



Intentions to hide and unfriend Facebook connections based on perceptions of sender attractiveness and status updates



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ABSTRACT

We investigated how intentions to hide and unfriend Facebook contacts were linked to perceived sender attractiveness and face-threatening messages (FTAs). Intention to hide was higher than intention to unfriend contacts, implying that unfriending is harsher. Low social attractiveness predicted hiding and unfriending intentions, but low physical attractiveness was only linked to hiding. Disrespectful messages were linked to hiding contacts, while updates that made the receiver look bad were linked to unfriending. FTAs also mediated the influence of social and physical attractiveness on hiding and unfriending contacts. Overall, managing online relationships relied on independent and interdependent perceptual and behavioral processes.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) provide remarkable opportunities to self-express, rekindle friendships, and articulate personal connections (boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, the ways in which users ignore the updates (i.e., hiding a sender) or remove contacts (i.e., unfriending) have not been clarified. Moreover, the relational factors (e.g., language use, perceptions of senders) at the base of terminating online relationships have not been fully explored (Walther, 2004).

Recent research has investigated the factors linked to unfriending Facebook connections. For instance, 63% of SNS users have removed people from their friends list. Women and young adults aged 18–29 are more likely to unfriend contacts than older users (Madden, 2012). Political leanings also play a role in the unfriending process – up to 10% of SNS users report unfriending someone for posting too frequently about political topics (Madden, 2012). Additionally, Bevan, Pfyl, and Barclay (2012) examined the emotional and cognitive outcomes associated with unfriending behavior from the perspective of the individual who was unfriended.

Though these studies provide some clues about unfriending, it is not yet clear what factors are linked to this event. What features from senders affect the likelihood of unfriending or hiding SNS contacts? How does online communication (e.g., FB status updates) relate to hiding and unfriending contacts? There is a lack of studies detailing how relational factors such as perceptions of senders and online messages relate to disaffection among SNS users.

Similar to past research (e.g., Bevan et al., 2012), we conceptualize unfriending and hiding behavior as a relational termination event. In theories of relational dissolution, individuals often avoid or elude contact and dissolve their relationships with undesirable partners, which signals the end of the bond (Knapp, 1984; Vangelisti, 2002). In order to examine people's intentions to hide and unfriend online contacts, this study reviews how individuals avoid and terminate interpersonal relations (e.g., avoidance, rejection). This study also reviews research showing how social and physical attractiveness are two of the most influential factors in interpersonal relationships (McCroskey & McCain, 1974), and thus should also relate to intentions to manage SNS contacts. Additionally, this research draws from politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to understand how SNS messages' face threatening qualities (e.g., rude) can affect receivers' intention to hide or unfriend SNS contacts. Ultimately, studies on the effects of both social (Morry, 2005) and physical (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) attractiveness, as well as the damaging effects of face threatening messages (Cupach & Carson, 2002) suggest a mediating relationship, whereby attractiveness affects perceptions of face threatening messages, which in turn influence message receivers' intentions to unfriend or hide online contacts. Thus, we examine how senders' social and physical attractiveness mediates the interpretation of face threatening messages, which in turn affects intentions to hide and unfriend SNS contacts.

Because relational termination events are notoriously hard to record and analyze (Hopper & Drummond, 1990), this research examines SNS users' intentions to hide and unfriend online contacts. This approach is similar to that of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985), which proposes that *behavioral intention*

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is a reliable though somewhat imperfect measure of future behavior. Behavioral intention is defined as people's readiness to perform a given behavior (Ajzen, 2002). According to this framework, researchers can create customized intention scales in order to estimate whether individuals will engage in a given behavior (Ajzen, 2002). This approach assumes that, if individuals have positive intentions and attitudes toward the behavior, then they will be more likely to display the actual behavior. Using the steps outlined by Ajzen (2002), we created behavioral intention scales to measure hiding and unfriending intentions FB "friends." The following section outlines how behavioral intention to hide and unfriend FB contacts might be linked to traditional relational termination and rejection processes.

2. Intention to hide and unfriend face-threatening SNS contacts

Intentions to hide and unfriend are likely rooted in avoidance, rejection, and relational termination processes. Rejection refers to situations in which romantic partners, friends, or family members drift away, or when coworkers snub each other, etc. (Leary, 2001). Rejection belongs to a family of concepts representing excluding partners (Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005). People may undergo stages of relational dissolution such as the avoiding stage, in which partners elude contact and the terminating stage, which signals the end of the bond (Knapp, 1984; Vangelisti, 2002).

To hide or ignore a Facebook connection, users need to search for the contact and click on a button to opt out from receiving updates from a target (Facebook, 2012a; Facebook, 2012b). Consider also that, to unfriend SNS contacts, users need to edit their friend list and click a button to remove the contact (Facebook, 2012a; Facebook, 2012b). Thus, we hypothesize that hiding and unfriending SNS contacts is akin to avoiding topics or connections because, after clicking a button, users shun exposure to information about individuals (e.g., updates from high-school friends, coworkers, etc.).

Though both hiding and unfriending imply rejecting a connection, unfriending is more synonymous to terminating a relationship than hiding. Although hidden contacts retain access to each other's information, unfriended contacts can no longer access each other's profiles. Unfriended users become de facto online strangers. Second, 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.

These technical features have theoretical implications because, taken together, they imply that unfriending is a distinct relational termination behavior. For example, offline relationships such as friendships often do not officially terminate but, instead, partners simply cease to interact (Knapp, 1984). Contrary to this, SNS users have visual evidence that they have been unfriended. Thus, this study assumes that unfriending is more threatening to both parties' self-concept (i.e., *face*) than hiding. Building on Goffman's (1959) insights, unfrienders might appear as stuck-up because they take the effort to show that they are not interested in having an online connection anymore. Also, unfriended connections may feel hurt or defensive after deletion. This supposition is congruent with the way in which IM users manage their contact lists. IM users reported tensions when managing their contacts with blocking and deleting functions and, moreover, deleting contacts was used infrequently and reserved only for people that IM users truly wanted to avoid (Birnholtz, 2010). If unfriending is a more extreme relational termination strategy, it follows that when receiving a face-threatening SNS message, users' intention to hide the sender should be higher than their intention to unfriend. Thus:

H1. Users will intend to hide rather unfriend senders of face-threatening status updates.

2.1. Interpersonal perceptions and intentions to hide and unfriend SNS contacts

In regards to identifying the more central perceptions linked to intentions to hide and unfriend, although there are many factors to consider, physical and social attractiveness play a particularly salient and influential role in initial encounters (McCroskey & McCain, 1974) and in computer-mediated interactions (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008).

Consider that people self-disclose more to those who they find more physically attractive (Brundage, Derlega, & Cash, 1976). In general, individuals believe that they will be seen more favorably if they associate with more attractive partners (Sigall & Landy, 1973). Additionally, people often use physical appearance as an indicator of partner's traits (Dion et al., 1972). Physical attractiveness also sets in motion *halo effects* in which beliefs are transferred from one realm (e.g., physical attractiveness) to another (e.g., increased perceptions of competence, etc.) (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). Observers are also more likely to transfer the positive attributions stemming from a physically attractive individual onto another person when the two individuals are linked as friends (Melamed & Moss, 1975). Halo effects may occur in computer-mediated interactions. As in Melamed and Moss' (1975) study, FB profile owners were rated as more physically attractive when 'friends' who posted on their profile were good-looking (Walther et al., 2008). Clearly, there is a benefit to having nice-looking friends. This will likely offset intentions to hide and unfriend more physically attractive contacts.

In addition, social attractiveness refers to perceptions of partner's friendliness, whether they fit into one's circle of friends, and the overall quality of social interaction (Huston & Levinger, 1978; McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Social attractiveness is strongly associated with perceived and actual similarities in attitudes and background (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2005). This is congruent with the *similarity-attractiveness principle*, which states that perceptions of similarity correlate positively with attraction between partners (Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986). In addition, Interaction Appearance Theory proposes that effective social interactions (e.g., social attractiveness) can lead to increased perceptions of physical attractiveness and pursuing a romantic relationship, even when initial levels of physical attractiveness were low (Albada, Knapp, & Theune, 2002). In sum, social attractiveness is a central component of interpersonal relations, and it is linked to agreeable interactions and perceived similarity (Huston & Levinger, 1978; McCroskey et al., 2005).

In social media contexts, senders' social attractiveness leads to increased self-disclosure and interdependence with SNS contacts (Craig, Igiel, Wright, Cunningham, & Ploeger, 2007). In addition, Sheldon (2009) found that social attractiveness impacts the information seeking strategies deployed in online interpersonal processes (see Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002). Overall, socially attractive individuals are more esteemed, thus:

H2. Physical and social attractiveness will be negatively associated with receivers' (a) intention to hide and (b) intention to unfriend senders of face-threatening SNS updates.

3. Status updates as face-threatening acts linked to hiding and unfriending SNS contacts

In general, individuals are expected to show self-respect and be considerate toward others (Goffman, 1967). Doing so requires skill, as there are several behaviors that may threaten self and partner's face (Goffman, 1967). Communicators may threaten their own face when committing a gaffe or an unintentional breach in manners

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