

UNFRIENDING ON FACEBOOK: SPECIFICS, MOTIVATIONS, AND REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE UNFRIENDED

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Abstract. *The article investigates the reasons for friendship termination on social network sites, like Facebook, and analyses the aftereffects for the deleted person. Specifics in the online defriending process, like social media usage intensity, audience size, status, and self-image, are outlined. The literary review also reveals parallels between friendship termination stages in online and offline environments. Different reasons for Facebook friendship discontinuation are listed with their classification of online and offline origin. The online habitual behavior that leads to unfriending includes too frequent posting, scarce activity and too many game requests. Quality characteristics of the content like polarizing statements, obscene or attention-seeking posts are among the online reasons for defriending. Emotional outcomes that follow defriending such as being bothered, feeling sadness, surprise or rumination, are closely observed.*

Keywords: unfriending; social media; friendship termination; closeness; digital behavior.

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Facebook, a college system for meeting fellow students 18 years ago, developed to be a globally recognized factor in human communication. Its size, features, and usability exceed the purpose of creating and sustaining friendships. The platform now acts as a communicational arena for the fullest scope of topics with limited visual censure. Social network sites (SNS) or known as social media, flourished ever since, Facebook being the biggest one with over 2,9 billion active users, despite the emergence of other innovative SNSs like Instagram (1,5 billion active users) and Tik Tok (1 billion active users) (Statista, 2022).

With that size of a network, it's calculated that on average, a Facebook user would have 130 friends on his list, which sums up to about 48 billion dyadic connections in total for the whole social network (Nuttal, 2010). These connections represent a very wide range of interpersonal closeness – from online users that one has never met in person, through fake profiles to the closest and most intimate real-life connections such as family and romantic partners. However, it is believed that the majority of Facebook connections are weak (Lewis, 2009).

Social networks such as Facebook, have an interest in creating more and more connections or “friendships” on their sites. The software regularly makes friends suggestions - users on the network that one may know such as former colleagues, neighbors, or friends of friends. That is why the majority of Facebook connections are offline ones as well. Also, the mechanism for inviting someone to become a part of each other's friend lists is very simple – an “Add Friend” button right next to the profile picture of the user, while the “Unfriend” button requires more effort to find. All existing connections on Facebook, however, share a uniformity and that is the possibility for them to end suddenly, unilaterally, with a click of a button.

A cradle for new interpersonal phenomenon, Facebook gave birth to a new verb “unfriend” which was announced the word of the year 2009 by the Oxford dictionary (Reuters, 2009). It means to remove someone

from your friend list on SNS. Depending on the privacy settings, that action may result in the unfriended person no longer having access to the unfriender's information and activity. The action of unfriending is not rare - 63% of Facebook users unfriended someone in 2011, a double-digit-rising trend of 56% from 2009 (Pew Research, 2012). The unfriending rates of adolescents (12-17 y.o.) specifically are higher: 74% have removed a user from their list, 23,5% of adolescents had unfriended people more than ten times, while about 1/5th have never unfriended someone (Madden et al., 2013).

When unfriending occurs, the unfriended doesn't receive any notification or notice since no mutual consent is required. The ways for users to find about that change are implicit – by noticing they don't see content from the certain user anymore or by proactively checking their total number of friends or visiting the personal profile of the potential unfriender. Viewing Facebook unfriending as a “form of relationship sudden death accomplished via purposeful, unilateral avoidance suggests that unfriending is a specific, unique instance of relationship termination” captures the painful character of digital tie-breaking (Bevan, Pfyl, Barclay, 2012, p.1459). This manner of friendship termination deprives one of the parties of the ability to respond, react or even be aware of the relationship's demise, which circumstances create a space of secretness and opacity.

It is known that the end of a relationship has the magnitude of a highly distressing and identity-threatening event (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). In social media, there are even more prerequisites for social identity damage since many of the digital events are publicly visible.

One of the most cited reasons for friendship dissolution was purposeful avoidance, which involves reducing or ceasing communication without contacting the friend. Also, it is known that computer-mediated romantic dissolution was more likely to occur asynchronously (see Bevan et al., 2012)

Scholars have shown that adults' own decision to unfriend someone on Facebook is

mostly taken by the individual receiving and accepting the friend request (Verswijvel et al., 2018). The evidence that relationship termination can be a major life stressor (Tashiro et al., 2006) is fortified by the fact that third-party software exists that sends notifications when someone is defriended on Facebook. Since removing someone from one's friend list on SNS can have painful consequences, users also perform a more subtle way to unnoticeably cut off someone's activity – through un-following or through the recently introduced button "Take a break" that hides the person's posts for a certain period of time. Those options elegantly allow the digital connection to remain, while the information for the problematic party's content is hidden from the sight of the other. Choosing to unfriend someone (that is permanently deleting them from one's network) suggests that the individual wishes to declare publicly to others that the relationship is over, to communicate something to the partner, or otherwise attempt to make a point to others in their social network (Sibona, 2014).

Why someone wouldn't like to lose Facebook friends may also have a relation to their social status and image. There is an estimated number of Facebook friends (about 302) for optimal social attractiveness and thus proactively unfriending or being unfriended can have a negative impact on someone's social and physical attractiveness (Sibona, 2014). Furthermore, it's believed that some Facebook users are controlling the number of friendship requests received to be higher than the number of friends requests they sent as an indicator of status (Lewis, 2009).

It's not surprising that the initiator of the friendship request tends to have lower status than the recipient for online and offline friendships alike (Sibona, 2014).

REASONS FOR UNFRIENDING ON SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

The motivation for terminating the friendship with someone on social media can vary on several axes – according to the level of closeness – for example, whether the other person

is an online-met-stranger or a personal acquaintance; according to the digital behavior on site – for example, the frequency and the emotional depth of the published content; according to the offline behavior or a combination of those factors.

Popular reasons for deleting a Facebook friendship because of online behavior are frequent or unimportant content, polarizing posts (such as politics, homosexuality, and gender), inappropriate content (such as obscene or insulting posts), and everyday life (such as eating or other expected or repeated actions), sending too many game requests or little to no activity on the site (Gashi and Knautz 2016; Sibona and Walczak 2011). The top offline reasons for terminating the relationship on Facebook are disliked behavior (e.g. betraying) and changes in the relationship in the offline world like alienation. Other reasons for unfriending on Facebook, deriving from physical interactions are relocations, quarrels, incompatible friends, or the end of a romantic relationship (Gashi and Knautz 2016; Sibona and Walczak 2011). An interesting nuance is that those who received the friend request were more likely to initiate the termination of the online friendship in comparison to the ones who sent the invitation (Sibona and Walczak, 2011). The same authors found out that 55% of people unfriended someone for their online posting behavior, while twice less the number (28%) unfriended someone for their offline behavior and 17% were unsure.

Verswijvel proposed a classification for online and offline reasons (see Table 1), where they differentiated between specific online or offline reasons, and reasons that could possibly occur both online and offline (e.g., quarrels and romantic issues) (Verswijvel et al., 2018).

The same authors found out that 214 out of 419 adolescents (51.1%) provided exclusively online reasons for their unfriending decision, while 125 adolescents (29.8%) drew only offline reasons for ending a digital friendship, while the smallest share of the tested subjects (19.1%) provided a combination of both online and offline reasons explaining their unfriending. This data shows

Table 1
Classification of reasons for unfriending

	Online reasons	Offline reasons
Specific online or offline reasons	Too many posts Uninteresting posts (unimportant posts or being non-active) Inappropriate or polarizing posts Gaining attention (e.g., game requests)	Personality Dislike behavior Alcohol and drug abuse
Reasons that can both occur online and offline	Romantic relationship Quarrels Alienation Incompatible friends Replacing friends or other interests	Romantic relationship Quarrels Relocation or alienation Incompatible friends Replacing friends or other interests

that online friendships can exist independently in the digital medium with triggers and motivation for utter relationship decisions (like friendship termination), drawn entirely from digital behavior. Half of the adolescents are ready to part with an online friendship for reasons like too frequent posting or polarizing content. However, there is no data on how this termination affects the offline relationships between the two.

Verswijvel and colleagues found out that indeed, polarizing content (religion or politics) that was insulting in some way, was the number one reason (20.1%) for unfriending among Flemish adolescents. Lack of excitement about the post was another frequent reason for that action - uninteresting posts was the unfriending reason for 17.4% of the tested subjects. Adolescents soon unfriended people when they posted too much (10.2%), or when they sought too much attention, bragged, or stalked (16%) (Verswijvel et al., 2018). An interesting nuance from the same study is that Flemish young people were irritated by misuse of the language or spelling mistakes which led to unfriending on Facebook for 10.5% of the group.

Some of the not-so-popular online reasons for unfriending among adolescents are the replacement of friendships or interests (3.7%), incompatible friends/family (2.7%), romantic issues (2.4%), or quarrels (2%) (Verswijvel et al., 2018).

Alienation, mean and arrogant, or irritating live behavior are the main offline reasons for Flemish adolescents for deleting somebody on Facebook (Verswijvel et al., 2018). Alienation was cited as both online and offline reason for friendship termination which represents the essential place of closeness for friendship preservation. This is confirmed by research from almost 30 years ago, investigating the reasons for friendship dissolution in adolescents. The results indicated that physical separation, friend substitution, dislike behavior, romantic relationship endings, and competing interests were the main reasons why friendships ended before the dawn of the Internet. A parallel can easily be drawn between the pre-social media data and the one from contemporary studies (Rose, 1984; Sibona and Walczak 2011; Verswijvel et al., 2018).

An in-depth recent study uncovered additional factors and interdependencies in adolescents' unfriending behavior. The survey data analysis showed that the social norm (normative expectations of important others) and attitude were related to behavioral intention, which in turn was related to adolescents' unfriending behavior. Perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy) was associated with adolescents' unfriending behavior. However, no significant relation was found between adolescents' number of friends and their attitude (positive or negative) toward unfriending (Verswijvel et al., 2019).

Among some of the reasons and prerequisites listed above, we can see a protective motive for deleting the connection. That is self-protection from digital insults or harassment (Justice, 2016). Scholars' academic efforts uncover the factors that affect unfriending related to those that make the unfriending decision. The motivations for digital decision-making are well researched, however the effects of the quoted digital experience on the offline relationships of people are scarcely investigated.

EFFECTS FOR THE UNFRIENDED

Scholars have investigated both the emotional and cognitive reactions of the deleted party after friendship termination on SNS. The pallet of emotions is predominantly negative - feeling depressed, frustrated, worried, shocked, experiencing disbelief, denial, loneliness, anger and bitterness, guilt, sadness, and depression, (Bevan, 2012, 2014; Hatfield, 1995; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006). Based on this long list of serious emotional conditions, unfriending is perceived as a threatening and harsh act toward the unfriended parties (Verswijvel et al., 2018). These findings aren't surprising, having in mind that "In the outer world, there is an increasing emphasis on the value of the self, the sense of being unique...All of this is achieved in the context of interpersonal relationships" (Bakracheva & Bakalova, 2011, p. 64). Thus, deleting a digital relationship directly impacts the personal identity and sense of self of the unfriended individual.

Evidently, the digital loss is experienced in a very similar way to the offline relationship lost in terms of emotional hue. This creates a potential threat to the wellbeing of people on SNS who can be unfriended at any time, without a warning, suddenly and unilaterally. An obvious control disbalance is created in relationship termination on the SNSs, while in offline situations usually some hints and opportunities for counter reaction are provided. Furthermore, the manner of discontinuing the relationship on SNSs didn't exist before the emergence of the networks themselves. That means people are offered a new way of

obliterating someone without the weight or responsibility of explaining, or even facing the other person. It is an act of sudden and immediate erasion of someone which equivalent in the real life is death. As people are getting used to the immediacy of digital communication, it needs to be taken into consideration that some processes from offline interactions between people also take place in purely digital scenarios.

Similarly, Duck developed a four-phase process model for relationship dissolution that is applicable to online conditions as well (Duck, 1982). The intrapsychic phase is the first phase of dissolution where a person revisits the relationship and considers its pros and cons. The dyadic phase is where the two sides have a conversation about the difficulties in the relationship in order to resolve any issues. This is a crucial stage for relationship restoration. The third phase is the social phase which begins when the two sides couldn't bring resolution in the previous phase and begin to express their dissatisfaction with their bond with others. In this phase, the others who represent the social network of the dyad start providing advice that may help maintain the relationship or speed up the breakup. The final phase, grave dressing, occurs when the two people speak openly about the end of the relationship and announce that it is over. That phase comes from the need for official closure of the past relationship and drawing a lesson and moral that can be used as an example or advice for others (Sibona, 2014).

Sibona used that theoretical formulation for their own research where they investigated network vigilance, dyadic discussion about unfriending, grave-dressing, peak tie strength of the connection, and personal responsibility to predict unfriending-related affect on Facebook. The constructs represent both internal motivations for affect and dyadic motivations (Sibona, 2014). Results showed that respondents who engaged in either phase of relationship termination, experienced less negative emotion, after the unfriending, suggesting that each represents a successful mechanism for helping to cope with the end of a relationship.

Those who discussed problems within the dyad, prior to the unfriending, registered less surprise after the unfriending took place. The author suggested that in that case, the person anticipated the termination. The same study shows that respondents who discussed the end of the relationship with others, after the digital friendship was over, tended to feel less sad about being unfriended, and more amused (Sibona, 2014).

Looking at the other constructs, it turned out that peak tie strength, where the bigger closeness that the unfriender felt to the other at the height of their relationship, was the strongest predictor for the intensity of emotional reaction following the unfriending. This predictor was responsible for experiencing sadness, surprise and feeling bothered, where all three states increased with the as peak closeness levels. Furthermore, participants found themselves less amused at having been unfriended by those whom they once considered close (Sibona, 2014). The results continue - network vigilance, or the more often a person checks their friend list, the more bothered, sad, and surprised they feel, and the less amused they are after unfriending. Vigilance is typical for self-regulatory style that ensures the absence of negative outcomes for the individual. Thus, regularly checking the Facebook friend list enables the person to control and be aware of unnoticed friendship terminations (Sibona, 2014).

Unfriending, an event with potential serious concerning outcomes has negative cognitive effects as well. Rumination is a persistent and continuous thinking process toward a given object which state derives as a reaction to an unpleasant situation (Gold & Wegner, 1995). Rumination is an unintentional and dominating cognitive activity that is hard to eradicate (Martin & Tesser, 1996). It has also been observed as a specific response to a number of negative relational interactions, including conflict, jealousy, and transgression (Bevan et al., 2012)

A study of Bevan, Pfyl and Barclay in the US, showed that rumination and negative emotions that are experienced upon being unfriended on Facebook are correlated.

Furthermore, the Facebook user intensity is a significant predictor of rumination and negative emotion after an unfriending event on that social media (Bevan et al., 2012). Facebook intensity represents the emotional investment that the user places on their online friendship, therefore, the bigger the intensity the greater rumination and negative emotion one experiences upon friend loss on Facebook.

People who were unfriended by a close partner experienced more rumination than those unfriended by a distant partner. This finding suggests that in either case people experience heavy thoughts to a different degree. An interesting nuance is that the individuals who knew who unfriended them experienced more rumination than those who did not know who unfriended them (Bevan et al., 2012), which indicates the series of questions, or lingering, that arise after the termination is a recognized act of a specific acquaintance.

Looking at the types of reasons for Facebook unfriending we know that users who perceived being unfriended for online reasons experienced significantly more rumination than those who believed they were unfriended because they weren't staying in touch or weren't too close with the other person (Bevan et al., 2012).

The authors revealed that the one who initiated the friend request mattered for the emotional interplay after unfriending on Facebook. They proved more rumination was experienced both when the individual initiated the request and when the individual did not remember who initiated it compared with when the other person initiated the request (Bevan et al., 2012). This is not surprising, having in mind that the unfriended person would be left with a number of questions about this one-sided and sudden event if they had information and formed expectations about the relationship with the other person. It is difficult to create so dominant and unexpected situation when ending a relationship with another in an offline scenario. The deprivation of opportunity to react along with the silence and unilateral actions can put the abandoned individual into informational deficit and emotional confusion.

CONCLUSION

Even though the pool of academic research about relationship termination on social media is still relatively small and it requires constant updating because of the ongoing development of SNSs, a few implications could be done. First, there is an established parallel between online and offline friendship stages and their effects on relationship dissolution. Regardless of the different media that offers possibilities for relationship deletion that is hard to be achieved offline, and the specific manner of digital friendship termination, we can argue that the outcomes for the abandoned party aren't less serious than in real life setting. This means that other cognitive connections can be investigated between digital and non-digital events like information perception, attitude formation, emotion development (e.g. falling in love, liking or disliking someone). It also opens a field for research on whether the emotional and cognitive processes behind unfriending for the proactive party differ from real-life interactions, given that social media offers great possibilities for hiding, avoiding, and managing the informational input.

The second implication is that social identity and the need for a positive self-image play a role in both digital relationships decision-making and the effects after the friendship termination considering that SNSs are first and foremost public and despite all the privacy settings that they offer, this is not surprising that the users are exposed to a much larger multitude of people than they are in a regular offline setting. Similarly, whether social media events would weigh more and have higher perceived importance for the individuals because of the wider publicity, is still an open area for research.

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