

Can Disconnection Make Us Discuss Politics Freely? A Moderated-Mediation Model of Cross-Cutting Exposure on Social Media Political Expression via Politically Motivated Unfriending and Blocking Contingent upon Fear of Social Isolation

ICA Pre-Conference: Digital Asia

Authors: Wang Haoyu*¹, Wang Dandan¹, Cao Wenwen²

¹ Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

² The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

*** Correspondence:**

Wang Haoyu

wanghaoyu@ruc.edu.cn

Note: For ease of reading, this is an excerpt from the original article.

Introduction

Social media afford users an expanding repertoire of tools to express themselves in a (semi-) public arena (Bozdog, 2020) and increase users' chances of being exposed to cross-cutting opinions (Kim, 2011), which may lead to tie dissociation and content filtration on social media (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Scholars argue that disconnective political behaviors on social media can be understood as a means toward digital safe spaces for those who fear social sanctions (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). But whether the "safe spaces" can facilitate people to discuss politics freely is still questionable. Although fear of social isolation (FSI) can strengthen the positive relationships between political disagreement and unfriending and blocking (Zhu & Skoric, 2023), previous research has consistently indicated that FSI makes individuals self-censor and dampen their political expression to avoid social sanctions (Weeks et al., 2024). According to social projection effect, people tend to perceive a high degree of similarity between themselves and others (Cho & Knowles, 2013). Thus, when individuals unfriend or block others, they also worry about being dissociated from others in turn, and the threat of isolation dampens their political expression on social media. Given the little direct research on this, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and social media political expression (SMPE)?

RQ2: What role does politically motivated unfriending, blocking and fear of social isolation (FSI) play in this relationship?

Method and Results

We conducted a nationwide survey between December 9th and 22nd 2023 in mainland China. 900 participants were recruited from a market research agency Credamo (<https://www.credamo.com/>), a member in the ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) and its services have been acknowledged for meeting the authoritative international standards. We limited the sample to Weibo and Wechat users. we asked participants, “Have you used Weibo or WeChat in the past year?” Then we conducted further surveys with those who had used social media in the past year.

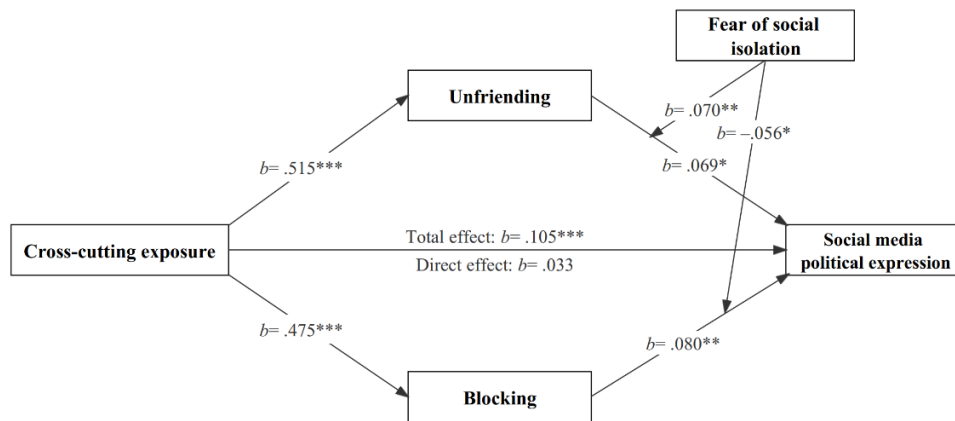


Figure 1. Conceptual model with path coefficients

The structural modeling was employed using bruceR package (Bao,2021; see Figure 1) in R. The findings indicated a positive relationship between cross-cutting exposure and SMPE ($b = .10, p < .001$). This association was mediated by unfriending and blocking, showing higher levels of cross-cutting exposure results in increased unfriending ($b = .51, p < .001$) and blocking ($b = .47, p < .001$). Subsequently, unfriending ($b = .06, p < .05$) and blocking ($b = .08, p < .01$) positively correlated with SMPE. Additionally, FSI moderated the mediation relationship ($b_{unfriending \times FSI} = .07, p < .01$; $b_{blocking \times FSI} = -.05, p < .05$). The plots in Figure 2 and Figure 3 demonstrate the interaction of unfriending and blocking with FSI. The results indicated that as the FSI increased, the slope of the unfriending level also increased, but the slope of blocking in decreased. For total analysis outcomes see Appendix A and Appendix B.

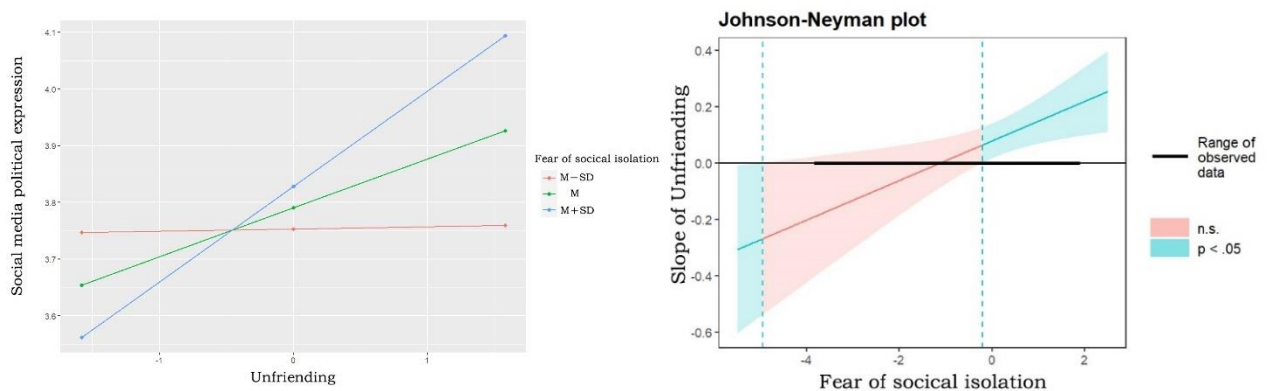


Figure 2. Interaction effect of fear of social isolation on unfriending.

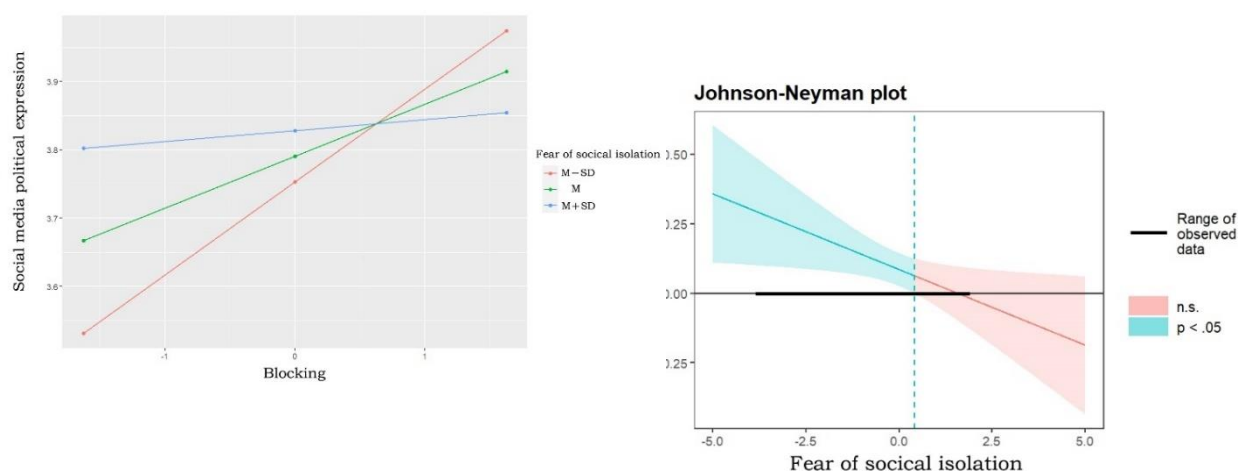


Figure 3. Interaction effect of fear of social isolation on blocking.

Contributions

This study has the following contributions to research. First, this study supports previous research that unfriending as a means to build digital “safe spaces” can facilitate political expression (Zhu & Skoric, 2023), and further discusses the strength of “safe spaces”, that is, for those who fear social isolation more, this space is safer. Second, the research proposes differentiated treatment of specific disconnected behaviors. Because, although blocking as a content filtration strategy positive association with SMPE, for those who fear social isolation blocking cannot drive them to discuss politics freely. Finally, this study sees disconnection as a “democratic paradox” (Zhu, 2023), which is simultaneously engaging and disengaging. Specifically, public discussion based on disagreement on political issues is a cornerstone of democratic politics (Habermas, 1991), and unfriending as well as blocking positive mediate the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and SMPE, which have democratic potential. But to those who fear social isolation, blocking dampens their SMPE.

References

- Bao, H.-W.-S. (2021). *bruceR: Broadly useful convenient and efficient R functions*. <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=bruceR>.
- Bozdog, C. (2020). Managing diverse online networks in the context of polarization: Understanding how we grow apart on and through social media. *Social Media+ Society*, 6(4), 2056305120975713.
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kim, Y., & Chen, H.-T. (2016). Social media and online political participation: The mediating role of exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives. *Telematics and Informatics*, 33(2), 320–330.
- Weeks, B. E., Halversen, A., & Neubaum, G. (2024). Too scared to share? Fear of social sanctions for political expression on social media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 29(1), zmad041.
- Cho, J. C., & Knowles, E. D. (2013). I'm like you and you're like me: Social projection and self-stereotyping both help explain self-other correspondence. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 104(3), 444.
- Zhu, Q., & Skoric, M. M. (2021). From context collapse to “safe spaces”: Selective avoidance through tie dissolution on social media. *Mass Communication and Society*, 24(6), 892-917.

2024 International Communication Association – Digital Asia

Zhu, Q., & Skoric, M. M. (2023). When politics is personal: Curating safe spaces through disconnection on instant messaging platforms. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 1-15.

Zhu, Q. (2023). The Politics of Disconnection: A Systematic Review of Politically Motivated Unfriending. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 24.

Appendix A. Predicting disconnective political behaviors and political expression on social media.

	Social media political expression	Unfriending	Blocking	Social media political expression
	<i>b</i> (<i>se</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>se</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>se</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>se</i>)
Constant	3.78(.03)***	2.98(.04)***	3.27(.04)***	3.79(.03)***
Gender	.01(.07)	.04(.09)	.05(.10)	-.00(.07)
Age	-.02(.02)	-.03(.03)	-.01(.04)	-.01(.02)
Education	.03(.05)	.05(.06)	.06(.07)	.03(.04)
Monthly income	.02(.02)	-.05(.03)	-.07(.04)	.03(.02)
Internal political efficacy	.23(.03)***	.02(.05)	.04(.05)	.22(.03)***
External political efficacy	.10(.02)***	.03(.02)	-.01(.03)	.10(.02)***
Political ideology	.04(.01)*	-.00(.02)	-.01(.02)	.04(.01)*
Political interest	.36(.04)***	.09(.05)	.04(.05)	.35(.04)***
Social media use frequency	-.09(.04)*	-.22(.05)***	-.15(.06)*	-.06(.04)
Political discussion network size	.45(.03)***	.17(.04)***	.17(.04)***	.43(.03)***
Cross-cutting exposure	.10(.02)***	.51(.03)***	.47(.03)***	.03(.03)
Fear of social isolation		-.02(.04)	-.01(.04)	.01(.03)
Unfriending				.06(.03)*
Blocking				.08(.03)**
Unfriending × FSI				.07(.02)**
Blocking × FSI				-.05(.02)*
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.519	.231	.172	.537

Note: FSI = Fear of social isolation; $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Appendix B. Testing for indirect effect.

Path	FSI	Indirect Effect	Boot SE	<i>p</i> Value	[Boot 95% CI]
CCE → Unfriending → SMPE	3.967(−SD)	−.007	.023	.755	[−.053, .037]
	5.143(<i>M</i>)	.036	.018	.044*	[.001, .070]
	6.319(+SD)	.078	.025	.002**	[.029, .128]
CCE → Blocking → SMPE	3.967(−SD)	.070	.023	.002**	[.026, .117]
	5.143(<i>M</i>)	.038	.016	.019*	[.008, .072]
	6.319(+SD)	.007	.022	.759	[−.036, .052]

Note: CCE= Cross-cutting exposure, SMPE= Social media political expression, FSI= Fear of social isolation; Bootstrap sample size = 10000, CI = confidence interval; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.