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## Political Unfriending on Social Media: A Survey Study

**Abstract:** Political unfriending on social media in Pakistan refers to the increasing usage of social media platforms for political discourse and activism in the country. This research purpose is to explore the extent to which individuals are influenced by political differences and how this influence ultimately provokes them to unfriend other users from their social networks, this was observed under the umbrella of cognitive dissonance theory. In order to study this, a Survey was adopted as the research methodology to observe the viewpoints of individuals with respect to their political preferences on social media by employing a quantitative research design with the help of university students, a sample of 300 respondents was selected who responded over a questionnaire based upon closed-ended questions along with systematic sampling technique which is used for analyzing and interpreting data which helped us to draw a valid conclusion.

**Key Words:** Social media, Political Disagreement, Unfriending, Social Media Engagement, Social Networking Sites, Political Talk

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## Introduction

Political unfriending is a common practice among users of social media who participate in political debates having strong political ideologies. According to researchers, these political disengagements lead to social segregation and disconnection (Bode, 2016 & John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). While social networks are usually credited for offering accessibility to a wide variety of views and perspectives, additionally, they provide strong affordances for filtering plus selection that may encourage the development of

hemophilic information environments. Moreover, individuals possess the capability to establish homogeneous online networks through selective affiliation. People can easily hide those posts that they disagree with and unfriend sources that do not align with their beliefs with just a click of a button.

Studies show various reasons for political unfriending on social media platforms including weak social ties, friends of friends, and casual acquaintances being the most frequent victims of political unfriending (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). According to

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available literature, people who are exposed to stimuli that are controversial have a tendency to either avoid, ignore, or bypass unwanted content by unfriending. There is a need to examine how and to what extent social media users in Pakistan are influenced by political differences, ultimately provoking them to unfriend individuals from their social networks. The case of Pakistan is important because their social media platforms have increased exponentially. The existing political polarization is further adding to this malaise.

In this article, first, we provide a detailed description of the political unfriending, and how it is fuelled by the digital media. In the second section, the methodology is explained, followed by results and conclusion.

### Political Unfriending

The Oxford College Press claims that the term "unfriend" first appeared in 2005 and that it became the word of the year in 2009. The American Oxford Dictionary defines the term "To delete somebody from a list of friends or contacts on a social networking website".

Researchers have indicated that political unfriending has the potential to inspire people to express their political ideas for the following reasons. First of all, unfriending can encourage similarity in one's online social system because the people we connect with greatly determine the kind of content that exists in our newsfeeds. Unfriending similarly changes our information environment. Second, unfriending avoids contact with people who hold different opinions in the future, which may reduce social anxiety about potential disputes and eliminate the hesitation that individuals have about expressing their opinions. Although the option to unfriend someone has been since the early 2000s, there's only limited literature that examines the tendencies, trends, and implications of this practice. A significant amount of this research is theoretical in nature, speculating on the

purposes unfriending might serve in the diverse world of social networking sites or the problems unfriending might present when attempting to measure social influence. Facebook in particular was crucial in getting the word out and getting people involved in connecting the road issues. Social media is a trustworthy source of news (Wong & Chan, 2015). The act of unfriending is defined as a deliberate action undertaken by an individual with the intent of terminating a dyadic relationship. The connection between two individuals can be defined as a "relationship" that is demonstrated by the detachment of a bond between the pair. Research on unfriending is also often limited in that it does not particularly address political unfriending, instead focusing on unfriending motivations that are more generic (Sibona, 2014). Users have control over the information they consume and the people they choose to interact with on social media by unfriending and blocking others. The limited amount of research on political unfriending that has been done centered on the Israel-Gaza conflict in 2014 and was conducted in a highly charged environment (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015).

Unfriending was apparently most common among those who were more politically active and the more ideologically extreme. The study provides us with a wealth of information regarding political unfriending, but it is constrained by its setting of a distinct and complex conflict and its focus on Facebook in Israel, where only about half of the population uses it, compared to the 65% of adults and 76% of adults online in the United States. Political factors have been identified in studies as predictors of animosity and stress on social media. Noel & Nyhan (2011), noted that the homogeneity principle implies that there is a higher likelihood of associating with homogenous groups than with heterogeneous ones. Previous research has initiated that political unfriending is utmost shared between

individuals who lock in political discourses (Bode, L. [2016](#)).

People are more inclined to unfriend individuals by unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking them if they are frequently uncovered to hate speech with regard to particular groups and matters relating to those groups. People who choose to shut off their internet relationships with others tend to avoid discussions about community and political issues with others who hold cross-cutting dissimilar opinions but, they exhibit a tendency to extensively involve in like-minded political discourse.

Experiencing various sorts of harm and an increase in the likelihood of hate speech or acts, such as violent radicalization, are two examples of these changes. According to this perspective, hate speech isn't just a collection of statements; it's also an action that has consequences in the real world. Stages on social media provide places where people can express a range of opinions (Brundidge, [2010](#)). Each social media user has a unique set of demographic, regional, and socioeconomic characteristics, and these aspects are linked to the variability of the communication networks in social media (Brundidge, [2010](#); Takhteyev, [2012](#)). There is a load of evidence that suggests there is a relationship between using social media and being exposed to more political disagreement as represented by (Barnidge's work in 2016). Hate speech leads to conflicts and may cause people to block or unfriend users on social media (John & Agbarya, [2020](#)). Social media hate speech targeting specific groups can cause strong negative sentiments like anger and hatred. To avoid negativity, they might cut off the consumers who made hateful expressions.

### **Social Media Perspectives: Cross-cutting vs. Like-minded**

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Research has demonstrated that being around people who share like-minded opinions is

linked to increased intensities of political involvement (Dilliplane, [2011](#)). However, cross-cutting exposure (like, conversations with people who hold opposing opinions) may prevent political involvement because opposite political opinions inherently involve some conflict (Mutz, [2002, 2006](#)).

Scheufele & colleagues ([2004](#)) stated that political diversity encourages people to political involvement to acquire political knowledge through news consumption. Previous studies have emphasized the connection between social network usage and individual political and public participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., [2013](#); Kim et al., [2013](#)). Researchers have turned to studies of the use of media and indirect influences, which show that media use often has a direct impact on people's behavior and attitude therefore, like-minded exposure can make the public's political opinions stronger and extra certain which inspires their participation behaviors (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2005).

Selective exposure literature highlights that people engage more frequently with those who share their viewpoints primarily because they usually avoid the cognitive discomfort that results from facing cross-cutting viewpoints (Festinger, [1962](#)). Studies that have already been conducted on the subject have shown that people who frequently engage in cross-cutting political discourse can improve their political tolerance, learn about the political justifications of others, and reflect on their own. Sasahara and associates (2021) the creation of homogeneous communities is a major predictor of unfriending on social networks. In other words, unfriending is a person-level approach to creating hemophilic discussion contexts where people are less likely to encounter interdisciplinary points of view. According to (Granovetter, [1973](#)), delicate ties increase the likelihood that cross-cutting data will spread in social media, and solid bonds are compelling to lock in mutual activities. Cutting off or limiting powerless ties

made on social media will be less expensive because they are not self-centered connections (John & Lady, [2018](#)). Researchers from the past have perceived that weak-tie connections are the primary scenario in which unfriending occurs.

### **Selective Avoidance in Political Context**

Communication researchers have known since the middle of the 20th century that viewers only expose themselves to material and viewpoints that support their preexisting beliefs. Selective avoidance advises people to ignore, avoid, or bypass offensive content when exposed to it; this behavior is also identified as user filtration strategies or unfriending. Selective avoidance is frequently used on social media through unfriending and quieting (Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018). Numerous researchers look at the extent to which people choose favorable material or reject unfavorable information, as well as the role these decisions play in how audience members are affected by media messages. Social media websites allow the public to interact and share information with one another (Ellison & Boyd, [2013](#)). Although they don't have complete power over the material they are exposed to on social media platforms, users frequently have a choice in who they connect with. However, individuals can choose the information flow on social media to achieve their own objectives. Several prior studies have looked at the idea of hiding, muting, and unfriending content, particularly during election seasons.

Selective avoidance over social media refers to the intentional decision-making process whereby users reconfigure their acquaintances and change the nature of the information they consume through these platforms (Kim, Jones-Jang, & Kenski, [2022](#)).

Political differences frequently become enthusiastically charged and apparent on social media sites within times of political disturbance, reflecting the divergence between

opposing viewpoints in a debate around the world. According to John and Dvir-Gvirsman ([2015](#)) during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, 16% of Jewish Israeli Facebook users felt compelled to unfriend or unfollow others for political reasons. The major goal of unfriending and unfollowing is weak ties that convey selective avoidance of diverse info and perspectives on social media. Existing studies on selective exposure demonstrate that people favor material that reinforces their opinions over that that challenges their attitudes (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2008).

Prior studies related to selective avoidance have comprehensively acknowledged a possible and productive strategy to avoid such divergent beliefs or viewpoints. Political ideology or partisanship intensity may be a frequent predictor of selective media exposure. This is understandable given that conflicting viewpoints are most likely to elicit a powerful and unfavorable emotive reaction in people who have powerful political inclinations and that political opinions are more open and meaningful for them (Stroud, 2008). According to several studies (Bode, [2016](#); John & Dvir-Gvirsman, [2015](#) Yang, 2017), this connection encompasses politically inspired selective avoidance going on social media, comprising unfriending and unfollowing users on these platforms.

### **Methodology**

In the present study, we applied a survey technique to observe the prevalence of political unfriending among the students of Bahria University. For this purpose, an online survey was prepared and distributed among the 300 students of various departments. The questions were closed-ended questions which were developed with the help of the Likert scale.

## Measurement of variables

### Strength of Political Ideology

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Political ideological strength was assessed using standard measures that asked respondents to rate themselves on a 10-point scale of 1 (strong conservative) to 10 (strong liberal) in terms of "how they define themselves in terms of political ideology." The sum was taken in order to calculate the index.

### Political Debate

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We measured a respondent's political debate on social media by asking the following questions: "How frequently do you participate in political discussion on social media", "How often do you participate in political debate with people having different political viewpoints", "How frequently do you participate in political discussion with people having similar political viewpoints". The response scale ranges from 1 (never) to 10 (all the time).

### Social Media Engagement

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The social media engagement variable we developed by combining four items that indicated participants' level of news-related behavior on social media. According to previous research (Effing, van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011), social media engagement was assessed using a 10-item index, with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 10 (all the time). Respondents were asked how frequently they engaged in the following sorts of activities on social media: "Posted content about political or social issues originally posted by others ", "Created a blog post or social media update about current events or public issues ", "Disseminated a link to political stories or articles for others to read," and "Motivated others to cast votes or address the political or social issues that you consider significant."

### Political Polarization

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This concept was measured using operational definitions (Stroud, 2010; Mutz, 2002). Respondents were asked about their political affiliations with various political parties. This index was calculated using short answer text, and respondents were asked to respond appropriately. The greater the difference in scores, the more polarized the respondent.

### Uncivil Political Discussion

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This concept is put into practice by calculating the average scores obtained for responses to questions about how often survey participants engage in uncivil political discussions online (1 = never, 10 = always). The respondents were asked the following items: "How often do you face uncivil (insulting) political discussion on social media", "How frequently do you discuss politics or public affairs online with individuals who have humiliated, threatened, or intimidated you, as well as with those who do not discuss politics in civil (respectful) manner?"

### Data Analysis

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The questionnaire was distributed among the students of Bahria University to determine how and to what extent social media users in Pakistan are influenced by political differences, ultimately provoking them to unfriend individuals from their social networks. The closed-ended questions were selected with the purpose of identifying the users' behavior with respect to their political differences on social media. Around 300 respondents filled out the survey who were the students of Bahria University.

The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms as it was the most efficient way due to the shortage of time. Upon completion, the data was compiled and analyzed in the form of tables and pie charts.

### Descriptive Analysis

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Descriptive Analysis includes the table-wise arrangement of data that shows the frequency and percentage of the answers given by respondents. In accumulation to giving descriptive statistics, two-tailed Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) were drawn up to examine the relationship between all the variables.

Later in the data-collecting process, we work on many descriptive statistics to identify

differences and errors. To investigate the hypothesized hypothesis, we employed the software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) for regression analysis, ANOVA, correlations, coefficients, and descriptive statistics.

### Results

RH1. Stronger political ideology leads to frequent unfriending on social media

**Table 1**

*Relationship between Political Ideology and Unfriending.*

		Unfriending	Political ideology
Unfriending	Pearson Correlation	1	.357**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	300	300

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).*

In response, to the question regarding political ideology and unfriending. The correlation (r) value between the ideology and unfriending is .357. The hypothesis is that a person who scores higher on ideology will engage more in unfriending behavior. Researchers discovered a significant correlation of .357. The p-value is

<0.01 which means the relationship is statistically significant. Hence H1 is supported.

RH2. People who engage in political debates more on social media will frequently resort to unfriending.

**Table 2**

*Relationship between political debates and social media unfriending*

		Unfriending	Political debates
Unfriending	Pearson Correlation	1	.608**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	300	300

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

According to the Table 4, it is about the engagement and political debate on social media. The correlation (r) value is 0.608\*\* the above table depicts the level of engagement on political debates and the tendency to engage in unfriending. The p-value is <0.01

which means the relationship is statistically significant.

RH3. The more the users spend time on social media, the more they engage in unfriending practices.

**Table 3**

*Relationship between Times Spent on Social Media and Unfriending.*

		Unfriending	Time spent
Unfriending	Pearson Correlation	1	.115**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.047
	N	300	300

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The above table is about the correlation b/w time spent on social media & the unfriending practices. The correlation value is .115 which shows that the correlation is significant. The p-value is <.047 which means the relationship is statistically significant.

RH4. Users who have friends/followers who engage in political debates are more likely to practice unfriending.

**Table 4**

Relationship between peer political activities and Unfriending.

		unfriending	Peer political engagement
unfriending	Pearson Correlation	1	.594**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	300	300

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above table discussed the engagement and the hypothesis is those people who have political friends are more inclined to engage in social media as compared to those who don't.

The correlation (r) value is .594 which shows that the correlation is significant.

RH5. Uncivil political discussions will be favorably related to user-filtering on social media.

**Table 5**

Relationship between Age, Gender, and unfriending on social media

		UncivilFinal	Age	Gender
UncivilFinal	Pearson Correlation	1	.176**	-.026
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.648
	N	300	300	300

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above table describes the double correlation b/w unfriending age and gender. So first the researcher talks about age and the researcher finds out that age is negatively correlated. The correlation (r) value is 0.176\*\* which shows that the correlation is significant with double astrics it indicates that as the age grows there is more likelihood that they would indulge in unfriending practices. The p-value

is <.006 which means there is no correlation between gender and unfriending and the minus (-) shows that there is no change between males and females in terms of engaging in unfriending.

RH6. To what extent do the variables engagement in political debates, strength of political ideology, peer

political activities, age, and gender of respondents predict the practice of unfriending on SM?

**Table 6**

Regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.955	.302		3.157	.002
Political engagement	.315	.058	.328	5.457	.000
PoliticalDebateFinal	.388	.063	.378	6.130	.000
Time spent	.024	.016	.067	1.528	.128
age	.015	.013	.052	1.158	.248
IdeologyFinal	-.002	.037	-.003	-.050	.960

R .664 R Square .44. Anova p-value .001

a. Dependent variable UncivilFinal.

b. As indicated in the above table, the results revealed a model that reasonably fits the data well ( $R = 0.664$ ), explaining 44.0% of the variance in the dependent variable. After considering the number of predictors and model complexity, the adjusted R-squared value stood at 0.431, this indicates that the included independent variables accounted for approximately 43.1% of the variation in the dependent variable. The standard error of the estimate was 1.50114, reflecting the average deviation among observed and predicted values by the regression model. Notably, the predictors collectively contributed significantly to the model, as indicated by the F-statistic of 46.255 ( $p < .001$ ), signifying that the association between the independent variables we can see the R-square value is .440 which means that our independent variables which are ideology, political debates, time, age and social media engagement causes 44.0% change in the dependent variable that is unfriending practices. The change statistics highlighted a substantial increase in the R-squared value by 0.440, emphasizing the enhancement in the model's explanatory power due to the inclusion of these predictors.

Overall, this regression model presents an important association between the identified predictors and the dependent variable, suggesting their combined influence on the changeability of the outcome. So, to some extent, our research model successfully predicts the unfriending process. As the table shows the value of the R-square is 0.440 therefore, our adjusted R-value is 0.431 which means that our model has the capacity to 43.1% successfully capture the phenomenon of unfriending.

### Conclusion

Social media's influence on modern society's functioning, particularly in the realm of politics, cannot be overstated. Social media platforms have now become the most utilized platforms with respect to political discourse and the exchange of ideas, especially in countries like Pakistan where traditional media is often censored and biased. Social media also allow consumers to categorize their online connections as per their political ideologies. This study can also inform policymakers and social media companies about the challenges and opportunities of promoting healthy political dissertations on

social media, and how to address the negative consequences of political unfriending. In today's digital age, the act of political unfriending on social media platforms is extremely important. Its implications remain through various spheres of interaction, influencing social, cultural, and political dynamics. This phenomenon of social media unfriending is a two-edged sword, providing opportunities for discourse and connection while also acting as a potential catalyst for community division and polarization. In conclusion, social media users can get away from hateful and objectionable content by unfriending individuals, these activities may trap them in filter bubbles of like-minded users. This kind of prevention can make political groups more divided and separate from each other. The decision to unfriend people based on people's political beliefs reflects the complex interplay between personal beliefs, political affiliations, and the evolving nature of digital interactions, which not only changes how individuals feel but also changes how politics is discussed by everyone else, especially on social media which in turn results in unfriending. The research had an aim to explore the extent to which individuals are influenced by political differences and how this influence ultimately provokes them to unfriend other users from their social networks, this was observed under the umbrella of cognitive dissonance theory. The researcher used quantitative research to obtain opinions from a population of students belonging to Bahria University Islamabad. A sample of 300 students was selected from which the majority of 47.3% was of men or male students while 52.7% population included women or female students. Upon distribution of a survey questionnaire based upon closed-ended questions, the response included results underlying the fact that the findings of the first variable political debate show that those who engage more in political debates on social media are more likely to

indulge in unfriending on social media platforms. Another finding suggested that a person who scores higher on ideology will engage more in unfriending behavior as well as those people who are more conservative in their ideologies, and who have stronger political ideologies, are more likely to unfriend others who disagree with them. Social media engagement and political debate suggest that those who engage more in political debates on social media are more likely to indulge in unfriending on social media. Furthermore, the study findings suggest that those people who use social media more and who have a greater network of political friends they are more likely to indulge in practices of unfriending on social media. In conclusion, the study discovered that online media has an important impact on university students. It promotes political efficacy in all respondents. The chosen sample of university students who energetically use social media is more knowledgeable about government events. Respondents stated that they actively contribute to numerous real-life political activities, and discuss and share political content on the internet. The study underscores the impact of political differences and engagement on social media in shaping unfriending behaviors. Individuals with conservative ideologies tend to unfriend more in response to differing political opinions, while active engagement in political discussions significantly correlates with increased unfriending practices. Higher social media usage is also linked to increased unfriending, possibly due to exposure to diverse views leading to conflicts. Age appears to play a role in unfriending behaviors, with older individuals more likely to be involved in the practices of unfriending. However, gender and political ideology didn't show significant effects. Overall, the findings emphasize the complex interplay between political beliefs, engagement in online debates, and social media usage in influencing unfriending

behaviors, contributing to a better understanding of how digital interactions and political differences intersect in the online sphere.

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