

# A Classification of Features for Interpersonal Disconnectivity in Digital Media: Block, Unfriend, Unfollow, Mute, Withhold, and Eject

Nicholas John 

Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

**Correspondence:** Nicholas John ([n.john@huji.ac.il](mailto:n.john@huji.ac.il))

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## Abstract

This article presents for the first time a classification of, and lexicon for, features for dissolving interpersonal ties in digital environments: blocking, unfriending, unfollowing, muting, withholding, and ejecting. There are two main motivations and two main contributions. The first motivation is that analyses of social media features have not included treatment of features for interpersonal disconnectivity; the second is that analyses of interpersonal disconnectivity have not included reference to the features that enable it. The two main contributions are the disambiguation of a confusing terminological field, thus making it possible to analytically distinguish between types of feature, and an intervention in the question of whether the features described in the article concern filtering *information* or avoiding *people*. Data were collected from 37 social media platforms and other services that enable digitally-mediated communication. Features for interpersonal disconnectivity were documented and then the features were grouped based on five questions about their use, where A is the person using the feature, and B is the target of A's use of the feature: (a) Does it affect A's feed?; (b) does it affect B's feed?; (c) is A still connected to B?; (d) is B still connected to A?; (e) can A and B see each other's profile?

## Keywords

blocking; disconnection; disconnectivity; feature analysis; social media; unfollowing; unfriending

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I offer a classification of, and lexicon for, features for dissolving interpersonal ties in digital environments. This is indispensable for two main reasons: First, because analyses of social media features

have not included treatment of features for interpersonal disconnectivity; and second, because analyses of interpersonal disconnectivity have not included reference to the features that enable it. This will have two main outcomes. The first will be to disambiguate a confusing terminological field, thus making it possible to analytically distinguish between types of feature. The second will be to try and address an ambiguity between filtering *information* and avoiding *people*. That is, when a social media user blocks or unfriends another user, as researchers we would want to know whether they are doing so in order to distance themselves from the other user, or whether they are concerned with managing flows of information. Another way of putting it is that this study addresses questions about what we are to one another on social media, in particular given that following a person and following a newspaper on Instagram (for instance) are technically identical (Bucher, 2013), as indeed is the reversal of this tie formation.

Before presenting the classification, though, I shall present brief discussions of research into social media features and interpersonal disconnectivity online, and the methods for the collection and analysis of the data on which this study rests.

## 2. Features

Writing in the context of Facebook, Smock et al. (2011) define a feature as “a technical tool on the site that enables activity on the part of the user” (p. 2323), while conceiving of Facebook itself as a “*collection of tools*” (2011, p. 2323, emphasis in original). Similarly, for Sajtos et al., “platforms can be regarded as a collection of features” (Sajtos et al., 2022, p. 1226). Referencing Smock et al., Hasinoff and Bivens (2021) define features “as functions that developers publicize or make visible to users” (p. 97), or “that users control or are likely aware of” (p. 96). From these references, it seems that a feature is not just something that an app or service does, but rather something that the user can interact with or use. It also implies that the idea of a featureless platform is a contradiction in terms. This basic insight that all platforms necessarily have features—underwhelming as it may be—implies that the study of platforms must include the study of their features.

Indeed, given the effort and capital invested in designing social media interfaces and their features, and given that it is through them that users experience social media, it is not surprising that they have received critical research attention. Stanfill (2015), for instance, adopts a Foucauldian approach to website interfaces, which they call “discursive interface analysis.” Arguing that “examining what is possible on sites—features, categories of use foregrounded, and how technological features make certain uses easier or harder—illuminates the norms of use,” Stanfill maintains that a site’s affordances “reflect, and help establish, cultural common sense about what Users do (and *should* do)” (2015, p. 1061, emphasis in original). As such, therefore, they are vectors of power.

This approach is shared by Bivens, who, in a series of collaborations, has carried out “feature analysis” in order to “reveal the average or typical ways that developers...think about the problems that their apps are designed to solve” (Hasinoff & Bivens, 2021, p. 89). If “programming practices bake values and assumptions into technology” (Bivens & Haimson, 2016, p. 1), then feature analysis seeks to expose those values and assumptions. Different scholars have taken different approaches to this. Elaheebocus et al. (2018) and Dawot and Ibrahim (2014), for instance, have offered taxonomies of social media taken as a whole, while others have focused on the features of a specific service, such as Twitter (renamed X since 2023; Bozyiğit et al., 2021; Burgess & Baym, 2020) or Instagram (Poulsen, 2018). Hasinoff and Bivens (Bivens & Hasinoff, 2018; Hasinoff

& Bivens, 2021), on the other hand, address collections of apps aimed at solving a particular problem (sexual violence against women). Yet others have written about a single feature, such as the like button (see, for example, Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Eranti & Lonkila, 2015; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021; Sumner et al., 2018).

There are, though, features that very rarely get any attention in studies of social media, namely, features that enable interpersonal disconnectivity (unfriending, blocking, etc.). Indeed, such features barely appear in the literature, even when authors make claims about comprehensiveness. For example, a central motivation behind O’Riordan et al.’s “feature-level analysis of social network sites” is that “a comprehensive list of features and affordances [in social media] does not exist” (O’Riordan et al., 2016, p. 2), yet their list includes none of the features for tie dissolution or other kinds of negative feedback (blocking, unsubscribing, etc.). Also, while Sajtos et al. (2022) *do* include blocking and “Hidden from Timeline” in their list of “20 commonly used features” on Facebook (p. 1232), it is unclear why their list does not include “unfriending” or indeed what constitutes a “commonly used” feature.

There is a certain irony in the almost blanket ignoring of features for disconnectivity in the literature on social media features, inasmuch as they address a problem that is created by social media themselves, namely, how to manage the sheer abundance (of information, of social ties) brought about by the social media features that *have* received attention. Put differently, beyond the challenges posed by the multitudes of other people in modern, urban settings (famously addressed by Goffman, Simmel, Le Bon, and many more), digital media enable us to be in contact—however fleeting—with more people than in any previous generation. Moreover, it is an attribute of social media ties (people whom we follow, or with whom we are friends) that they never “wither on the vine” (cf. Baxter, 1985), as most of the friendships we had when we were young children eventually did. Instead, they need to be intentionally broken (or otherwise managed) when they go bad, or when there are simply too many of them. This role of tie dissolution features, and especially unfriending, has been described by Light and Cassidy (2014) as a “social lubricant,” in that by allowing users to refuse contact with specific others they actually enable those users to remain on the platform rather than feeling impelled to abandon it.

Weller calls these understudied features the “forgotten features” of social media (Weller, 2016), for which she offers three categories: they are “more recent features...related to publishing or interlinking multimedia content, and functionalities that delete content or *revoke social network relationships*” (p. 260, emphasis added). Weller hopes that more studies of user motivations in using such features will inspire new insights and questions concerning social media. The purpose of the current article, though, is even more basic: it is to identify the features for interpersonal tie dissolution, and then to classify them so as to create a common lexicon for future research.

### 3. Interpersonal Disconnectivity

It is not only that the features for interpersonal disconnectivity are (almost entirely) ignored by studies of social media features, but also that the entire realm is relatively obscure. Indeed, Zhu’s (2023) recent review of politically-motivated unfriending found only 28 relevant articles published between 2015 and 2022. Part of the reason for this is that social media services deny researchers access to data about unfriending (John & Nissenbaum, 2019), meaning that substantive quantitative data can only be gathered through expensive surveys (for early examples, see John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, a body of research is growing, putting forward answers to important questions about social media, politics, culture, and everyday life. A main concern has been the political consequences of politically-motivated tie-breaking (for a recent review, see Zhu, 2023). Work with a more cultural leaning has used tie dissolution as a lens through which to understand digital culture more broadly (Hilmar, 2021; Kaun, 2021). Unfortunately, though, even within this body of literature there are terminological inconsistencies. For example, Hilmar (2021) defines unfriending as “the act of removing someone from the pool of individuals designated by the respective platform as ‘friends’ or ‘followers’” (p. 3). This is confusing, though, primarily because it elides friends and followers: the former relationship is mutually constituted, while the latter is one-directional; moreover, if I remove someone from the pool of individuals designated by the platform as my followers, we would not say that I was unfollowing them, but rather that I was making them unfollow me—a feature I discuss in Section 5.6. Similarly, Wu et al. (2019) state that, “There are two basic actions for users to manage their social relationships: *follow* (relationship creation) and *unfollow* (relationship dissolution)” (p. 1), but this is to ignore the friend relationship just mentioned. There are instances in the literature where “unfriending” stands metonymically for other disconnectivity features, such as when Zhu (2023) states that she will be referring to “disconnective behaviors such as unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking” as “unfriending” (p. 5354), or when John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) elide unfriending and unfollowing. The same appears to be happening when Schwarz and Shani (2016) start a paragraph on unfriending (or “defriending,” which is their preferred nomenclature) which pivots to blocking and hiding, which seem to be used interchangeably. Institutions such as the Pew Research Center also collapse unfriending, blocking, and unfollowing into one another. For instance, in a recent survey of religion and social media, a question asked, “Have you ever unfollowed, unfriended, blocked, or changed your settings to see less of someone on social media because of religious content they post or share online?” (Diamant, 2023).

In another early and influential article on unfriending, Peña and Brody (2014) also confuse unfriending, blocking, and hiding. They correctly say that “hidden contacts retain access to each other’s information,” but wrongly assert that “unfriended contacts can no longer access each other’s profiles” (p. 144; this is actually true of blocked contacts). Nor is it the case that in order 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”—this is true for blocking, but not hiding or ignoring (Peña & Brody, 2014, p. 144). Moreover, John and Katz (2023) demonstrate that the terminology for these features changes over time, making it hard to know exactly what authors are referring to when talking, for instance, about “hiding.”

There is need, therefore, for some conceptual clarity, an agreed-upon set of terms that will allow researchers to know that they are talking about the same phenomena. This article offers just that.

## 4. Method

This study makes use of a method very similar to that of O’Riordan et al.’s (2016) two-stage “feature-level analysis of social network sites.” However, rather than identifying three major social network sites (SNSs) as O’Riordan et al. did (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), the sample for this study comprises 37 social media platforms and other services that enable digitally-mediated communication. An initial and comprehensive list of 61 services was taken from John’s recent study of the word “sharing” (John, 2022). Because of the labor-intensive nature of the data collection, this list was trimmed down, but without sacrificing diversity: The sample was constructed to include the largest social network sites, such as Facebook and Instagram, as

well as more niche services, such as Deviantart. Additionally, non-US services, such as VK and Sina Weibo, and device-based services were added, such as those offered by Xbox or PlayStation were added. While it is not obvious what a representative sample of digital services would look like, this one is certainly broad and varied. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there are no significant features that are not covered by it.

The services in the sample were: Academia.edu, Battle.net, Blackplanet, Deviantart, Discord, Facebook, FB Messenger, Flickr, Goodreads, Hi5, ICQ, Instagram, Last.fm, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, MySpace, OK.ru, Pinterest, Playstation Network (PSN), QQ, Reddit, Sina Weibo, Skype, Skyrock, Snapchat, Soundcloud, Telegram, TikTok, Tinder, Tumblr, Twitch, Twitter, VK, WeChat, WhatsApp, Xbox, and YouTube.

Having compiled the sample, the next step was to identify and document as many features for interpersonal disconnectivity as possible. This involved a combination of looking for expected features—such as blocking or unfriending—and exploring the service’s app or website with the aim of finding additional features. Again following O’Riordan et al., the two components of this work were documentation analysis—collecting and analyzing “system help guides for end-users” (2016, p. 6)—and system analysis, defined as a “walkthrough of system functionality to validate data in documentation analysis and explore features of the system” (p. 6). Documenting the features involved collecting the following: the name given by the service to the feature; step-by-step instructions for using the feature; description of the feature in the service’s help pages; screenshots of the feature in use; and a link to the page in the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. A 715-row file with the collected data is available on the OSF website ([https://osf.io/z4ky8/?view\\_only=52b3a1feadbb4686863e084fd046c590](https://osf.io/z4ky8/?view_only=52b3a1feadbb4686863e084fd046c590)).

Having documented the features, the next stage was to “[order] entities into groups or classes on the basis of their similarity” (Bailey, 1994, p. 1)—which produces a classification, or the “systematic arrangement of classes of entities based on analysis of the set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient characteristics that defines each class” (Jacob, 2004, p. 528). This classification, presented Section 5, includes each of the named features such that each appears in one class, and one class only. Additionally, by naming the classes, this stage requires the formulation of a lexicon, where “lexicons are standardized vocabularies that facilitate communication across diverse audiences” (Lawless & Civile, 2013, p. 270). This lexicon, or vocabulary, is a major contribution of this article.

## 5. Findings

Fifty-two differently-named features were found. When looking at how often they were named, there is quite a long tail: block (57), unfollow (27), mute (14), and unfriend (12) were mentioned most often, while 25 features were named only once. These include features such as “unwatch” (Deviantart) and “timeout” (Twitch). The full list of features is presented in Box 1. Note that “Block” appears more times than the number of services analyzed because each way of blocking (via a profile, for example, or from a post) was counted separately.

Some of these features can easily be consolidated. For instance, we can consider “mute chat,” “mute conversation,” “mute notifications,” “mute profile,” and “mute story” as instances of a broader class of “mute” features. Even then, though, we are left with around 35 different terms which sometimes mean different things in different services. For example, in Skype, “deleting” means expunging a contact from one’s phonebook, while in Hi5, OK.ru, and WeChat it involves breaking a tie that had been mutually constituted by

**Box 1.** All of the features in the sample (with the number of times they appear; n = 52).

Ban (1)	Hide my moments (1)	Remove contact (1)
Banning a user (1)	Hide my posts (1)	Remove follower (3)
Blacklist (1)	Hide posts (1)	Remove friend (2)
Blacklist/shield (4)	Hide story (1)	Remove recommended content (2)
Block (57)	Ignore (4)	Restrict (4)
Block from commenting (1)	Infrequently contacted list (1)	Restricted list (2)
Block messages (2)	Mute (14)	Snooze (2)
Block/shield messages (from chat settings; 1)	Mute chat (1)	Snooze DMs (2)
Block/shield messages (from private message page; 1)	Mute conversation (1)	Take a break (hide to restricted list; 1)
Delete contact (2)	Mute notifications (3)	Take a break (see less; 1)
Delete friend (3)	Mute profile (2)	Timeout (1)
Hide (1)	Mute story (2)	Turn notifications off (4)
Hide comments (1)	No notifications (3)	Unfollow (27)
Hide content (2)	Not interested (2)	Unfriend (12)
Hide events (1)	Remove (3)	Unmatch (1)
Hide moments (1)	Remove a follow (1)	Unsubscribe (4)
	Remove a follower (1)	Unwatch (1)
	Remove a friend (3)	
	Remove connection (3)	

the two parties. At first blush, therefore, we can already see a need for an efficient and common vocabulary with which to talk about these features. The task at hand, therefore, is to construct a classification of features, to which we turn now.

I started with terms commonly used by the services themselves and, in particular, “block,” “unfollow,” “mute,” and “unfriend,” and tried to create distinctions between them. To start, the use of these features has implications for the feed or direct message inbox of the person using them: If I block, unfollow, mute, or unfriend another user, their content will no longer appear in my feed (or direct message inbox). I note, though, that blocking or unfriending another user means that my content can no longer appear in their feed either. Henceforth, I use “feed” to denote both a users’ social media feeds and other ways of delivering information to them (such as through direct messages). There are, though, features that only involve the latter, that is, preventing flows of information *from* me *to* other users. In other words, the usage of some features has consequences for the information flow experienced by the person making use of the feature, while the usage of others has consequences for the information flow experienced by the other party. Another distinction relates to outcomes in that some features operate on the flow of information, without impacting on the tie, while others operate on the tie itself, with downstream implications for flows of information.

Building on the distinctions noted in the previous paragraph, the following is a description of each of the primary categories of tie-breaking and is based on the answers to five questions about the consequence of using the feature, where A is the person using the feature, and B is the target of A’s use of the feature: (a) Does it affect A’s feed?; (b) does it affect B’s feed?; (c) is A still connected to B?; (d) is B still connected to A?; (e) can A and B see each other’s profile? Answering these questions for each of the features observed in the document analysis stage unambiguously places each feature into discrete groups. We turn now to the classification system itself.

### 5.1. Block

By far the most common feature, some kind of blocking is offered by all of the services in the sample. Uniquely among the categories of features, blocking is a feature required of apps offered in the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store. For Google, “apps that contain or feature UGC (user-generated content)...must implement...UGC moderation that...provides an in-app system for blocking UGC and users” (Google, n.d.). For Apple, “Apps with user-generated content or social networking services must include...the ability to block abusive users” (Apple Developer, n.d.).

The primary function of blocking is to prevent communication. If there is a tie between the two users, then blocking breaks that tie. Sometimes—but not always—blocking also has the effect of deleting past interactions, reinforcing Schwarz’s (2021) observation about how the objectification of interactions enables their temporal disunification. In other words, blocking can sometimes allow for a kind of rewriting of the past.

Blocking, though, does not only block direct messaging between users, it also prevents other kinds of service-specific interaction. For instance, blocking a user on Facebook prevents them from tagging the blocker or inviting them to events, while on Flickr, a blocked user cannot add photos posted by the person who blocked them to their galleries, or even “favorite” them (they can, however, see them). Another unique feature of blocking is that it can prevent the blocker from appearing in search results (Tumblr, Facebook), normally as part of a broader set of elements that render the two users involved invisible to one another on the service.

### 5.2. Unfriend

Unfriending is probably the most well-known of the features discussed here, even though it is actually offered by relatively few services. This is a function of the definition of unfriending being offered here, namely, the dissolution of a mutually constituted tie. A mutually constituted tie is one that requires both parties’ consent in order for it to be formed. The best example is that of Facebook friending: In order for A and B to become Facebook friends, one of them has to ask the other to be their friend, and the other has to accept the request. This is in contrast to following, which is a one-way act of connectivity: A does not need B’s permission to follow them on Instagram (I ignore here the case in which B has a private account, which means that A can ask to follow B; B can accept or deny the request—however, even in this case, the tie is not mutual in that there is no necessary connection between B granting A permission to follow them, and B following A.) Of the services in the sample, only Discord, Facebook, Goodreads, Hi5, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, OK.ru, QQ, Snapchat, Twitch, VK, WeChat, and Xbox offer such reciprocal relationships, and thus only they offer unfriending as a feature.

Unfriending has a number of consequences. First and foremost, it breaks the tie between two users. Unlike the formation of the tie, this is unilateral: One user unfriends another; they cannot both unfriend each other (though two users can block one another). Once A unfriends B, B’s content will no longer appear in A’s feed, and nor will A’s content appear in B’s feed. However, unlike with blocking, A and B can still visit one another’s profiles: as noted in Snapchat’s help pages, after removing a user from one’s friends list, “they’ll still be able to view any content you have set to public” (Snapchat Support, n.d.).

Unlike blocking, unfriending returns the relationship between A and B to its condition before A and B became friends. In terms of their mutual visibility, A and B are to one another as they are to all the other users of the service with whom they have never been friends. While one would expect that the act of unfriending will be registered and saved by the platform, and may even have some impact on the algorithmic ranking of the content served to A, this is not information available to us.

### 5.3. Unfollow

If following someone on social media involves some kind of sign-up or subscription to that person's content, then unfollowing is the reversal of that. Given that this is the relationship model in most social media, it is unsurprising that this was the second-most prevalent feature for disconnectivity (after blocking). Like unfriending, unfollowing returns the network to its previous state, prior to the following. Unlike blocking and unfriending, though, unfollowing has no impact on the unfollowed person's relationship of following/not following the person who unfollowed them.

### 5.4. Mute

The features presented thus far all entail the breaking of a digitally-mediated tie. Muting, however, does not. Rather, it is a feature that silences a particular user; after A has muted B, B's content will not show up in A's feed, be that permanently or for a pre-defined period of time (such as with snooze on Facebook, whereby A can mute B for 30 days). Unlike with unfollowing, however, muting leaves the tie between A and B intact. In other words, muting does not act on the social graph itself, in that the tie between A and B persists. Instead, it acts on—and only on—the flow of data from B to A. As such, and unlike the previous features, muting is undetectable by B: A still appears on the list of B's followers.

A special version of muting is offered by Instagram. Called "restrict," this lesser-known feature allows B to comment on A's Instagram post, but withholds the comment from A and all of their followers. It leaves B with the illusion of connectivity—they really are commenting on A's post; they have not been blocked—but in fact, unbeknownst to them, their efforts at communication are stymied by A as their post remains undelivered. This is reminiscent of the satirical proposal for "heavenbanning," "the hypothetical practice of banishing a user from a platform by causing everyone that they speak with to be replaced by AI models that constantly agree and praise them" (near, 2022).

### 5.5. Withhold

In a sense, the features that I am terming "withhold" are the mirror image of muting. For A to withhold content vis-à-vis B means that A is preventing their content from reaching B's feed. To use the withhold feature is to control the potential recipients of a piece of content rather than controlling which content the service delivers to me. As with muting, withholding does not change the structure of the social graph. It is a feature that, inter alia, allows people to control the reach of their online communications and thus, in a way, resurrect the barriers between social contexts that social media so easily pull down (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Of the services in the sample, this feature is offered only by Facebook, WeChat, and QQ.



## 5.6. Eject

If A unfriending B means that both A and B's content will cease to appear in one another's feed, and if A unfollowing B means that B's content will cease to appear in A's feed, without impacting on whether A's content appears in B's feed, what I am here calling *ejecting* prevents A's content from appearing in B's feed, without impacting on whether B's content appears in A's feed. This is clearly similar to withholding, as described in Section 4.5, but this time involves breaking a tie. Thus, ejecting is described as "removing a follower" in the help pages of Goodreads, Instagram, TikTok, and Sina Weibo, the only services in the sample to offer this feature. YouTube used to enable users to remove subscribers but removed this feature before my sample was created. Twitter introduced such a feature shortly after this sample was created.

As discussed by John and Katz (2023), there is a catch in the use of the eject function in that it is only effective for as long as the ejected user is logged in. That is, if A removes B from his Instagram followers, all B has to do in order to be able to see A's posts once more is to log out of Instagram. To avoid this, A can make their account private, but this prevents everyone who is not a follower of theirs from viewing their content, and not only B.

The categories in this typology are shown in Table 1. Note that "n/a" means that the act being characterized does not impact that particular dimension.

Before delving into this classification, at the purely descriptive level, we can show the names given to the features in each category by the various platforms and services in the sample (Table 2), the services with features in each category (Table 3), and the categories per service (Figure 1).

This allows us to make a number of further observations. First, while no two rows of Table 1 are identical (obviously), they can be very similar, a fact that enables us to draw out the defining feature of a certain category of features. To start, we can see that blocking and unfriending are identical except in relation to the question of whether the users can see one another's profile (or at all) on the service. In other words, blocking renders future communication impossible and makes A and B invisible to one another on that particular service. Unfriending merely breaks the direct tie between A and B, but in a way that means they will still be able to come across each other's comments to mutual friends' posts, for example. Unfollowing and muting are also identical apart from the dimension of connectivity. In both cases, B's content will stop appearing in A's feed, but with muting A still remains a follower of B. The main implication of this is that B cannot know that A has muted them, at

**Table 1.** Typology of categories of features for interpersonal disconnectivity.

	Does it affect A's feed?	Does it affect B's feed?	Is A still connected to B?	Is B still connected to A?	Can A and B see each other's profiles?
Block	✓	✓	x	x	x
Unfriend	✓	✓	x	x	✓
Unfollow	✓	x	x	n/a	✓
Mute	✓	x	✓	n/a	✓
Withhold	x	✓	n/a	✓	✓
Eject	x	✓	n/a	x	✓

**Table 2.** Names of the features in the platforms sampled.

Block	Unfollow	Mute	Unfriend	Withhold	Eject
Block	Delete contact	Ban	Delete friend	Hide my moments	Remove a follower
Banning a user	Remove a friend/contact	Block from commenting	Remove connection/friend	Hide my posts from this friend	
Blacklist	Unfollow	Hide	Remove connection/friend	Restricted list	
Block messages	Unsubscribe	I don't want to see this	Unfriend	Take a break	
Shield	Unwatch	Ignore			
Unmatch		Mute			
		No notifications			
		Not interested			
		Remove recommended content			
		Removing recommendations			
		Restrict			
		Snooze			
		Snooze DMs			
		Take a break			
		Timeout			

least not from within the service. This can be a powerful motivation for muting over unfollowing, as described by Lopez and Ovaska (2013).

Muting is one of two features that leave A's connection with B intact. The other is withholding. Indeed, in a way, muting and withholding are mirror images of one another. They both leave A's connection with B in place, and are agnostic as to B's connection with A, but they operate on different feeds. Both features are unknowable by B because A is not actually breaking their tie with B: B can identify changes in their list of followers (at least in theory), but short of looking at other people's devices or asking them, B cannot know that A has muted them, or excluded them from receiving content that they (A) have posted.

Unfollowing and ejecting are also mirror image features. When A unfollows B, A changes their own feed, while not impacting B's. When A ejects B, A changes B's feed, while not impacting their own. Blocking and unfriending do not have such mirror features because, as we can see in Table 1, they already operate on A and B's feeds. Unfollowing, muting, withholding, and ejecting, on the other hand, operate only on one of A or B's feeds, while what distinguishes them is whether or not the  $A \rightarrow B$  or  $B \rightarrow A$  tie remains intact.

**Table 3.** The categories and the services that offer the relevant features.

Block (36)	Unfollow (27)	Mute (16)	Unfriend (12)	Withhold (3)	Eject (4)
Academia	Academia	BlackPlanet	Discord	Facebook	Goodreads
Battle.net	BlackPlanet	Facebook	Facebook	QQ	Instagram
BlackPlanet	DeviantArt	Messenger	Goodreads	WeChat	TikTok
DeviantArt	Facebook*	Instagram	Hi5		Twitter <sup>†</sup>
Discord	Flickr	LinkedIn	LinkedIn		
Facebook	Goodreads	OK.ru	OK.ru		
Messenger	ICQ	QQ	QQ		
Flickr	Instagram	Snapchat	Snapchat		
Goodreads	Last.fm	Telegram	Twitch		
Hi5	LinkedIn	Twitch	VK		
ICQ	LiveJournal	Twitter	WeChat		
Instagram	OK.ru	VK	Xbox		
Last.fm	Pinterest	WeChat			
LinkedIn	QQ	WhatsApp			
LiveJournal	Reddit	Xbox			
MySpace	Sina Weibo	YouTube			
OK.ru	Skype				
Pinterest	Skyrock				
PSN	Snapchat				
QQ	Soundcloud				
Reddit	TikTok				
Sina Weibo	Tumblr				
Skype	Twitch				
Skyrock	Twitter				
Snapchat	VK				
Soundcloud	WeChat				
Telegram	YouTube				
TikTok					
Tinder					
Tumblr					
Twitch					
Twitter					
VK					
WeChat					
WhatsApp					
Xbox					

Notes: † = Most of the time, what Facebook calls “unfollowing” falls under “muting” in this typology, however, because it is possible to follow someone on Facebook without being friends with them, it is possible to unfollow in the sense described here of A breaking a tie with B; \* = This function was added to Twitter shortly after our sample period—It is included here because of the importance of Twitter in the social media ecosystem.

**Table 4.** Categories by service.

	Block	Unfollow	Mute	Unfriend	Withhold	Eject
Academia	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Battle.net	✓	–	–	–	–	–
BlackPlanet	✓	✓	✓	–	–	–
DeviantArt	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Discord	✓	–	–	✓	–	–
Facebook	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
FB Messenger	✓	–	✓	–	–	–
Flickr	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Goodreads	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
Hi5	✓	–	–	✓	–	–
ICQ	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Instagram	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓
Last.fm	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
LinkedIn	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–
LiveJournal	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
MySpace	✓	–	–	–	–	–
OK.ru	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–
Pinterest	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
PSN	✓	–	–	–	–	–
QQ	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
Reddit	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Sina Weibo	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Skype	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Skyrock	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Snapchat	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–
Soundcloud	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Telegram	✓	–	✓	–	–	–
TikTok	✓	✓	–	–	–	✓
Tinder	✓	–	–	–	–	–
Tumblr	✓	✓	–	–	–	–
Twitch	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–
Twitter*	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓
VK	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–
WeChat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–
WhatsApp	✓	–	✓	–	–	–
Xbox	✓	–	✓	✓	–	–
YouTube	–	✓	✓	–	–	–

Note: ✓ = yes, – = no; \* = the “eject” function was added to Twitter shortly after our sample period—It is included here because of the importance of Twitter in the social media ecosystem.

## 6. Conclusions

This article offers for the first time a classification of features for interpersonal tie dissolution such that each of the features identified in the feature analysis (see Box 1) can be allocated to one (and only one) of the categories (see Table 2). Moreover, it will also be possible to similarly allocate features that will be released in the future based on whether they act on my feed or the other person's, whether or not they leave the tie between us intact, and whether they render us visible to one another in the service or not. In this regard, I take inspiration from Carr and Hayes who hope that their work will be “robust enough to include future social media tools that have not yet emerged” (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 47).

It may be objected that this classification of features for interpersonal disconnectivity actually includes features that disconnect nobody: if A mutes B, there is no tie-breaking involved. However, given evidence that in social media people negotiate the tension between the outcome they seek from using a feature with the possible implications for face (theirs and the other person's), then muting certainly can be part of the dissolution of a digitally-mediated relationship (John & Gal, 2018; Lopez & Ovaska, 2013), which, as noted earlier, will not “wither on the vine.” Indeed, in a focus group study, Lopez and Ovaska (2013) showed how social considerations sometimes trump the technical outcome that users seek. That is, a Facebook user may refrain from unfriending someone (the technical outcome) because of the potential awkwardness should the two encounter one another outside Facebook (a social consideration). As a corollary to this, social media users may also achieve what a feature for tie dissolution might help them achieve without actually using any features. For instance, rather than unfollowing an Instagram tie, who might notice that they have been unfollowed, one could simply scroll past their posts or stories; or, rather than rejecting a Facebook friend request, one could leave it “in abeyance” (Light, 2014, p. 102; see also Lopez & Ovaska, 2013, pp. 6–7).

In another example of dissonance between designers' intentions and users' uses (see Bijker, 1992), there is growing evidence that features such as blocking and unfollowing are sometimes used in the service of bottom-up efforts towards moderation and governance, as perhaps most clearly seen in the use of shared blocklists (Geiger, 2016; Jhaver et al., 2018). In other words, while the motivation behind this study is to better understand computer-mediated interpersonal relationships, the tools for managing them can be used to achieve collective ends (e.g., Hallinan, 2021; O'Meara, 2019) through a process of de-description (Akrich, 1992).

A final conclusion is that the question of whether people are using these features in order to manage *people* or *content* remains underdetermined by my data. On the one hand, Sibona and Walczak (2011) found that people often unfriend others on Facebook because of their behaviors in offline settings; in such cases, the purpose is not to manage the content that person posts, but rather to put distance between oneself and the other person. On the other hand, research in political communication inquires into the role of cross-cutting opinions in unfriending, which puts content ahead of the person posting it (e.g., Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Neubaum et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017). Which one of these a particular act of unfriending or unfollowing is more similar to is knowable only if we ask the person carrying it out. However, the very fact that the same features for disconnectivity are offered for the purposes of managing people and content points to a blending of the two (Bucher, 2013).

Zooming out, this examination of how we can effect interpersonal disconnectivity in digitally-mediated environments raises questions for future research into the distinction between what a person is and what a

person says. This is a distinction that bearers of bad news have insisted upon for millennia, but one that on social media appears harder to sustain. Consider a social media tie who posts political content that you find deeply offensive. The way to prevent the content from reaching you will be to act somehow on the tie, as social media conflate the message with the messenger. The classification offered here could, for instance, serve as the basis of an empirical inquiry into which features are used when people are trying to curate a specific information environment, and which are used when people are trying to limit their contact with specific others.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data collected for this article are available online here: [https://osf.io/z4ky8/?view\\_only=52b3a1feadbb4686863e084fd046c590](https://osf.io/z4ky8/?view_only=52b3a1feadbb4686863e084fd046c590)

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## About the Author



**Nicholas John** is an associate professor at the Department of Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He studies digital culture through the lens of interpersonal relations, language, and technology. His current work focuses on technologies for ending online relationships, such as blocking and unfriending. He is the president of the Association of Internet Researchers.