

Navigating Political Disagreement on Social Media: How Affective Responses and Belonging Influence Unfollowing and Unfriending

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Abstract

While recent research has demonstrated how exposure to cross-cutting political opinions intensifies politically motivated disconnectivity on social media, there has been a notable gap in examining the influence of emotions and psychological traits in this process. Guided by the theories of selective avoidance and affective intelligence, our study employed a survey through Qualtrics panel drawn from a population-matching sample ($N = 498$) of the US population to investigate how perceived political disagreement on social media affects decisions to unfollow and unfriend others through the induction of affective responses (e.g., anger, anxiety) and the role of psychological trait—need to belong. Controlling for demographics and political ideology, our mediation analysis revealed that perceived political disagreement was significantly related to anger, which was further positively associated with both unfollowing and unfriending on social media. Perceived political disagreement was also related to anxiety while anxiety was positively associated with individuals’ behaviors of unfollowing and unfriending. Furthermore, results showed that the need to belong played a significant role in moderating the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending. When perceiving the same level of political disagreement, individuals with a higher need to belong were less likely to unfriend others on social media, compared to those with a lower need to belong. However, the need to belong did not exert a significant impact on how perceived political disagreement influenced unfollowing behavior. This study contributes to understanding the nuanced dynamics of disconnectivity on social media, particularly in navigating political disagreements.

Keywords

affective responses; anger; anxiety; disconnectivity; need to belong; political disagreement; social media; unfollowing; unfriending

1. Introduction

Social media has evolved into a platform where individuals express their political viewpoints (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Imagine yourself scrolling through your social media feed, encountering a post from a friend with an opposing political opinion. Research found that exposure to divergent political opinions increases the tendency towards politically motivated disconnectivity on social media platforms (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; John & Gal, 2018; Neubaum et al., 2021). For example, during the 2014 Israel–Gaza conflict, Jewish Israeli Facebook users unfriended others to prevent certain content from appearing in their online public spheres (John & Gal, 2018). Similarly, Palestinians were found to unfriend Jewish Israeli citizens as a form of resistance against inequality. In general, individuals frequently choose to avoid dissenting opinions or disengage from content that challenges their own beliefs on social media (Neubaum et al., 2021). A recent Pew Research survey revealed that one in six Americans have employed the strategy of blocking others on social media to curtail exposure to religious content they find disagreeable (Diamant, 2023). The act of disconnecting from individuals with differing political opinions, whether by unfriending, unfollowing, or blocking, is increasingly common as a means of sidestepping the discomfort of encountering incongruent viewpoints. Notably, a national survey found that 61% of respondents admitted to unfriending, unfollowing, or blocking someone on social media due to political disagreements (posts or comments; Goodwin, 2020).

Research has investigated the circumstances and motivations behind politically driven avoidance actions on social media, such as unfollowing and unfriending (Barnidge et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Zhu, 2023; Zhu & Skoric, 2022). Avoidance of political disagreement emerged as a primary reason for unfriending individuals on social media platforms (Bode, 2016; Neubaum et al., 2021; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018; Yang et al., 2017). This phenomenon aligns with selective avoidance theory, wherein individuals favor like-minded opinions while avoiding information against their pre-existing viewpoints to evade cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2010). Unfollowing and unfriending on social media to sidestep encountering political disagreement are manifestations of selective avoidance behaviors (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018). It's worth noting the distinction between unfollowing and unfriending in terms of the degree of disconnection from friends on social media. Unfriending entails a complete severance of the online relationship, whereas unfollowing involves opting not to view others' content without cutting off the relationship entirely. We aim to examine the variances in factors precipitating unfollowing and unfriending behaviors.

While recent studies have elucidated how exposure to cross-cutting political opinions prompts individuals to avoid others on social media (e.g., Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), there exists a notable gap in exploring the role of emotions and psychological traits in this process. Affective intelligence theory suggests that individuals rely on emotions like anger, anxiety (or fear), and enthusiasm to regulate their attention, engagement, and comprehension of the political world (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). For example, research indicates that anger diminishes exposure to news that contradicts one's prior attitudes (Song, 2017), while anxiety leads individuals to avoid counterattitudinal views when individuals find such information not useful for them (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009). Since anger often drives people to directly avoid opposing opinions, while anxiety prompts them to avoid counter-attitudinal information they deem unhelpful, anger is likely to result in unfriending more than unfollowing. Conversely, anxiety may lead to a preference for unfollowing rather than unfriending. Furthermore, psychological traits such as the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) have been utilized to explain how individuals avoid opposing opinions

from weaker ties but not strong ties on social media (Pennington & Palagi, 2023). Cognitive attributes, such as the need to belong, could play a crucial role in bridging political divides. However, limited research investigates how emotions and psychological traits specifically influence unfollowing and unfriending behaviors for political reasons on social media.

More importantly, as political communication in the US faces numerous challenges—such as the spread of misinformation, the reinforcement of echo chambers by social media, the crisis of political deliberation, and rising political anger and outrage (e.g., Garrett et al., 2013; Guess et al., 2023)—it is crucial to understand how emotions like anger and anxiety, along with individual differences in the need to belong, influence avoidance behaviors on social media. Such insights are essential for explaining political information processing and guiding future political communication strategies. To address this research gap, drawing on both selective avoidance theory and affective intelligence theory, we conducted a national population-matching survey to explore how perceived political disagreement on social media influences decisions to unfollow and unfriend others, considering the elicitation of emotional responses and the psychological trait of the need to belong. Given the significant role of social media as a primary source of political news, avoiding individuals with incongruent political views on these platforms may exacerbate partisan divides and perpetuate the validation of information, whether accurate or not (Guess et al., 2023). Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying unfollowing and unfriending behaviors on social media contributes to a deeper comprehension of their direct and indirect impacts on political engagement (Zhu & Skoric, 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Politically Motivated Disconnectivity on Social Media

Social media serves as a crucial information source for Americans, with half of US adults obtaining news from these platforms at least occasionally (Pew Research Center, 2023). Moreover, social media has become a platform where individuals express and disseminate political opinions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Consequently, individuals may find themselves confronted with others' comments on political matters that they disagree with on social media (Bode, 2016). Perceived political disagreement encompasses encountering political opinions or viewpoints on social media that individuals find disagreeing (Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017). The perceived intensity of political disagreement escalates with the frequency of exposure to such disagreement on social media (Yang et al., 2017). Individuals may feel offended by such political disagreement on social media and opt to engage in political debates with their peers or choose to ignore or avoid the content altogether (Bode, 2016; Neubaum et al., 2021).

Avoiding individuals with opposing political opinions has become a prevalent strategy to mitigate the discomfort of perceived political disagreement. Previous research has identified various forms of politically motivated disengagement, including unfollowing, unfriending, blocking, hiding, muting, and filtering (e.g., Baysha, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). Among these, unfriending and unfollowing are the most prevalent types (Baysha, 2020; Zhu, 2023). Scholars have viewed unfriending as a deliberate decision to terminate a dyadic relationship, resulting in the removal of the connection between the two parties in a political everyday life (Sibona, 2014) as well as in politically motivated disconnective actions (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Zhu et al. (2017) were the first to define unfriending (dissolving social ties) and unfollowing (removing or hiding content) as forms of selective avoidance within political movements.

Selective avoidance involves actively blocking sources of dissent and shielding oneself from information that might induce cognitive dissonance by filtering out opposing views and reducing connections that convey them (Zhu et al., 2017).

Unfollowing is a gentler approach wherein individuals opt to avoid seeing posts from others without severing the connection altogether (Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). However, unfriending represents a complete cessation of the relationship on social media, and unfollowing maintains the connection while limiting exposure to content. Although previous research has often grouped unfriending and unfollowing together (e.g., Bode, 2016), we posit that these two behaviors carry distinct consequences and thus warrant separate examinations. Examining unfriending and unfollowing is important both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, these actions represent distinct forms of selective avoidance behavior (Barnidge et al., 2023). They differ in how much individuals disassociate from their social network, involving varying levels of cost-benefit analysis and leading to different social consequences, such as the potential removal of social connections. Practically, individuals may use different avoidance strategies to reduce perceived political disagreement on social media, each of which carries unique psychological and social implications.

2.2. Political Disagreement and Selective Avoidance

Encountering information that contradicts their beliefs often triggers mental discomfort in individuals, leading them to seek out like-minded information or avoid exposure to incongruent viewpoints to mitigate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2008, 2010). Selective avoidance and selective exposure are distinct processes; while selective exposure doesn't necessarily preclude exposure to opposing opinions, selective avoidance constitutes a defensive strategy aimed at avoiding such exposure altogether (Garrett et al., 2013; Garrett & Stroud, 2014). The theory of selective avoidance has been used in explaining the rationale and psychological mechanisms behind avoidance behaviors on social media (Barnidge et al., 2023; Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018). For example, individuals with strong opinions on social issues have been observed actively avoiding disagreement by unfriending others on social media (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Selective avoidance behaviors like unfriending and unfollowing are often employed as means to filter content and individuals who challenge their existing beliefs within their social networks (John & Gal, 2018).

Furthermore, social media predominantly functions as an interpersonal platform, facilitating connections and the sharing of experiences among individuals (Barnidge et al., 2023; John & Gal, 2018). Consequently, when individuals choose to unfollow or unfriend someone on social media, they engage in a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the discomfort or cognitive dissonance induced by encountering opposing views against any benefits derived from maintaining social contact with that user. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the mechanisms of selective avoidance on social media and how perceived disagreement within these platforms predicts avoidance behaviors with varying degrees of disconnection, both similarly and disparately.

Previous studies have indicated that the degree of perceived political disagreement on social media significantly predicts unfriending and unfollowing behaviors (Bode, 2016). Unfriending or unfollowing individuals for political reasons has been observed across various cultural contexts and countries, including Western countries, Asia, and Europe (Baysha, 2020; Lin et al., 2023; Kozman et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2017). Selective avoidance behaviors on social media are particularly prevalent in political contexts (Kozman et al., 2022). For instance, during political protests, unfriending and unfollowing behaviors on social media were

common strategies employed to mitigate perceived threats posed by dissenting opinions (Zhu et al., 2017). Overall, research has consistently shown that the intensity of perceived political disagreement correlates with an increased likelihood of unfriending and unfollowing (Lin et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2017). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Perceived political disagreement will be positively associated with (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media.

2.3. Emotional Responses to Political Disagreement

Exposure to political disagreement can elicit emotional responses that subsequently influence one's political behaviors (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). Even individuals with high political sophistication are susceptible to the impact of emotions on political decision-making (Miller, 2011). According to the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion, emotions arise when individuals cognitively evaluate their environment (Dillard & Shen, 2007; Lazarus, 1991). If an individual perceives uncertain threats in their environment, specific emotions (e.g., anger) may be activated, and each discrete emotion plays a unique role in shaping an individual's subsequent coping strategies to address the threat (Lazarus, 1991). When individuals perceive political disagreement in their social media environment, various negative emotions may emerge based on their appraisals of the causes of the threat. These emotions can enhance the desire to exert control over the situation, thereby influencing individuals' selective avoidance behaviors. In this context, the perceived threat can include both one's identity and emotional well-being (John & Gal, 2018). For instance, individuals may choose to unfriend or unfollow others to alleviate feelings of anger and anxiety (Neubaum et al., 2021).

Additionally, the affective intelligence theory proposes that emotions play a crucial role in political decision-making by motivating individuals to engage more deeply in the processing and assimilation of political information (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Three primary emotions—anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm—significantly influence political judgment and decision-making processes (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Research indicates that anxiety (or fear) typically prompts systematic and effortful processing of political information to alleviate uncertainty, while anger and enthusiasm trigger heuristic processing, such as reliance on partisan cues (Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). This study specifically focuses on anger and anxiety, as these emotions are commonly elicited by perceived political disagreement (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011) and play distinct roles in political information processing (Marcus, 2003).

More specifically, anger and anxiety stemming from perceived political disagreement on social media may have distinct impacts on unfriending and unfollowing behaviors. Emotions are typically viewed as short-term and intense responses to external stimuli (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2010). Research suggests that actions triggered by emotions vary depending on the nature of the emotion itself, with different emotions leading to different behaviors (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2010). For instance, anxiety or fear tends to prompt individuals to engage in low-cost political activities, whereas anger encourages higher-cost participation (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011). Anger arises when a threat can be attributed to a cause and is perceived as controllable, thereby mobilizing political participation (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). In contrast, anxiety is triggered when individuals feel

a lack of control and struggle to attribute a cause to the threat, often resulting in low-cost actions. Considering that unfollowing and unfriending require individuals to weigh costs and benefits, with unfollowing entailing fewer social repercussions, anxiety may mobilize unfollowing more than unfriending. Anger, on the other hand, might lead to more unfriending, given its stronger emotional intensity and propensity for more drastic behavior compared to anxiety. Overall, both anger and anxiety are likely to increase the likelihood of unfriending and unfollowing, but we may observe differences between them.

While existing research suggests that both anger and anxiety contribute to selective avoidance behaviors (Garrett et al., 2013; Song, 2017; Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009), their specific roles in political disconnectivity behavior on social media remain underexplored. Drawing on the cognitive appraisal theory and affective intelligence theory and the arguments outlined above (Lazarus, 1991; Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008), we hypothesize that exposure to political disagreement on social media could evoke feelings of anger and anxiety, subsequently predicting unfriending and unfollowing behaviors. Specifically, the uncertain threat posed by perceived political disagreement may lead individuals to engage in systematic, effortful information processing, thereby inducing anxiety, while also prompting heuristic processing that evokes anger (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Additionally, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) suggests that exposure to disagreeing opinions challenging one's preexisting attitudes and beliefs can induce cognitive dissonance (Stroud, 2008, 2010), resulting in negative emotions like anger and anxiety. Consequently, these emotions may drive individuals to avoid political disagreement as a means of alleviating cognitive dissonance and reducing the perceived threat (Festinger, 1957; Marcus et al., 2000). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses to test the mediating role of anger and anxiety in this process:

H2: Anger will mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media; such that political disagreement is positively associated with anger, which is further positively related to (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending.

H3: Anxiety will mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media; such that political disagreement is positively related to anxiety, which is further positively associated with (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending.

2.4. Moderating Role of Need to Belong

Scholars have recently begun to explore psychological factors that may contribute to selective avoidance behaviors on social media, such as the need for cognition and the need to evaluate (i.e., the inclination to assess thoughts and form judgments; Kim et al., 2022). One psychological factor that has garnered attention in the literature is the need to belong (Pennington & Palagi, 2023). The need to belong refers to individuals' desire to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships and their tendency to avoid terminating relationships to fulfill this need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary et al., 2013). Individuals with a stronger need to belong prioritize gaining acceptance by others and maintaining relationships with others, whereas those with a weaker need to belong assign less importance to seeking acceptance and belonging (Leary et al., 2013).

Recent studies have used the need to belong hypothesis to explain why individuals are inclined to unfriend weak ties (acquaintances) but not strong ties (close friends) with opposing political views on social media

(Pennington & Palagi, 2023). However, the influence of individual differences in the need to belong on selective avoidance behaviors on social media remains unexplored. Considering that social media serves as both a public and personal sphere (John & Gal, 2018), individuals engage in a cost-benefit evaluation to determine whether to compromise interpersonal relationship maintenance to alleviate discomfort stemming from perceived political disagreement. In that case, the need to belong could moderate the relationship strength between perceived political disagreement and selective avoidance behaviors on social media. When individuals encounter political disagreement on their social networking sites, those with a high need to belong may be more inclined to preserve the relationship on social media and opt against unfriending or unfollowing compared to those with a low need to belong. Moreover, the impact of the need to belong on unfollowing and unfriending behaviors may differ. Unfriending represents a complete severing of the relationship on social media, while unfollowing is a more subtle approach, allowing individuals to maintain the connection but limit their exposure to the other person's content (Anderson, 2023; Zhu, 2023). Essentially, unfriending is social ties dissociation whereas unfollowing is a form of content filtering that hides specific content while keeping the social relationship (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). As a result, individuals with a high need to belong may be more likely to choose unfollowing over unfriending, as it enables them to preserve social ties while managing the level of engagement. It is also important to note that, according to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals with a stronger attachment to their political ideology or party are more likely to distance themselves from opposing views to protect their social identity. To account for this tendency, political ideology and ideological strength should be controlled when examining the moderating role of the need to belong. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Need to belong will moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media; such that low need to belong will strengthen such relationships.

3. Method

This study recruited a nationally population-matching sample ($N = 498$) through Qualtrics Panels after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval. Prior to data collection, we conducted an a priori power analysis for linear multiple regression ($f^2 = .10$, power = .95) using G*Power software, which indicated a required sample size of 277 respondents. Adopting a more conservative approach, we aimed to collect 500 responses. The Qualtrics Panel company was responsible for distributing and collecting the survey questionnaires from their panel participants. Initially, we received 506 completed surveys from the Qualtrics Panel; however, eight respondents failed the attention check and were subsequently removed from the sample. Initial screening of age (18 years old or above) and time spent on social media (at least 10 minutes a day) in addition to ideology, gender, income, and education quotas were applied to ensure the representativeness of the sample (see a comparison of the study sample and US population demographics in Table 1). The average age of all respondents was 38.95 ($SD = 13.53$) with 50.4% of them being female and 69.1% of them White, followed by Black (14.9%), Hispanic (9.8%), Asian (4.6%), and Native American (0.6%). The median income was between \$50,000 and \$74,999. The median education level of the respondents was some college.

Table 1. Demographics comparison of study sample and the US population.

	Study sample (%)	US population census (%)
Gender:		
Female	50.4	50.5
Male	49.6	49.5
Race/ethnicity:		
White	69.1	75.3
Black or African American	14.9	13.7
Hispanic or Latino	9.8	19.5
Asian	4.6	6.4
Age:		
Average age	38.95	38.9
Education:		
High school and some college	62	54.8
Bachelor's degree or more	38	36.2
Household Income:		
Less than \$25,000	18	15.2
\$25,000 to \$49,999	22.6	17.1
\$50,000 to \$74,999	18.4	16.1
\$75,000 to \$99,999	13.7	12.7
\$100,000 to \$149,999	15	17.4
\$150,000 or more	12.3	21.5

Note: The median household income in the US is \$77,719.

3.1. Procedure

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were presented with informed consent. Following their consent, respondents provided demographic information, disclosed their political ideology, reported their social media use, and indicated their perception of political disagreement on social media. Subsequently, respondents were asked about their emotional responses after they saw friends on social media posting about political issues in a way they disagreed with. They were then asked to indicate how frequently they had unfriended or unfollowed others due to their political postings. To ensure comprehension, participants were provided with brief explanations distinguishing between unfriending and unfollowing: Unfriending someone is a choice to remove a person from your social media friends list and decide to cut connections with that person on social media totally, while unfollowing someone is opting not to see a friend's posts while maintaining the connection. Respondents were asked about their unfollowing and unfriending behaviors on social media in general, rather than on a specific platform, as these actions take place across various social media platforms. Upon completion of the study, respondents were thanked for their time and participation.

3.2. Measures

Perceived political disagreement assessed the frequency of disagreement with others' political posts on social media (Yang et al., 2017). Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), respondents were asked the answer the following question: "How often do you disagree with the political opinions your friends post on social media?" ($M = 2.77$; $SD = 1.05$).

Anger was measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) adapted from Dillard and Shen (2007), where respondents were asked how they felt when they saw their friends on social media posting views about a political issue that they do not agree with. Respondents rated their agreement to four statements assessing feelings of anger after perceiving political disagreement on social media: (a) "I feel irritated"; (b) "I feel angry"; (c) "I feel annoyed"; and (d) "I feel aggravated". These four items were combined to form an index of feeling of anger and ensured its reliability ($\alpha = .90$; $M = 3.93$; $SD = 1.60$).

Anxiety involves not only feelings of anxiousness but also includes emotions such as sadness and dreariness/depression (Dillard & Shen, 2007; Marcus, 2003), the measure aims to capture this broader range of emotional dimensions associated with anxiety. Respondents rated their agreement to four statements assessing feelings of anxiety after perceiving political disagreement on social media: (a) "I feel anxious"; (b) "I feel dismal"; (c) "I feel sad"; and (d) "I feel dreary." These four items were combined to form an index of feeling of anxiety and ensured reliability ($\alpha = .84$; $M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.51$).

Need to belong was measured by asking respondents to rate their agreement to five statements (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; Leary et al., 2013): (a) "I want other people to accept me"; (b) "it bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people's plans"; (c) "I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me"; (d) "I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need"; (e) "I do not like being alone." All the items were combined into an index and ensured reliability ($\alpha = .82$; $M = 4.37$; $SD = 1.36$).

Unfriending was measured by asking respondents if, when using social media, they have "unfriended" a person from their friend list on social media because of the following behaviors of their friends (Bode, 2016; 1 = *never* to 7 = *always*): (a) posted too frequently about politics or political issues; (b) posted something about politics or political issues that you disagree with or found offensive; (c) argue about political issues on the site with you or someone you know; (d) disagreed with something you posted about politics or political issues; and (e) posted something related to politics or political issues that you worried would offend your other friends or people who follow you. The items were combined into an index of unfriending behaviors on social media ($\alpha = .91$; $M = 3.54$; $SD = 1.68$).

Unfollowing for political reasons was measured by asking respondents if they have "unfollowed" a person from their friend list on social media for political reasons (Bode, 2016) using the same items above for measuring political unfriending (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*). The items were combined into an index after rechecking the reliability ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 3.69$; $SD = 1.60$).

Demographic variables include age, gender, education, income, race, and four other variables that serve as control variables such as ideological extremity based on prior research (Barnidge et al., 2023; Skoric, Zhu,

et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to indicate their political ideology (1 = *very liberal* to 5 = *very conservative*; $M = 3.45$; $SD = 1.51$) and answered one of the two items that applied to their ideology on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not very strong* to 5 = *very strong*): “How strongly would you rate your affiliation with the liberal/conservative political ideology?” The two items were merged into one item to indicate the strength of a person’s ideology regardless of whether they lean toward more conservative or more liberal ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 1.27$). Respondents were also asked, generally speaking, how interested they were in politics ($M = 3.28$; $SD = 1.28$). Adapted from Ellison et al. (2007), respondents were asked to report their time spent on social media every day (1 = 0–30 min to 6 = 4+ hours per day; $M = 3.28$; $SD = 1.28$).

3.3. Data Analysis Technique

To test H1, we conducted an ordinary least squares regression model. To examine H2, H3, and H4, we employed process model five (Hayes, 2017), where perceived disagreement served as the independent variable, unfollowing and unfriending as dependent variables, and anger and anxiety as mediators, with need to belong as a moderator. Additionally, all other controlled variables from the regression model were included as covariates. Process model five enables the simultaneous examination of the mediating role of anger and anxiety in the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing/unfriending, as well as the moderating role of need to belong in this relationship.

4. Results

H1 proposed that perceived political disagreement would be positively associated with (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Results showed that perceived political disagreement was positively related to unfollowing ($\beta = .12, p < .05$) and unfriending behaviors ($\beta = .11, p < .05$) on social media (see Table 2). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Table 2. Regression models testing perceived political disagreement and social media unfollowing and unfriending.

	Unfollowing	Unfriending
Block 1: Demographics	β (SE)	β (SE)
Age	.001 (.003)	-.08 (.004)
Gender (female)	-.07 (.12)	-.07 (.13)
Race (White)	-.04 (.13)	-.02 (.11)
Education	-.02 (.05)	-.004 (.05)
Income	.12* (.04)	.11* (.04)
ΔR^2 (%)	5.9%	7%
Block 2: Political attitudes		
Political interest	.01 (.03)	.04 (.04)
Political ideology	-.06 (.12)	-.06 (.13)
Ideology strength	.05 (.04)	.04 (.03)
ΔR^2 (%)	3.7%	3.6%

Table 2. (Cont.) Regression models testing perceived political disagreement and social media unfollowing and unfriending.

	Unfollowing	Unfriending
Block 3: Social media network belonging		
Need to belong	-.17*** (.06)	-.13** (.04)
Time spent on social media	.03 (.01)	.03 (.01)
ΔR^2 (%)	6.1%	3.9%
Block 4: Variables of interest		
Anger	.17*** (.05)	.11* (.05)
Anxiety	.25*** (.05)	.28*** (.06)
Perceived political disagreement	.12* (.04)	.11* (.03)
ΔR^2 (%)	14%	12.3%
Need to belong * Perceived political disagreement	.08 (.04)	.13** (.04)
ΔR^2 (%)	.2%	.6%
Total ΔR^2	29.9%	27.4%

Notes: $N = 498$; the coefficients are standardized Beta (β); SE = standard error; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

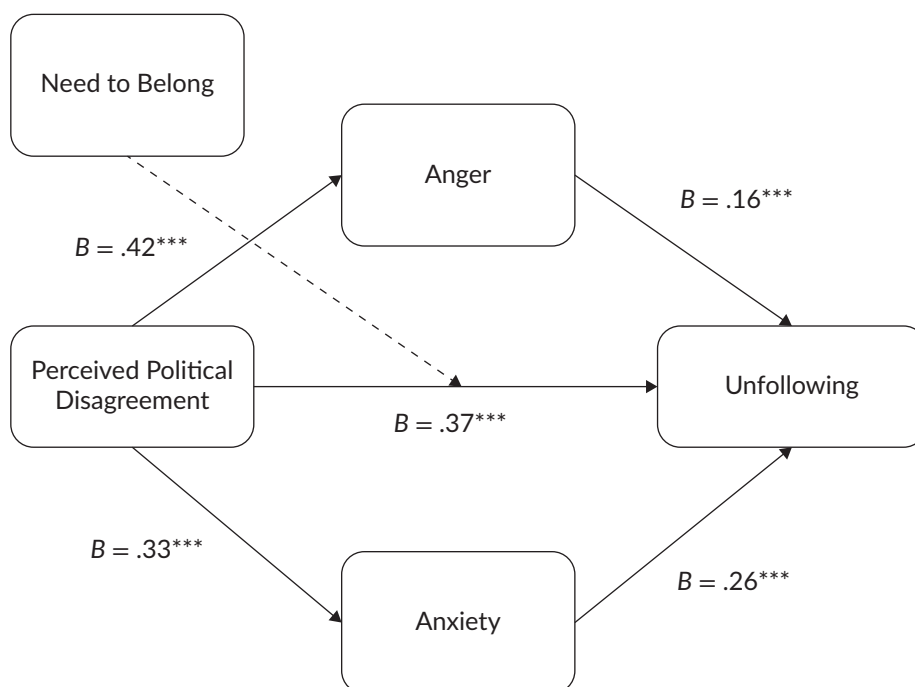


Figure 1. Effects of perceived political disagreement on unfollowing on social media, mediated through anger and anxiety and moderated by need to belong. Notes: $N = 498$; the path coefficients are unstandardized; the same control variables in Table 2 were included in this model; the indirect effects are—perceived political disagreement \rightarrow anger \rightarrow unfollowing ($B = .05$, 95% CI = [.02, .08]); perceived political disagreement \rightarrow anxiety \rightarrow unfollowing ($B = .06$, 95% CI = [.03, .10]); the interaction effect is $B = .05$, 95% CI = [-.02, .12], $p > .05$; CI = confidence interval; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

H2 proposed that anger would mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Mediation analysis results showed that anger mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending behaviors on social media ($B = .05$, 95% CI = [.02, .08]; see Figure 1). Specifically, individuals who perceived political disagreement on social media were more likely to feel angry after viewing their friends on social media posting views about a political issue that they do not agree with ($B = .42$, $p < .001$) which subsequently increased their possibility to unfollow someone ($B = .16$, $p < .001$). Similarly, mediation results showed that anger mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending ($B = .03$, 95% CI = [.003, .07]; see Figure 2). Specifically, individuals who perceived political disagreement on social media were more inclined to increase their level of anger ($B = .42$, $p < .001$) which in turn increased the engagement in unfriending behavior ($B = .12$, $p < .05$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

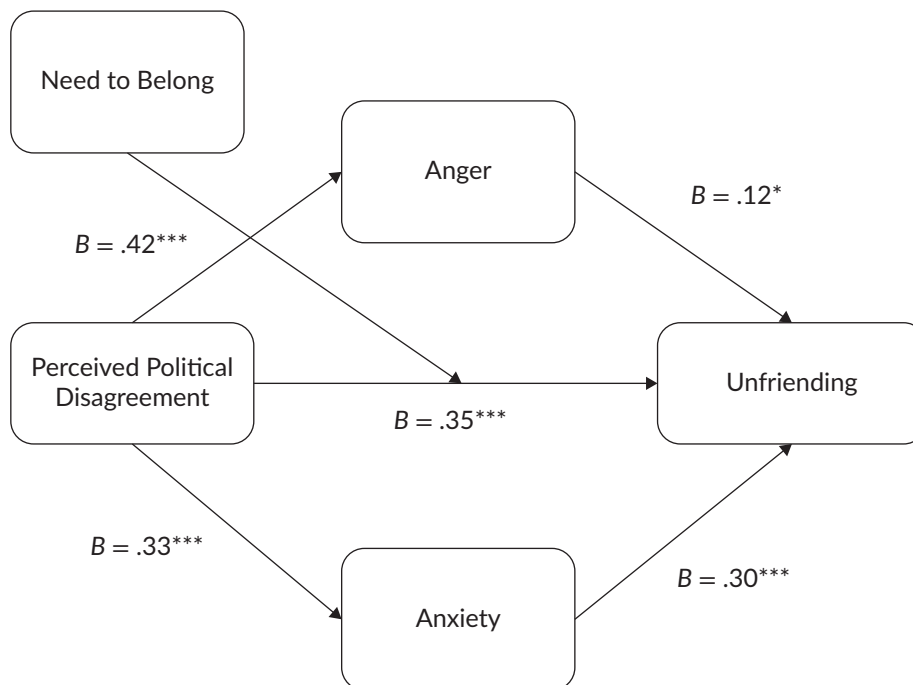


Figure 2. Effects of perceived political disagreement on unfriending on social media, mediated through anger and anxiety and moderated by need to belong. Notes: $N = 498$; the path coefficients are unstandardized; the same controls variables in Table 2 were included in this model; the indirect effects are—perceived political disagreement \rightarrow anger \rightarrow unfriending ($B = .03$, 95% CI = [.003, .07]); perceived political disagreement \rightarrow anxiety \rightarrow unfriending ($B = .07$, 95% CI = [.03, .11]); the interaction effect is $B = .08$, 95% CI = [.005, .15], $p < .05$; CI = confidence interval; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

H3 proposed that anxiety would mediate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Mediation analysis results showed that anxiety mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending behaviors on social media ($B = .06$, 95% CI = [.03, .10]; see Figure 1). Specifically, individuals who perceived political disagreement on social media were more inclined to increase their level of anxiety ($B = .33$, $p < .001$) which in turn increased their likelihood to unfollow someone ($B = .26$, $p < .001$). Similarly, mediation results showed that anxiety mediated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending behaviors on social media ($B = .07$, 95% CI = [.03, .11]; see Figure 2). Specifically, individuals who

perceived political disagreement on social media were more likely to feel anxious ($B = .33, p < .001$) which subsequently increased the unfriending behavior ($B = .30, p < .001$). Therefore, H3 was supported.

H4 proposed that need to belong would moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and (a) unfollowing and (b) unfriending behaviors on social media. Moderation analysis results showed that need to belong did not moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing ($B = .05, 95\% CI = [-.02, .12]$; see Figure 1). However, moderation analysis results showed that need to belong moderated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending ($B = .08, 95\% CI = [.005, .15]$; see Figure 3). More specifically, individuals with a lower need to belong were more likely to unfriend others as they perceived higher levels of political disagreement on social media. When perceiving the same level of political disagreement, individuals with a higher need to belong were less likely to unfriend others on social media, compared to those with a lower need to belong (see Figure 3). Therefore, H4a was not supported but H4b was supported.

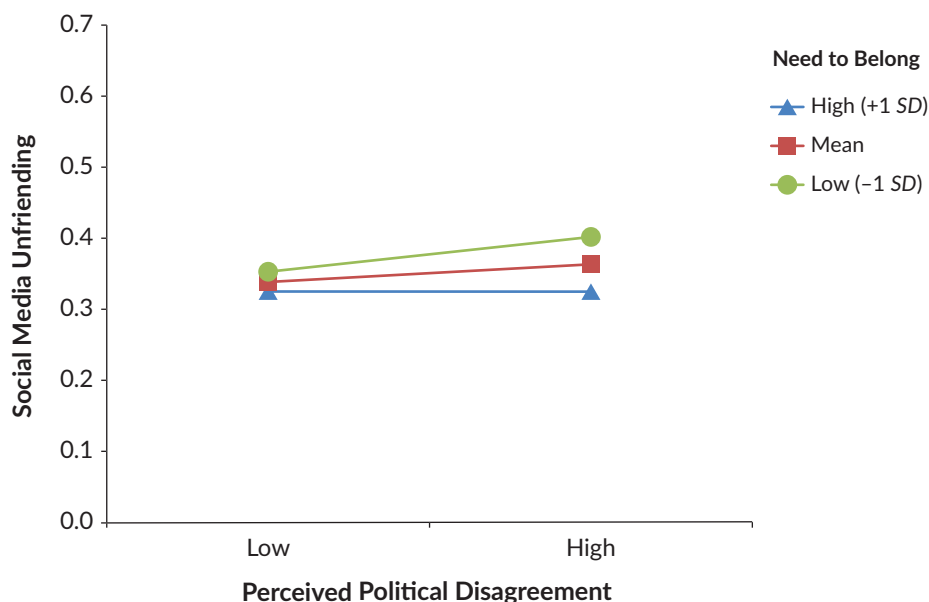


Figure 3. Interaction effects of perceived political disagreement and need to belong on social media unfriending.

5. Discussion

Due to proprietary algorithms and individual selective exposure tendencies, individuals often encounter a higher volume of like-minded information on social media platforms (Guess et al., 2023). Consequently, incongruent opinions on social media become more noticeable to users. While prior research has identified various selective avoidance behaviors triggered by perceived political disagreement on social media (e.g., John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), the role of emotional responses and psychological factors in selective avoidance has remained underexplored. Based on selective avoidance theory (Garrett et al., 2013; Stroud, 2008, 2010) and affective intelligence theory (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000), this study addresses this gap and identifies the mediating role of two specific discrete emotions—anger and anxiety—in this process. Perceived political disagreement was found to be positively associated with both anger and anxiety, which was further related to unfriending and unfollowing behaviors.

Additionally, the need to belong was found to moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending. Individuals with higher levels of need to belong were less likely to unfriend others after perceiving political disagreement. Our findings unpack the underlying mechanisms through which discrete emotions arising from perceived political disagreement and individual psychological traits—the need to belong—influence the selective avoidance process on social media. Given that this area of research is still in its nascent stages (Zhu, 2023), our study contributes to the literature by offering several significant findings and explanations.

First, we found that perceived political disagreement on social media predicted the likelihood to unfriend and unfollow others, consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017). Through unfriending and unfollowing others for political reasons, individuals can alleviate cognitive dissonance derived from political disagreement on social media, as posited by the theories of selective avoidance and selective exposure (Festinger, 1957; Garrett et al., 2013; Stroud, 2008, 2010). Selective avoidance behaviors have been identified across various contexts where individuals are exposed to counterattitudinal political opinions, including news consumption (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Song, 2017), social media information exposure (Skoric, Zhu, & Lin, 2018), and participation in political protests (Zhu et al., 2017). Our findings contribute further evidence supporting exposure to political disagreement as a significant predictor of selective avoidance behaviors on social media.

Second, both anger and anxiety were identified as mediators in the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending or unfollowing. According to cognitive appraisal theory, distinct discrete emotions are elicited as individuals appraise environmental threats (Lazarus, 1991). Our findings revealed that perceived political disagreement serves as a type of uncertain threat, evoking negative emotions such as anger and anxiety. Despite both being categorized as negative discrete emotions, prior literature indicates distinctions between how anger and anxiety manifest (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 2010). Research suggests that anger is more likely to be induced when individuals can attribute the cause of the threat, while anxiety is more likely to be evoked when the cause cannot be attributed (Lazarus, 1991; Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011). We found that individuals exposed to political disagreement on social media experience both scenarios, inducing both anger and anxiety as they attempt to regain control of the situation.

We anticipated that anger would prompt action more strongly than anxiety, as anger typically triggers heuristic information processing (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Surprisingly, some studies found that anger might mitigate confirmation bias and foster engagement with opposing viewpoints (Young et al., 2011). However, our findings contradict this notion, revealing that anger stemming from perceived disagreement predicted the likelihood of both unfriending and unfollowing. It's essential to note that in our study, anger and anxiety stem from the perception of political disagreement, distinct from the anger provoked by viewing a specific media stimulus (Young et al., 2011). Generally, when individuals feel angry after perceiving political disagreement on social media, they tend to resort to unfriending or unfollowing. Moreover, anger tends to spur individuals toward more high-cost actions (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). Given that unfriending entails severing relationships and necessitates thorough cost-benefit evaluations, anger emerged as a significant factor driving unfriending behavior.

While prior research suggests that emotions facilitating the identification of causes prompt action, and emotions failing to identify causes and provide a sense of control may lead to inaction (Marcus et al., 2000;

Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008), we found that anxiety exerted similar effects as anger in the process of unfriending and unfollowing behaviors. Anger and anxiety may prompt different types of political actions—anger leads to more high-cost actions, whereas anxiety or fear leads to low-cost actions (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, et al., 2011). Anger arises when individuals perceive the threat of political disagreement on social media and can specifically identify who is causing it within their social media networks. In contrast, anxiety may occur when an overwhelming of political disagreement information emerges on one's social media, and individuals perceive a lack of control over the situation, sometimes without knowing whom to blame. We found that anxiety can prompt actions to both unfriend and unfollow others. This contradicts affective intelligence theory, which posits that anxiety can stimulate more effortful processing of political information to reduce uncertainty (Marcus, 2003; Marcus et al., 2000). Instead, it may be that people employ politically motivated disconnective behaviors as emotional regulation strategies, aiming to avoid the anxiety associated with exposure to opposing views (Zhu & Skoric, 2023).

Third, we found that the need to belong moderated the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfriending. For individuals with a higher need to form and maintain relationships on social media, unfriending—which involves completely cutting off relationships—may be a less desirable option (Pennington & Palagi, 2023). Consequently, they might opt to endure the discomfort rather than unfriend others. However, the need to belong did not moderate the relationship between perceived political disagreement and unfollowing. Since unfollowing does not necessitate a complete severance of relationships, the level of need to belong did not influence the impact of political disagreement on unfollowing. This finding highlights that networked connections on social media reflect similar offline relationship types including strong and weak ties and individuals value their online relationships. The limited impact of the need to belong on unfollowing behaviors derived from perceived political disagreement, as compared to unfriending, suggests that people may place importance on the strength and quality of these relationships. Choosing to unfollow, rather than unfriend, allows individuals to maintain these connections without causing potential harm to the relationship. This study represents one of the first investigations into how individual differences in the need to belong influence unfriending and unfollowing for political reasons on social media. Future research could explore whether the need to belong affects unfriending and unfollowing behaviors within strong ties or weak ties on social media (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pennington & Palagi, 2023).

This study has several limitations worth noting. Firstly, we did not comprehensively cover all types of selective avoidance behaviors on social media but rather focused on the most prevalent ones. Given the diverse functions and applications of different social media platforms, actions like unfollowing and unfriending may carry varying implications. For instance, on Instagram, “mute” is akin to unfollowing, while “unfollow” is comparable to unfriending. One of our contributions is the examination of unfriending and unfollowing behaviors across social media platforms. To ensure clarity, we provided clear definitions of unfriending and unfollowing at the beginning of the survey, alongside questions pertaining to these behaviors for political reasons. Secondly, we are relying on cross-sectional survey data that cannot establish the causal relationships between perceived political disagreement, emotional responses, and selective avoidance behaviors. While our data allows for correlations of a general nature, future research could employ experimental designs to explore these relationships more rigorously. Thirdly, we asked participants to recall their emotional reactions upon encountering political disagreement, which may present challenges in accurately articulating these feelings. However, we specifically focused on the two most commonly reported emotions derived from perceived political disagreement (Valentino, Banks, et al., 2009; Valentino,

Brader, et al., 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, et al., 2008). Moreover, previous research investigating the impact of political disagreement on emotional responses has utilized survey methods involving the recall of feelings (e.g., Song, 2017; Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). Therefore, we believe our approach enabled us to capture respondents' emotions stemming from political disagreement on social media effectively.

Despite its limitations, our study contributes to the literature on political disconnectivity by enhancing our understanding of the emotional and psychological factors that influence unfriending and unfollowing behaviors on social media. Specifically, our findings demonstrate the applicability of selective avoidance theory, affective intelligence theory, and cognitive dissonance theory in explaining political information avoidance behaviors on social media. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing literature by identifying individual differences, particularly the need to belong, as factors that can influence selective avoidance behaviors. Our findings also have practical implications for the design of social media content filtering, as platforms may consider incorporating features with varying levels of disconnectivity to accommodate individual differences such as the need to belong. For instance, social media platforms like Facebook have introduced various options for managing interactions, such as blocking or hiding content, in addition to unfriending and unfollowing. Users can also control who can view their timelines. Building on these features, platforms could design a grouping function that allows individuals to categorize their friends. This would enable users with varying levels of need to belong to selectively block content from specific groups without notifying them, maintaining relationships while managing content exposure. Furthermore, these findings have practical implications for mitigating political polarization, as individuals with a high need to belong may be less likely to unfollow or unfriend those with opposing political views. In this context, both social media platforms and society can encourage more constructive dialogue between people with different political opinions by enhancing individuals' sense of belonging. Specifically, platforms can design features that strengthen online relationships by fostering community-building, which may promote engagement across diverse viewpoints.

Broadly, our findings shed light on how the social media environment shapes individuals' processing of political information and their responses to political disagreement. Widespread adoption of selective avoidance behaviors, such as unfriending and unfollowing, may contribute to the formation of echo chambers, where people are exposed only to like-minded political opinions. Understanding the factors driving selective avoidance of political information in the digital age is crucial. It represents the first step toward developing strategies to promote democratic deliberation and counteract these divisive behaviors. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how individuals' reasons for using social media may influence the role of political disagreement in promoting selective avoidance behaviors. The source of anger and anxiety stemming from political opinions on social media may not solely arise from encountering opposing viewpoints but could also result from content that does not align with one's motivations for using social media. Anecdotally, individuals have expressed fatigue with excessive political content on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Research has also demonstrated that using Facebook for political purposes can drive unfriending and muting behaviors (Zhang & Shoenberger, 2021). Furthermore, future research should include comparative studies examining the emotional and psychological antecedents of political disconnection on social media across different cultural contexts, as cutting off relationships on social media may carry different implications in various cultural settings (Skoric, Zhu, et al., 2022). In addition, future research should explore how other individual difference factors such as age and ideology influence emotional responses to political disagreement and selective avoidance behavior.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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