credit card number to a political candidate, party or issue,” “created, shared or signed a petition,” “Volunteered to help with a political cause or candidate,” “sent a letter to the editor” by regular mail to a newspaper or magazine,” “voted in local or statewide election” and “voted in federal or presidential elections.” The index was computed by taking the sum (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$).

Demographics. Age (in years), gender (1 = male, 2 = female), income (in a 6-point scale), and education (in a 6-point scale) were also asked in the survey.

Data analysis

In addition to reporting descriptive statistics, one-tailed Pearson’s correlation coefficients (r) were conducted to examine relationships among all variables. Two hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted for hiding and unfriending, respectively to measure the contribution of each independent variable. For hierarchical regression analysis, demographic variables, including age, gender, income and education were the first block, and political ideology belonged to the second block. Like-minded exposure to political contents and political polarization

were subjects of the third block. Both social media participation and offline political participation were included in the fourth block.

RESULTS

Descriptive results of all variables are given (Table 1). Also, a one-tail correlation table measured the inter-relationships among variables (Table 2 – see Appendix). Results indicated that hiding and unfriending are closely correlated ($r = .895$, $p < .001$), even though hiding is a milder act of friend filtration on SNS.

Numerous significant relationships were found among variables.

Table 1
Descriptive results

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	42.86	13.95
Political ideology (1 : conservative, 10: liberal)	6.28	2.50
Like-minded exposure (1: never, 10: all the time)	5.63	2.27
Political polarization	5.41	5.18
Social media political participation	3.52	2.82
Offline political participation	4.05	2.31
Frequency of hiding/unfollowing on Facebook (1: never, 10: all the time)	4.31	2.84
Frequency of unfriending and unfollowing on Facebook and Twitter (1: never, 10: all the time)	4.05	2.85

Two hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine the hypotheses and research questions. Both final models were found to be statistically significant ($R^2 = .497$, $F = 43.66$, $p < .001$ for the hiding model, $R^2 = .521$, $F = 47.38$, $p < .001$ for the unfriending model, see Table 2). This study also measured multi-collinearity issues and found that all VIF (Variance Influence Factor) values were less than 10, showing that all independent variables are not substantially associated with one another at all.

RQ1 asked to see if politically liberal people are much more likely to hide and unfriend others than politically conservative people, or vice versa. Different results between hiding and unfriending models were found. While political ideology did not predict hiding (Adjusted R-square = .022), politically liberal individuals were more

likely to unfriend others than conservative ones ($\beta = .094$, $p < .05$, Adjusted R-square = .033).

H1 posited a higher level of exposure to likeminded opinion on SNS is positively related to the frequency of (a) hiding and (b) unfriending. Results indicated that likeminded exposure to political opinion on SNS had a statistically significant influence to the frequency of hiding ($\beta = .257$, $p < .01$) and unfriending ($\beta = .232$, $p < .01$). Thus, **H1** was supported.

RQ2 asked about the influence of political polarization to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending behaviors. Results indicated that political polarization did not significantly predict contact filtration behaviors (Adjusted R-square = .205 for hiding model & .201 for unfriending model).

H2 examined whether social media political participation related to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending and **H3** looked at whether offline political participation is related to (a) hiding and (b) unfriending. Results showed that both forms of political participations are able to predict (a) hiding and (b) unfriending. Social media political participation was also affiliated with (a) hiding ($\beta = .210$, $p < .01$) and (b) unfriending ($\beta = .221$, $p < .001$), supporting the idea that people who participated a lot both in social media and offline unfriended because of political disagreement. Offline political participation significantly predicted hiding ($\beta = .217$, $p < .001$) and unfriending ($\beta = .221$, $p < .001$). Adjusted R-squares explained .093 for the hiding model and .101 for the unfriending model.

Among demographic variables, age was negatively associated with both hiding and unfriending, which suggested the younger an individual is, the more likely s/he is to hide ($\beta = -.193$, $p < .001$) and unfriend ($\beta = -.179$, $p < .001$) others. Meanwhile, there was a positive relationship between education and unfriending, which suggested a more educated an individual was, the more likely s/he was to unfriend others ($\beta = .090$, $p < .05$) with an opposite opinion. Finally, gender and income did not significantly predict hiding and unfriending (Adjusted R-square = .177 for hiding model & .186 for unfriending model).

Table 3
Hierarchical linear regression models for hiding and unfriending

	Hiding	Unfriending
<i>Block 1: Demographics</i>		
Age	-.193***	-.179***
Gender	-.013	.003
Income	-.041	-.042
Education	.036	.090*
ΔR^2	.177	.186
<i>Block 2: Political ideology</i>		
Political ideology	.061	.094*
ΔR^2	.022	.033
<i>Block 3: Selective exposure and polarization</i>		
Like-minded exposure	.257***	.232***
Political polarization	-.026	-.057
ΔR^2	.205	.201
<i>Block 4: Political participations</i>		
Social media political participation	.210**	.221***
Offline political participation	.217***	.221***
ΔR^2	.093	.101
<i>Total Adjusted ΔR^2</i>	.497	.521
N	386	386

DISCUSSION

Using a U.S. national panel survey with 386 SNS users, this study examined the influence of political ideology, political polarization, likeminded exposure to political opinion, social media and offline political participation toward relationship dissolution on SNS -- hiding and unfriending. Based on the results from two hierarchical linear regressions, this study found several significant predictors for both dissociative behaviors and offered different dynamics of predicting hiding and unfriending.

Unfriending and hiding have different dynamics

Hiding and unfriending did not share all predictors. While age, likeminded exposure, social media political participation, and offline political participation were common predictors for both dissociative behaviors, they did not share some other predictors. For example, the more educated an individual was, the more likely s/he

was to unfriend others but not hiding others; The more liberal an individual was, the more likely s/he was to unfriend their contacts, but there was no difference in hiding others among conservatives and liberals. While hiding and unfriending are closely correlated with each other, they did not exhibit the exact same results in the OLS linear regression models. This can be explained that the consequences between unfriending and hiding have fundamental differences -- unfriending is a more open public relationship dissociative behavior and is subjected to a higher opportunity cost than hiding.

Liberals far more likely to unfriend opposing views

Based on SIT, this study found that liberals are more prone to unfriending others on SNS, which is consistent with the results from previous studies (Colleoni et al., 2014; Fix, 2013; Rainie & Smith, 2012). The findings differ from the general stereotype of liberals, who are known as much more open-minded than conservatives (Jost et al., 2003). However, Gervais (2015) found that liberals tend to express “their aversion to disagreeable incivility by reprimanding the uncivil perpetrator” while conservatives are more likely to “use incivility when exposed to the uncivil messages,” but they did not become emotionally angrier and did not critique the original messenger (p. 177). Gervais’ study can offer a plausible explanation that liberals tend to resolve their anger by unfriending. Also, Colleoni et al. (2014) found that liberal networks on Twitter were more homogeneous than conservative ones. Liberals may enact in the relationship dissociative behaviors to achieve a homogeneous sphere.

Unfriending occurs more often in homogeneous circumstances

Additionally, this study found that SNS users who reported a higher exposure to politically likeminded contents on their newsfeeds were likely to hide and unfriend others. This finding supported the idea of echo chambers on SNS, arguing a tendency of individuals to maintain homogeneous groups and affiliate

with others who share similar political views by pruning out others who possess different political views. Selective exposure theory can justify this phenomenon: individuals are more likely to consume information sources that are supportive of their opinions (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2010). Based on SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the current study found that individuals perceived the political differences between in-group (politically homogeneous users) and out-group (politically cross-cutting others) and tried to maximize such differences. People psychologically prefer to be exposed to arguments that support their position (Stroud, 2010), which helps strengthen their beliefs and avoid cognitive conflicts. Therefore, they unfriend and hide cross-cutting information to maintain cognitive parity. Another possible explanation is that when an individual self-segregates within his/her politically homogeneous group, the more noticeable opposing views in their SNS feeds become, which force them to trim out cross-cutting views more often to reduce the chance of being confronted by a conflict.

Political polarization does not directly represent dissociative behavior

One finding from this study was that political polarization did not predict both dissociative behaviors. Several explanations can be used to justify why political polarization does not lead to unfriending and hiding. First of all, even though unfriending and hiding can be specific political acts, posting offensive and uncivil comments (NM Incite, 2011) in SNS or offline interactions, such as unpleasant behaviors (Sibona & Walczak, 2011) can also be resolutions to show disagreement. There is a high possibility that polarized individuals enjoy arguing and being involved in constant conflict. So, active communications between politically polarized individuals can be expected. Another reason is that polarized individuals can be information omnivores (Massanari & Howard, 2011), who consume political information from multiple sources. Such polarized individuals may not care much about conflicting views. Indeed, polarized individuals, who usually express their

extreme stands on SNS are those people who got unfriended by others (Sibona, 2014).

Unfriending and hiding as new forms of social media political participation

Moreover, this study found that both offline and social media political participation strongly predicted dissociative behaviors, which means individuals who are more politically active on SNS are more likely to hide and unfriend others. The result is consistent with John and Dvir-Gvirsman's (2015) findings which stated unfriending is politically motivated and a new kind of political gesture. With a growing number of calls (e.g., LGBT Indonesians and anti-government protesters in Hong Kong) to unfriend those who disapprove them politically, the act of unfriending may have become a tactic to request SNS users' involvement in political affairs, which serves a similar purpose as other collaborative social movements and political actions, such as signing petitions against a specific policy or changing a profile picture to support a cause. In addition, even though offline participation requires more time and devotion when compared to social media political participation, both types of participants share similarities in motivation -- influencing government actions. Unfriending and hiding can be interpreted as a new form of social media political participation.

Young people are more likely to hide. Educated people are more likely to unfriend.

Results revealed that the younger an individual is, the more likely s/he to hide and unfriend. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Bevan et al., 2012; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Bevan et al. (2012) argued that younger people were more likely to unfriend their Facebook friends than older ones when they perceived their friends to violate their expectations (e.g., posting too many status updates, being too emotional in their updates). This study also found that a more educated an individual is, the more likely they are to unfriend. Hampton et al. (2014) found that less educated people were more likely to speak up on an

important political issue on Facebook, while those with more education were more likely to be silent to avoid unnecessary conflicts. Hence, more educated people may choose to unfriend others to avoid conflicts on SNS.

Limitations and future studies

This study calls for future investigation that will address some limitations. First, this research only measured the frequency of unfriending and hiding on SNS due to the encountering of opposing political views and did not ask about unfriending towards incivility and emotionally harmful comments, or towards a specific type of relationship. Future research should ask such questions to study unfriending in detail to address if the level of tolerance varies according to various types of relationships (e.g., close friends, work-related friends or high school friends). In addition, controlling for length of friendship can bolster the study because some selection bias can happen in that users did unfriend others with different political ideology in the first place. Also, complete disconnection of an online friendship may not happen just because of one single conflicting view, a longitudinal study would be useful to look at how frequent a clashing opinion needs to be considered to be too much. Moreover, this study lumped Facebook and Twitter together. Even though Facebook has several options of dissociative behaviors, unfollowing on Twitter and unfriending on Facebook cannot be directly comparable as the way to have a relationship is quite different between the two: While Twitter does not require mutual confirmation to follow others, Facebook requires this. Future studies should clarify such differences between the two SNS platforms. Finally, more emotional and psychological reasons (e.g., anger, sadness, happiness) to both types of dissolution should also be examined. More studies are needed to understand the complexity of dissociative behaviors on SNS, constructed by both political and psychological factors.

CONCLUSION

SNS seems to have become a political filtering platform that enables users to classify their friends. A major contribution of this study lies in understanding the complexities of SNS dissociative behaviors with political orientations as well as offline and social media political participation. Reasons to commit dissociative behaviors on SNS are not purely political but complex, considering the non-significant relationship between political polarization and both hiding and unfriending. Both social media and offline political participations predicted two user filtration behaviors, explaining that unfriending and hiding are new forms of social media political participation to mobilize citizens' involvement in political affairs.

Investigating the predictors of the dialectical tensions helps to test the applicability and relevance of political communication theory to SNS environments as well as provides further insights into the decay of social relations in a technologically-mediated world. In a practical sense, our findings might successfully inform the design of a variety of social-networking tools, such as people recommender systems (i.e., “People you may want to know”), to suggest “friends” to users based on their political orientations (e.g., partisan organizations they follow).

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Appendix

Table 2. One-tailed correlation table ($n = 386$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	1										
2. Gender	-.047	1									
3. Income	.012	-.072	1								
4. Education	-.037	-.020	.441***	1							
5. Political ideology	-.185***	-.078	-.049	.018	1						
6. Exposure to likeminded opinions	-.255***	.006	.098*	.099*	.153**	1					
7. Political polarization	.217***	.025	.073	.117*	.011	-.068	1				
8. Social media political participation	-.365***	-.032	.071	.082	.269***	.551***	-.183***	1			
9. Offline political participation	-.239***	-.094	.126*	.183**	.225***	.562***	-.167**	.818***	1		
10. Hiding	-.399***	-.048	.050	.094	.258***	.546***	-.156**	.629***	.604***	1	
11. Unfriending	-.409***	-.046	.053	.112*	.285***	.530***	-.200***	.641***	.616***	.895***	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$