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From Context Collapse to “Safe Spaces”: Selective Avoidance through Tie Dissolution on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether disconnective practices on social media such as unfriending could constitute a form of selective avoidance and investigates its boundary conditions. To do so, we study whether, to what extent, and under which conditions exposure to disagreement on social media predicts politically motivated unfriending. Specifically, we examine how the relationship varies in different relational contexts and whether it is conditioned by opinion minority status. Using survey data collected shortly before the 2017 Chief Executive Election in Hong Kong, we find cross-cutting exposure to be a significant predictor of politically motivated unfriending. This suggests that the disconnective practices represent a form of selective avoidance, but only among a relatively small number of social media users. We also show that only disagreements arising from political discussion with distant others predict unfriending. Furthermore, opinion minorities are more inclined to cut ties in the face of political disagreement than the majorities. Based on these findings, we discuss the weakness of weak ties on social media and characterize selective avoidance as a means to build digital “safe spaces”.

Introduction

Today’s social media landscape has two distinct characteristics—it is a high-choice information environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) offering greater user control (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). On the one hand, the expansion of weak ties increases the diversity of viewpoints in individuals’ online milieus (Barnidge, 2016; Goel et al., 2010; Kim, 2011). On the other hand, people

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can actively customize their newsfeeds by pruning their online social networks and making ad-hoc decisions about who to mute or disconnect from (Bode, 2016b; Dylko & McCluskey, 2012; Yang et al., 2017). Generally speaking, greater choice often requires stronger filtering capacity, which could potentially lead to an actual reduction in diversity (Bakshy et al., 2015; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Mutz & Martin, 2001). Since exposure to different views is crucial for cultivating an informed and tolerant citizenry (Mutz, 2002; Price et al., 2002), it is important to understand whether and how social media may promote the creation of homogenous political environments.

Existing research has often probed the question from the perspectives of selective *exposure* and *affiliation*. Findings show that when it comes to contentious politics, people tend to consume, seek, and share information consistent with their existing beliefs and rarely interact with those from the other side of the political spectrum (Barberá et al., 2015; Weeks et al., 2017; Yardi & boyd, 2010). Indeed, social media users craft their information exposure by selectively following/friending people and subscribing to their preferred sources. But more importantly, they can screen out attitudinally challenging views through post-hoc filtration, such as hiding content they do not want to see and severing ties with people they dislike and/or disagree with (Bode, 2016b; Dylko & McCluskey, 2012; Yang et al., 2017). Yet relatively little is known about whether and how individuals use these control mechanisms to selectively *avoid* challenging views.

Selective avoidance refers to individuals taking deliberate measures to shelter themselves from attitude-challenging information, often driven by defensive psychological mechanisms (Garrett et al., 2013). Research evidence suggests that even though the Internet affords users the ability to shape their information environment to their liking they do not systematically avoid disagreeing views online (Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Garrett et al., 2013; Garrett & Stroud, 2014). However, in the above studies the concept of selective avoidance was operationalized as either low levels of cross-cutting exposure or non-selection of counter-attitudinal content, which differs substantially from avoidance achieved by explicit actions such as unsubscribing from an information source. Furthermore, the above studies were conducted in the context of Web 1.0 ecologies, in which technological filtering was limited and people primarily avoided counter-attitudinal information by *looking away*. As Bennett and Iyengar (2008) pointed out, the reason why we did not find empirical evidence of the contemporary turn toward avoidance might have been due to the digital transformations not being fully completed at the time.

Given the above, this study aims to take another look at the phenomenon of selective avoidance, this time within the context of maturing social media ecologies. To do so, we focus on the deliberate disconnective action,

namely unfriending, which is defined as “a conscious act by a person to end the dyadic relationship and manifests itself through the removal of a link between the dyad” (Sibona, 2014, p. 1677). Since social media newsfeeds are curated by social contacts (Thorson & Wells, 2015), removing or suspending a digital tie will consequently filter out information from that person, and with the help of the algorithm prevent similar encounters in the future. Since weak ties are the most likely casualties of unfriending (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), tie dissolution can further restrict information flows and social interactions across ideological or partisan lines. We thus argue that such disconnective behaviors on social media constitute a form of selective avoidance.

To date, research on this topic is still rather scarce, with a mixed pattern of findings. Studies based on interviews show that social media users often attribute politically motivated unfriending to major ethical breaches (e.g., incivility, racism) or social dramas caused by the collapse of social boundaries (John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). Interestingly, people do not explicitly report political disagreement to be the main reason for unfriending, with some exceptions (Rainie & Smith, 2012). Evidence from survey studies is mixed; while several studies suggest that encountering political disagreement predicts tie dissolution (Bode, 2016b; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), others do not report such a relationship (Yang et al., 2017).

Our aim is to contribute to this nascent research program by further exploring the conditions of this relationship. To do so, we replicate the above-mentioned survey studies and examine the relationship between encountering political disagreements in online social networks and the likelihood of unfriending in a highly polarized society—Hong Kong. More importantly, we extend the research by focusing on two conditional factors, namely, the relational contexts in which political disagreements arise and the perceived opinion minority status. Previous studies have shown that people with more Facebook friends (and hence more weak ties) and those who discuss politics with weak ties are more likely to cut ties for political reasons, arguably because of disagreements emerging from such a relational context (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Skoric et al., 2018). Continuing with this line of reasoning, we propose a mediation model and explicitly test whether cross-cutting exposure arising from political discussion with distant vs. close others predicts unfriending differently. Furthermore, we investigate how this process is dependent on the opinion climate as perceived by individual citizens. Informed by the optimal distinctiveness theory, we ask whether individuals who perceive themselves to be opinion minorities are more likely to engage in selective avoidance through unfriending. Based on our results, we discuss the potential of disconnective practices to create digital “safe spaces” and their possible political ramifications.

This study was conducted in the context of the 2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive election. It was the first chief executive election following the Umbrella Movement in 2014 during which pro-democracy activists and citizens participated in large-scale protests demanding the implementation of universal suffrage. However, the election in 2017 was still conducted through an indirect electoral system that favors pro-establishment interests (Freedom House, 2018). Moreover, while the pro-democracy and pro-establishment divide has been a central feature of Hong Kong politics, there has been a rising level of polarization both among the elites and the general public since the Umbrella Movement, leading to a stalled political reform. Debates on social media about politics are rife with extreme opinions (Lee, 2016), and people tend to sort themselves into like-minded enclaves in their online political discussions (Chan & Fu, 2017). In such a situation, people are less willing to seek common ground and the desire to preserve social ties with disagreeing others may decline. We thus note that findings of the present study should be interpreted within the context of a highly polarized society.

Selective avoidance through tie dissolution

The exponential growth of social media platforms over the past decade has significantly extended individuals' online social networks. People could easily rekindle lapsed relationships, reach out to those from different backgrounds, and maintain a large repertoire of new and diverse ties (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011). As a result, a substantial fraction of social ties online are between those with differing political views (Goel et al., 2010). As social media platforms have become a major source for news, the heterogeneous network composition could in principle expose people to a diverse range of views (Barnidge, 2016; Kim, 2011; Yang et al., 2017).

However as a part of the human condition, people are predisposed to favor information congenial to their prior beliefs (Festinger, 1957; Fischer et al., 2005). Research evidence generally shows that people primarily choose news sources well-aligned with their ideological orientations and spend more time-consuming news consistent with their views (Garrett, 2009a; Hart et al., 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009, 2011; Stroud, 2008). Yet recent development highlights that although people selectively *approach* pro-attitudinal information, they do not *selectively avoid* counter-attitudinal content (Garrett, 2009b, 2009a; Garrett et al., 2013; Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Song, 2017). While selective avoidance refers to individuals taking deliberate actions to shield themselves from challenging views, existing survey studies operationalized the concept by measuring the level of cross-cutting exposure (e.g., Garrett et al., 2013). Noticeably, high levels of cross-cutting exposure are not sufficient to

rule out the existence selective avoidance behaviors, given the extent of incidental exposure online (Bode, 2016a; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2013). In experiments, selective avoidance is considered to occur when a participant does not select counter-attitudinal content within a short time frame (e.g., Garrett & Stroud, 2014). But this approach does not reflect the real-world situation in which people often employ post-hoc strategies to resolve dissonance. For example, according to the theory of motivated reasoning, after encountering disagreeing views people tend to reduce the dissonance by counter-arguing (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Relying on a two-wave panel survey, Weeks et al. (2017) find that incidentally stumbling upon discordant views on social media at Time 1 predicts deliberate seeking of confirming information at Time 2. By the same token, it is plausible that when exposed to counter-attitudinal information, people may also cut connection with the source of dissonance in order to dispel the psychological discomfort and to avoid challenging views in the future.

Existing survey research has generally supported the view that exposure to cross-cutting political content is a significant predictor of unfriending, with some exception (e.g., Yang et al., 2017). John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) show that, during the Israel-Gaza armed conflict in 2014, those who reported more cross-cutting exposure were substantially more likely to unfriend others on Facebook over political issues. Using the survey data collected by Pew Research Center during the 2012 United States presidential election, Bode (2016b) reports that perceived political disagreement on social network sites is positively associated with the likelihood of blocking or unfriending an online friend and hiding their feed because of political reasons. Nevertheless, a study by Yang et al. (2017) failed to find this relationship among Colombian adults, despite the existing political divisions in the society. The current study thus aims to replicate the above-mentioned studies in the context of post-Umbrella Movement Hong Kong, by proposing the following hypothesis:

H1. Cross-cutting exposure on social media is positively associated with the likelihood of politically motivated unfriending.

Cross-cutting exposure in different relational contexts

Previous research shows that when it comes to politics, people are more likely to cut weak than strong ties (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Skoric et al. (2018) report that discussing politics with weak ties is a significant predictor of politically motivated unfriending. The authors argue that this is likely because weak ties offer diversity and yet become brittle when

disagreements happen (Granovetter, 1973; Grevet et al., 2014). According to the principle of homophily, similarity breeds connection and mutual influence further increases similarity (McPherson et al., 2001). People in close personal relationships tend to be more similar to each other when it comes to their socio-political orientation and fundamental principles. In contrast, casual relationships are characterized by a higher degree of ideological and philosophical incongruence (Morey et al., 2012). At the same time however, the literature on interpersonal conflict states that close relationships can be a major source of disagreements as well (Teven et al., 1998). Despite their general political congruence, people sharing strong ties are actually more likely to discuss things they disagree on than people connected via weak ties (Morey et al., 2012). In other words, both strong and weak ties involve disagreements and yet the relational context affects how people experience, perceive, and react to disagreement. We thus extend the existing line of research by testing directly whether political disagreements coming from close vs. distant ties predict unfriending behaviors differently.

In close relationships, the shared common ground and trust could help people view disagreement in a positive light, channel the focus on opinion differences, and prevent disagreement from escalating into conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2002; Matthes, 2013; Morey et al., 2012). People sharing close ties are also incentivized to handle disagreement in constructive ways, since effective management of interpersonal disagreement not only eases the strain but can also improve relationships (Teven et al., 1998). These qualities are however largely missing in weak ties; since discussing politics with acquaintances and strangers is less constrained by the need to preserve social ties, people may be more confrontationally inclined.

Moreover, we argue that in a polarized society, people may easily categorize distant others expressing differing political views into out-groups, which can turn simple disagreement into a more serious conflict and lead to tie dissolution. According to anxiety/uncertainty management theory, strangers and distant acquaintances are at the unfamiliar end of the strangeness-familiarity continuum (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Interaction with this type of people is thus characterized by a limited amount of information, which gives rise to a high level of uncertainty and anxiety. In order to manage the situation, people tend to rely on heuristic cues such as group-based information to engage in simplistic information processing and make judgments (Gudykunst, 1993). This tendency is particularly strong in high-context cultures like Hong Kong (Duronto et al., 2005). This is also in line with the social categorization theory, which suggests that people attribute group features to individuals and categorize them into in- and out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). In other words, with little prior interaction or relationship history, people are likely to view distant others through the

lens of social stereotypes (i.e., oversimplified mental images of categories of people). Research on social identities consistently shows that social categorization is associated with intergroup prejudice and animosity (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of social media, existing research finds that interactions across the ideological lines tend to be confrontational and defensive and in effect reinforce in-group attachment (Yardi & boyd, 2010).

Additionally, social ties differ in respect to whether network selections are amenable to free choice. Certain work-related and kinship relations are deeply embedded in one's social network, which makes them difficult to dissolve even in the face of irreconcilable differences (Lazer, 2001). In comparison, weak ties are most susceptible to dissolution because they are socially dispensable—getting rid of them does not compromise other social ties (Quercia et al., 2012). Given the line of reasoning, we put forward the following research question and the hypothesis:

RQ1. Is political discussion with close others positively associated with cross-cutting exposure, which further predicts a higher likelihood of politically motivated unfriending?

H2. Political discussion with distant others predicts unfriending indirectly through cross-cutting exposure.

The moderating role of opinion minority status

People constantly monitor the climate of public opinion through their “quasi-statistical sense”, and by doing so they estimate their opinion minority or majority status (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This does not only influence how willing they are to express their opinions, but also how they perceive and react to disagreement in social interactions. Overall, opinion minorities are more cognizant of disagreement and more in need of support (McClurg, 2006), which may enable and motivate selective avoidance through tie dissolution.

Research shows that there are distinct differences in how opinion minorities and majorities perceive themselves and the world around them. First of all, by virtue of the minority status, opinion minorities tend to have a clearer self-concept compared to the majorities, especially when the opinions represent personal values. As a result, they can gauge others' political preferences with more accuracy and easily identify those who share their views as well as those who do not (Morrison & Wheeler, 2010). At the same time according to the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), people are motivated to define themselves in terms of their

uniqueness as individuals (need for differentiation of the self), as well as similarities to others (need for assimilation with others). They also desire to attain an optimal balance between the two competing motives. Since a minority status highlights differences, people holding minority views tend to be more sensitive about the level of support they garner from their social networks and have a stronger need to be around those who think alike. In comparison, opinion majorities do not respond to the negative signals sent from their networks as strongly and in fact have an elevated need for distinctiveness, because a majority status may threaten their sense of being a unique individual (Morrison & Matthes, 2011).

Since opinion minorities in general have high self-concept clarity and a strong need to belong, they may have additional abilities and incentives to filter out dissonant voices in order to increase the supportiveness in their networks. Besides, at the affective level, encountering network disagreement at a time when the need for support is high may inflict strong negative emotions like anger, which can exacerbate the need to reduce dissonance and motivate people to cut ties (John & Gal, 2018; Jonas et al., 2006; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). According to the appraisal theory, people experiencing negative high-arousal emotions are prone to take risks, spend scarce resources, and act with little contemplation (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Minority opinion holders may thus have a stronger impulse to sever ties with those holding opposing views as well. We thus propose that:

H3. The relationship between cross-cutting exposure and politically motivated unfriending is strengthened by opinion minority status.

Method

Sample

In order to test our research question and hypotheses, we conducted a survey between March 17th and 26th 2017 in Hong Kong, shortly before the Chief Executive election took place. The study received an approval from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee of City University of Hong Kong. The survey data was collected by a market research agency YouGov, using a panel-based approach known as “active sampling”. It generated 1,500 completed cases in total, among which 93.8% reported to be active social media users ($N = 1407$). The sample size was larger than in most survey-based studies on political unfriending published so far with the exception of Bode (2016b), because of the relatively low expected incidence of political unfriending among the general population in Hong Kong—previous research estimates it at around 13% (Skoric et al., 2018).

In terms of the demographics of the sample, the participants were between 18 and 77 years old, with a median age of 33 and a mean of 34.44 ($SD = 10.95$). Nearly half (48.93%) of the sample was female. On a 1–6 scale (1 = *less than high school*, 2 = *high school degree or equivalent*, 3 = *some college but no degree*, 4 = *associate degree*, 5 = *bachelor's degree*, 6 = *graduate degree*), the median education level is 4 (*associate degree*) and the mode is 5 (*bachelor's degree*). In terms of personal monthly income, the median income range is 6 (HK\$ 15,000–19,999) and the mode is 5 (HK\$ 10,000–14,999), on a 12-point scale (1 = *no income* to 12 = *HK\$100,000 or above*). Compared to the Hong Kong 2016 population census, our sample over-represents the younger population, arguably due to the nature of online panels; the mean age of the survey respondents ($M = 34.44$, $SD = 10.95$) is significantly lower than the population's average age of 49.01, $t(1499) = -51.53$, $p = .000$. 93.8% ($N = 1407$) of the participants reported to be active social media users and the non-users are excluded from analyses.

Measures

Cross-cutting exposure

We measured cross-cutting exposure on social media by asking respondents (1) how frequently they encountered political opinions different from their own and (2) how often they found themselves disagreeing with others on political issues on social network sites, using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very often*). The variable was computed by taking the mean ($r_s(1405) = .75$, $p < .001$; $M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.49$). We note that our measure implicitly relies on a “summary evaluation” of the object, i.e., cross-cutting views present in one's online social networks. This evaluation may result from prior experiences with the object, i.e., engaging in political discussion with others. Of course one may argue that social media users could learn others' political leaning and issue positions by simply reading their posts and comments without actual interactions. However, research has pointed out that people are often unaware of their social contacts' political orientations (Grevet et al., 2014), and that political discussion plays a crucial role for them to gather information (McClurg, 2003).

Political discussion with close and distant others

We adopted the scale from Skoric et al. (2018) to measure political discussions with close and distant others. Respondents were asked to report on a 7-point scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *all the time*) how frequently they discussed politics with the following four groups of people on social media in the past six months— (1) close friends and families, (2)

coworkers and friends, (3) strangers, and (4) people outside their families who are not of the same ethnicity or socio-economic status. Based on a Principle Component Analysis with a Promax (oblique) rotation, two factors emerged and explained 84.07% of the variance. Items (1) and (2), both reflecting discussion within one's social circle, highly loaded onto the first factor and explained 52.54% of the variance. Item (3) and (4), capturing political discussion outside one's immediate social circle, loaded onto the second factor and counted for 31.53% of the variance. The variable political discussion with close others was computed by taking the mean of the first two items ($r_s(1405) = .71$, $p < .001$; $M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.55$), and the variable political discussion with distant others was estimated by taking the mean of the other two items ($r_s(1405) = .57$, $p < .001$; $M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.40$). The two variables were weakly positively correlated ($r_s(1405) = .25$, $p < .001$).

Opinion minority status

To estimate perceived opinion minority status, we adopted the two-step measure that has been used in many spiral of silence studies (e.g., Gearhart & Zhang, 2013; Matthes et al., 2010). First, respondents were asked if they could vote which candidate they would vote for in the upcoming Hong Kong Chief Executive election (1 = *Carrie Lam*, 2 = *John Tsang*, 3 = *Woo Kwok-hing*, 4 = *None of the above*, 5 = *Don't know*, 6 = *I'll not vote*). Cases where the respondents reported 4 ($N = 172$), 5 ($N = 65$), or 6 ($N = 68$) were excluded from analysis. 51.13% ($N = 767$) of them reported to prefer John Tsang (candidate from the pro-democracy camp), followed by 17.73% ($N = 266$) voting for Carrie Lam (candidate from the pro-establishment/Beijing camp) and 10.80% ($N = 162$) for Woo Kwok-hing (independent candidate). Second, respondents were asked what percentage of the general population in Hong Kong they believed supported each of the three candidates, which summed to 100% (31 respondents reported "don't know" and were excluded from analysis). The percentage score of the preferred candidate indicated the level of support one believed to have from the general public. We then used the percentage to compute a majority/minority index: If respondents perceived less than 50% of the general public supported their preferred candidate, they were assigned the minority status (1 = *minority*, $N = 586$). The rest were given the majority status (0 = *majority*, $N = 607$).

Our measure of opinion minority status relies on the participants' estimate of the distribution of candidate preferences among the general public. We did not measure the actual minority status by comparing their candidate preferences with the election results. There are two reasons that we focused on their perceptions. For one, people react to the external environment based on perceived rather than actual reality.

Secondly, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong is elected by an electoral college composed disproportionately by non-elected professionals, business and trade elites. Many see it as being unfairly weighted toward business and Beijing's interests, instead of reflecting the popular preferences. Hence the election result cannot be used as an accurate indicator of the opinion climate.

Politically motivated unfriending

Respondents were asked if they had unfriended or unfollowed someone on social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter because of comments or posts related to politics in the past six months (1 = *Yes*, 2 = *No*, 3 = *Don't know*). We emphasized "someone in your social network, not celebrities or public figures" for the reason that this study focuses on personal networks rather than parasocial relationships. 9.81% ($N = 138$) of the respondents who used social media reported "yes", whereas 76.26% ($N = 1,073$) reported "no". 196 cases where the respondents answered "don't know", together with those who were not social media users ($N = 93$), were excluded from analysis.

Control variables

We controlled for demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and personal monthly income) and political orientations including political interest, internal and external political efficacy, and political discussion network size in our analyses. Previous research shows that they are significant predictors of politically motivating unfriending (e.g., Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2017), and that political interest and discussion network size are also consistent predictors of cross-cutting exposure (e.g., Barnidge, 2016; Castro-Herrero et al., 2018; Lu & Lee, 2020). It is thus possible that they might confound the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and politically motivated unfriending. In order to eliminate that possibility, we hold them constant in our analysis.

We estimated political interest with a single item on a 5-point scale ("How interested are you in what's going on in government and politics?" 1 = *extremely interested*, 5 = *not interested at all*; reverse coded; $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.04$). Internal political efficacy was measured by asking respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement "sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on" (7-point scale, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; reverse coded; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.40$). External political efficacy was gauged with two items— (1) "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think" and (2) "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" (both reverse coded, 7-point scale; $r_s(1405) = .61$,

$p < .001$; $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.26$). Political discussion network size was measured by asking respondents to estimate the number of people they had discussed political affairs with via social media in the past month (1 = *I didn't discuss political affairs*, 2 = *1–20 people*, 3 = *21–50 people*, 4 = *51–100 people*, 5 = *101–200 people*, 6 = *201 to 500 people*, and 7 = *more than 500 people*; $M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.49$).

The measurement of opinion climate incongruence may be confounded with the candidate preferences. For example, although there could be projection, many people knew that John Tsang was the front-runner. Therefore, those who supported Tsang were more likely than others to be opinion majorities. To cope with this confounding factor, the analysis also controlled for candidate preferences in the analysis. Additionally, existing research shows that issue importance and attitude certainty are important individual-level predictors of outspokenness, which tempers the spiral of silence effect (e.g., Matthes et al., 2010; Willnat et al., 2002). We thus also controlled for opinion certainty (“how certain are you in your preference for the Chief Executive candidate?” 7-point scale, $M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.57$) and issue importance (“How important do you think the upcoming Chief Executive election result is to Hong Kong?” 7-point scale, $M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.53$) in our analysis. The zero-order correlation coefficients of the key variables are listed in Table 1.

Results

We hypothesize that cross-cutting exposure is positively associated with politically motivated unfriending (H1), and examine if political discussions with close and distant others, respectively, are positively associated with cross-cutting exposure, which further predicts politically motivated unfriending (H2 and RQ1). To test the hypotheses and research question, we performed a mediation analysis using PROCESS v2.16 macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). With Hayes' (2013) model 4 template, we defined political discussion with close others (X1) and political discussion with distant others (X2) as the two independent variables, politically motivated unfriending as the dependent variable (Y), and cross-cutting exposure as the mediator (M). The results are listed in Table 2 and Figure 1.

First of all, cross-cutting exposure positively correlates with the log likelihood of politically motivated unfriending ($b = .24$, $SE = .10$, $p < .05$), when holding other variables constant in the model. H1 is thus supported. Regarding H2, results show that political discussion with distant others is a significant predictor of unfriending indirectly through cross-cutting exposure. Specifically, we first estimate the total effect size of the relationship without including the mediator cross-cutting exposure ($b = .41$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). To

Table 1. Zero-order correlations.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Unfriending (1)										
Cross-cutting exposure (2)	.24***									
Political discussion with known others (3)	.09**	.14***								
Political discussion with distant others (4)	.32***	.41***	.25***							
Perceived opinion minority status (5)	.05	-.04	-.00	-.02						
Political interest (6)	.22***	.40***	.14***	.33***	-.06*					
Internal political efficacy (7)	-.01	.03	-.09**	.01	-.04	.16***				
External political efficacy (8)	.01	.00	-.09**	.03	.04	.01	.38***			
Political discussion network size (9)	.32***	.40***	.08**	.55***	-.05	.30***	.05*	.08**		
Opinion certainty (10)	.06*	.21***	.17***	.09**	-.16***	.29***	.05	-.06*	.04	
Issue importance (11)	.03	.11***	.15***	.04	-.11***	.22***	-.10***	-.06*	-.03	.37***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

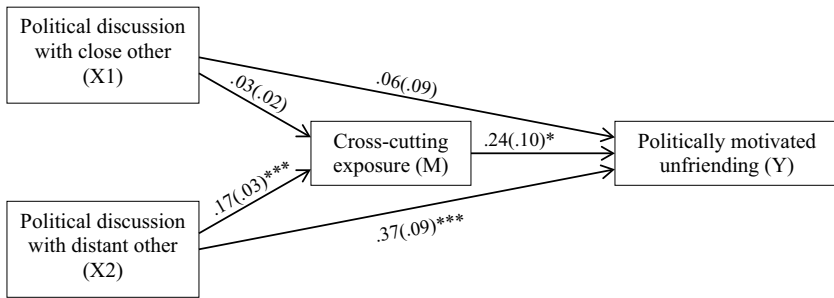


Figure 1. Mediation analysis model and results.

estimate the indirect effect, we then added cross-cutting exposure to the model; the relationship between political discussion with distant others and unfriending remains significant and positive ($b = .37$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). At the same time, political discussion with distant others is also positively associated with cross-cutting exposure ($b = .17$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). To summarize, the finding shows that the relationship between political discussion with distant others and unfriending is partially mediated by cross-cutting exposure ($b = .04$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .08]), accounting for 10.22% of the total effect. H2 is thus supported that political discussion with distant others positively associates with cross-cutting exposure, which further predicts the likelihood of unfriending. In contrast, political discussion with close others does not predict cross-cutting exposure nor the likelihood of unfriending.

Given the cross-sectional nature of our survey data, we cannot exclude the possibilities of alternative causal orderings. One could argue that people might encounter cross-cutting views simply by reading others' posts and comments, which may happen prior to political discussion. We thus estimated both theoretical models using sem command in Stata and compared their goodness of fit. The purpose is not to describe adequate fit for the models but to compare the relative fit of them. Since they are two different rather than nested models, we used the comparative measure of fit AIC for the comparison (Kenny, 2015). The result shows that the hypothesized model has a smaller AIC score (57,006.52) than that of the alternative model (57,073.91), indicating the former to be a better model fit.

H3 states that the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and politically motivated unfriending will be strengthened by opinion minority status. In order to test that, we performed a logistic regression with a two-way interaction effect, using perceived opinion minority status as the moderator (1 = *minority*, 0 = *majority*). The results support that perceived opinion minority status is a significant moderator of the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and politically motivated unfriending. As shown in Table 3, the interaction

Table 2. Summary of the mediation analysis ($N = 1211$).

	Cross-cutting exposure (M)	Unfriending (Y)	Unfriending (Y)
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Political discussion with close others (X1)	.03(.02)	.08(.09)	.06(.09)
Political discussion with distant others (X2)	.17(.03)***	.41(.09)***	.37(.09)***
Cross-cutting exposure (M)			.24(.10)*
Age	-.01(.00)*	.00(.01)	.00(.01)
Gender 1 = Male, 0 = Female	.15(.08)*	-.21(.21)	-.24(.21)
Education	.04(.03)	.04(.08)	.04(.08)
Personal monthly income	.01(.02)	.04(.06)	.03(.06)
Political interest	.34(.04)***	.48(.13)***	.39(.13)**
Internal political efficacy	-.03(.03)	-.06(.08)	-.05(.08)
External political efficacy	.00(.03)	.04(.09)	.05(.09)
Political discussion network size	.20(.03)***	.36(.07)***	.32(.07)***
Opinion certainty	.09(.03)***	.02(.08)	.00(.08)
Issue importance	.01(.03)	-.03(.08)	-.02(.08)
Constant	1.24(.27)***	-6.55(.88)***	-6.87(.89)***
R^2 /Nagelkerke R^2	.29	.26	.27
LR χ^2 / <i>F</i>	41.17***	172.48***	178.82***

X refers to independent variable; M refers to mediating variable; Y refers to dependent variable. Unstandardized regression coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

term (cross-cutting exposure \times opinion minority status) is positive and statistically significant ($b = .40$, $SE = .20$, $p < .05$). Specifically, cross-cutting exposure is associated with a substantially larger log odds of unfriending among

Table 3. Summary of logistic regression with two-way interaction ($N = 988$).

	Unfriending <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Cross-cutting exposure (X)	.08(.14)
Perceived opinion minority status (W) (1 = minority, 0 = majority)	-1.43(.92)
X \times W	.40(.20)*
Political discussion with close others	.06(.10)
Political discussion with distant others	.40(.10)***
Age	-.01(.01)
Gender 1 = Male, 0 = Female	-.35(.23)
Education	-.01(.08)
Personal monthly income	.06(.07)
Political interest	.40(.15)**
Internal political efficacy	-.07(.09)
External political efficacy	.04(.10)
Political discussion network size	.34(.08)***
Opinion certainty	-.01(.09)
Issue importance	-.03(.09)
Lam	.40(.38)
Tsang	.08(.34)
Constant	-5.95(1.14)***
Model Chi-Square(<i>df</i>)	177.40(17)***
% Correct predictions	87.45
Nagelkerke R^2	.31

X refers to independent variable; W refers to moderating variable. Unstandardized regression coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

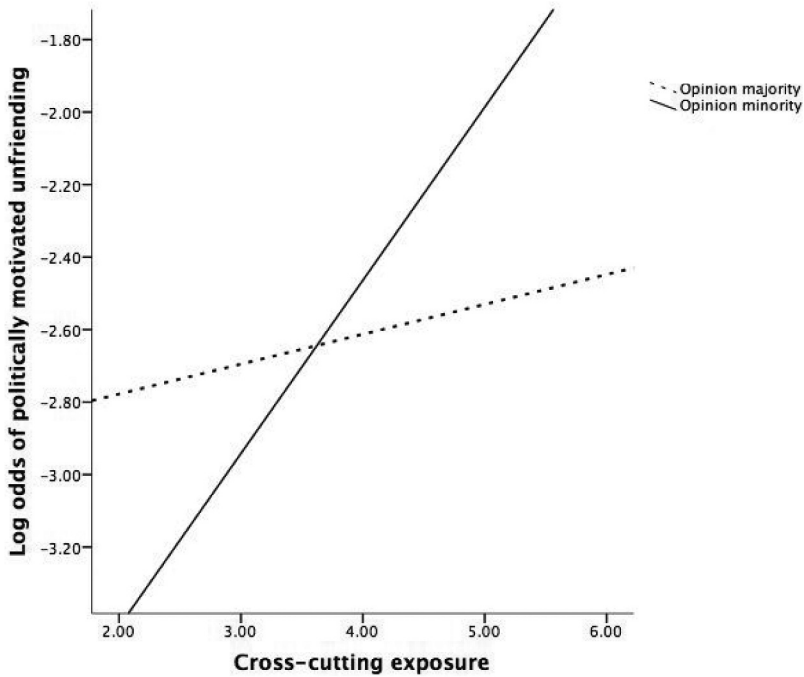


Figure 2. The log odds of politically motivated unfriending as a function of cross-cutting exposure and perceived opinion minority status.

respondents who perceive themselves among the opinion minorities ($b = .48$) than the majorities ($b = .08$) (Figure 2). Furthermore, cross-cutting exposure is only a significant predictor among the opinion minorities ($b = .48$, $SE = .16$, $p < .01$), but not among the majorities ($b = .08$, $SE = .14$, $p = .54$). H3 is thus supported.

We also tested if social desirability bias in self-report may have influenced the findings. Since unfriending can be seen as socially undesirable in general and cutting ties for political reasons may appear to be an act of intolerance, the respondents may underreport the behavior. In other words, they may choose the “don’t know” response while in fact having unfriended someone. To test this, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression predicting politically motivated unfriending with cross-cutting exposure and other control variables. Results show that, if a participant were to increase her cross-cutting exposure by one unit, the relative risk for preferring to report “yes” to report “don’t know” would be expected to increase by a factor of 1.39 ($b = .33$, $SE = .11$, $\text{Exp}(b) = 1.39$, $p < .01$). But it would not change the relative risk for preferring to report “no” to report “don’t know” ($b = .12$, $SE = .06$, $\text{Exp}(b) = 1.01$, $p = .85$). It suggests that contrary to

the social desirability assumption, those who reported “don’t know” are actually more similar to those who did not unfriend others, and distinct from those who reported to have done so.

Discussion and conclusion

This study focuses on the disconnective practices on social media that allow users to curate their information exposure through post-hoc tie dissolution, namely unfriending. Weighing in onto the discussion about whether new media technologies are facilitating a turn toward selective avoidance, we examine whether, to what extent, and under what conditions cross-cutting exposure predicts tie dissolution.

First of all, consistent with some of the previous findings (Bode, 2016b; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), we also find that encountering political disagreements in one’s online social network is a significant predictor of politically motivated unfriending. It presents some evidence that disconnective behaviors on social media could function as a means of selective avoidance. Nonetheless, this is not a dominant tendency in social media users’ behavior. Only 9.81% of the participants reported to have engaged in politically motivated unfriending during the period of six months. Existing research on unfriending in general suggests that people rarely remove online social contacts they have established, even when they are categorized as dispensable (Karr-Wisniewski et al., 2011). This is arguably because humans have an innate need to belong and fear losing a social bond forever (Krämer et al., 2015). This also appears to be in line with the existing evidence suggesting that most people refrain from actively avoiding content they disagreed with (Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Garrett et al., 2013; Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Song, 2017), even though the disconnective affordances allow them to effectively screen out attitudinally challenging information.

At the same time, we also acknowledge that political disagreements predict an increase in the likelihood of unfriending. For those practicing unfriending, it is an effective means to remove challenging information entirely from their versions of reality. Nevertheless, we also need to take into consideration the context of heightened political conflicts in interpreting this finding. When a society is gripped in a heated political conflict, people may become more inclined to display political badges and sort themselves into different political camps (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The defensive mind-set prevalent in such situations can also amplify selectivity bias (Frey, 1986). In an environment like this, disagreement runs a higher risk of being seen as a sign of relational transgression and threat to one’s closely held belief, thus triggering a desire to purge dissent (Wojcieszak, 2011).

Furthermore, our study expands the existing research agenda by investigating the boundary conditions of selective avoidance. Our findings suggest that not all kinds of political disagreements would lead to unfriending, and that many are not inclined to engage in such avoidance. Specifically, supporting Skoric et al.'s (2018) argument, the relationship stands *only* when cross-cutting views are associated with political discussion with distant others. Social media platforms allow users to easily expand their networks of weak and diverse ties. This is important for exposing individuals to novel perspectives, cascading information across previously disconnected networks, and mobilizing public attention and support at a larger scale. However, it is also such weak ties that are particularly weak in the face of political disagreement (Grevet et al., 2014; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). We argue that three explanations can be offered here. First, people are likely to interpret disagreement from someone they barely know as an indicator of fundamental incompatibility, which according to the principle of homophily can contribute to tie dissolution (McPherson et al., 2001). Second, because of the lack of prior relational histories and interdependence, people do not have the incentive to work their way through differences (Teven et al., 1998). Third, we need to interpret the findings in the context of Hong Kong where political identities occupy the collective psychological foreground and where the intergroup conflict between the pro-democratic and pro-establishment has intensified in the recent years. In an environment like this, people are likely to categorize strangers and distant acquaintances who express dissenting political views as a member of the out-group. This “us vs. them” social categorization is accompanied by intergroup animosity, especially in highly polarized environments (Iyengar et al., 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It may not only motivate individuals to sever ties but can also serve to legitimize their unfriending decisions.

In contrast, we find that political discussion with close others does not predict individuals' encounters with counter-attitudinal views. This is consistent with the principle of homophily (McPherson et al., 2001) and corroborates the existing empirical finding that strong ties are characterized by overall political congruence compared to weak ties (Morey et al., 2012). At the same time, existing research also suggests that the overall political congruence associated with strong ties does not mean there is no political disagreement; in fact, people are more likely to express than to avoid political disagreement with close others, arguably because of the intimacy and trust they share (Morey et al., 2012). If this is the case, our finding suggests that people sharing close relationships may not see disagreement as cross-cutting. This is arguably because disagreement is often aired in a benevolent way and individuals are more inclined to see disagreement as manageable opinion differences rather than truly misaligned values. Future research should examine what constitutes cross-cutting in different

relational context. Alternatively, we can also interpret the lack of political disagreement among close ties within the context of heightened political conflict— when politics becomes a particularly sensitive topic, we can expect people to be more inclined to avoid expressing political disagreement even within their close social circles, in order to preserve social harmony (Mutz, 2006). Further research is thus needed to distinguish between perceived and actual disagreement in different relational contexts, and examine how they predict selective avoidance differently.

Furthermore, our findings highlight the important role of opinion climate in this process, adding to our understanding of how the effect of network disagreement on individuals' behaviors is dependent on the aggregate social context. Specifically, the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and unfriending is stronger among people who perceive themselves to be opinion minorities than among their majority counterparts. It suggests that opinion minorities are more inclined to engage in selective avoidance through unfriending. We could understand this from the lens of social identity and intergroup conflict. According to social identity theory, minority group membership tends to be salient to individuals and hence promote the formation of their social identities (Huddy, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Optimal distinctiveness theory also suggests that minorities have distinct self-concept clarity, which helps develop a strong internalized identity (Brewer, 1991). As the voting preferences closely aligned with the pro-establishment vs. pro-democratic political identities in the 2017 Chief Executive election, we could reasonably expect the opinion minority status to evoke stronger in-group identification and out-group antipathy. Consequently, for opinion minorities, encountering cross-cutting views is likely to activate negative emotions associated with the opposing political group, which can propel people to cut ties. This is further exacerbated by the intense conflict between the opposing camps during the large-scale protests (Sherif, 1966), which triggers defense mechanisms especially among those feeling marginalized. Since defense motivations accentuate confirmation bias (Festinger, 1957; Frey, 1986; Hart et al., 2009), it is likely that opinion minorities use unfriending as a dissonance reduction strategy. Furthermore, we argue that by engaging in such selective avoidance, opinion minorities could build digital "safe spaces" where they are surrounded by like-minded others and where they can express themselves without feeling threatened. Indeed, previous research demonstrates that cutting ties with people one disagrees with is associated with an increased likelihood of online political expression and protest participation (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Zhu et al., 2017). Nevertheless, while selective avoidance may provide an important psychological and social mechanism to defend minority views under certain circumstances, it also prevents people from

hearing the other side, which consequently could reinforce existing cleavages and lead to political gridlocks.

We also note the potential limitations of the present study. First of all, the mediation model tested implies a causal path that political discussion gives rise to cross-cutting exposure, which further leads to unfriending. However, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, we cannot make strong causal claims. Acknowledging this issue, we compared the model with the alternative model statistically, and found the proposed model to be a better fit. It also seems more likely that cross-cutting exposure would lead to tie dissolution rather than vice versa; if we cut ties with people holding opposing views, our networks should be expected to become less rather than more heterogeneous. Second, the measures of the main variables in this study, i.e., cross-cutting exposure, political discussion with others, and politically motivated unfriending all used the implicit screening item “about political issues”. It required respondents to determine if the content they encountered, the discussions they had, as well as the incident of unfriending were about politics. We thus cannot exclude the possibility of systematic measurement error (Prior, 2013). Future research may consider tackling the issue by measuring the variables using behavioral trace data, if possible. Third, our study does not directly measure who gets unfriended. Although the finding shows that political discussion with distant others predicts unfriending, we can only infer that weak ties are the casualties. Fourth, we did not conduct a priori power analysis in order to estimate a sufficient sample size. Finally, we note that the findings should be interpreted within the context of Hong Kong, a highly polarized society characterized by an intense, ongoing conflict between the opposing political groups. Future research should aim to replicate the findings in other research contexts, i.e. by comparing the findings from high vs. low conflict environments.

In conclusion, the disconnective affordances of social media enable a form of selective avoidance, which increases homogeneity in individual users’ online environments. Nevertheless, this is not a prevalent trend on social media, even when political conflicts and polarization remain strong on the ground. Only disagreements arising from political discussion with distant others predict unfriending, with minority status exacerbating selective avoidance, arguably as a means of creating digital “safe spaces” in which minority views can be expressed and discussed more openly.

Notes on contributors

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