Facebook Fallout: Future Contact Avoidance After Being Unfriended on Facebook

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Abstract

Objectives: Determine the factors that predict whether a person who is unfriended on Facebook will avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them.

Results: The research results show that six factors can predict whether a person will avoid future contact with the individual who unfriended them: whether the person discussed the event after it occurred, the emotional response to the unfriending, whether the person who was unfriended believed it was related to their offline behavior, the perceived geographical distance between dyad, whether difficulties were discussed between the dyad prior to the event and how the person valued the peak-tie strength of the relationship.

1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNS) are where Americans spend the largest share of their time online; Americans spend approximately 25% of their time online on SNS and blogs [19]. Social network users form these connections under a variety of contexts, ranging from maintaining existing relationships, forming new romantic connections, and creating new online friendships [26], these relationships are fluid and the relationship may be dissolved as easily as they are formed. Unfriending has become a widely-used feature of social networking sites; Pew Internet found that 63% of users unfriended at least one member of their online social network in 2011 up from 56% in 2009 [17].

Facebook’s mission is to “make the world more open and connected”1 but these connections are not immutable. The word unfriend was named the word of the year by the New Oxford American Dictionary for 2009 [8]. The dictionary defined unfriend as follows: “unfriend – verb – To remove someone as a ‘friend’ on a social networking site such as Facebook”2. The word suggests that the dissolution of the relationship has social and emotional significance, but there is little research to confirm this view.

The research examines potential consequences to relationship dissolution on Facebook. Facebook behavior is naturally confined within the computer-mediated setting; however, the consequences of actions on the site extend beyond the confines of Facebook. The dissolution of the relationship may have real world consequences like future contact avoidance of the person who has unfriended a member of the network. This research may help identify where computer-mediated and face-to-face relationships share similarities. This research may help develop future lifecycle models of online behaviors from the initial friend request to maintenance of the relationship and potential dissolution.

1.1. Friendships Formation and Dissolution

Friendships are formed and maintained because they are rewarding to individuals [29]. Friendships tend to be formed by people who share certain similarities (such as values) [14, 18]. People tend to create friendships with those who share a similar race and ethnicity followed by age, religion, education, occupation and gender and roughly in that order [18]. The largest portion of friendships that are formed with those who are not family members are through organizational structures [18]. Schools, work, and geographic location are major factors in how relationships are formed.

Friendship formation in the real world has more nuance than in the online world. The initiator of the friend request may communicate the desire to be friends with varying degrees of directness [10]. Those who initiate the friendship in less direct ways can avoid embarrassment and rejection should the request not be accepted. Computer-mediated settings (e.g. Facebook) lack this nuance and make it very clear that one person requests the other’s friendship through the visible friend request. Variations in how directly or indirectly friendship requests are made offline [10] are somewhat eliminated on Facebook, where a request is sent or not sent. The online requests are either accepted or...
“ignored.” boyd [1] notes that some social network site (SNS) users accept friend request because it is easier to say “yes” than “no.”

Facebook users undergo a series of steps to unfriend. There is no way to mass unfriend; a user must go to each individual’s page, scroll down and click the link “unfriend” to unfriend. This link is placed in a relatively obscure location compared to the prominently placed “Add as Friend” button that is displayed prominently next to a person’s name. The process to add a friend requires that the invited person grant permission for the union; unfriending is unilateral and no permission is needed to unfriend. In most cases the person who was unfriended does not receive notification that they have been unfriended. Many people only notice they have been unfriended when they go to view a member of their network and that person is no longer displayed as a friend, or when they compare their friendship list to recent memory to find additions and absences.

Research evidence is still emerging to clarify how Facebook friendships do and do not resemble offline friendships in their formation, characteristics, and dissolution [20]. After users join Facebook, they are asked to identify others in the network with whom they have an existing relationship. Thus Facebook users tend to maintain existing social ties with people they know rather than seek out new friends on the social network [7]. However, although these relationships may vary from weak- to strong-ties, there is some consensus that the majority of ties on Facebook are weak [7, 16]. This may be because of the ease at which friendship can be maintained through low levels of commitment [16], or because strong-ties are more likely to be maintained with face time, thus obviating a need for social media.

Relationship dissolution in the real world has been defined by Duck as the permanent dismembership of an existing relationship [6]. Duck [6] developed a four phase process model for relationship dissolution. The intrapsychic phase is the first phase of dissolution where a person reflects on the relationship and evaluates its costs and benefits; the person tends to discuss the relationship with third parties who not directly familiar with the relationship. The dyadic phase is where the dyad discusses the difficulties in the relationship directly in order to resolve any issues. The relationship may still be repaired at this stage. The social phase begins when the dyad begins to discuss their dissatisfaction with the relationship with others in their social network (e.g. mutual friends). During the social phase members may provide support, mediation, and advice and may help maintain the relationship or encourage its dissolution. The final phase, grave-dressing, occurs when the dyad broadcasts to others that the relationship has dissolved. Grave-dressing allows a member to work through a post-mortem of the relationship to avoid similar issues in the future.

Sibona and Walczak [22] found four common online reasons and two common offline reasons for unfriending on Facebook. The four online reasons were frequent/unimportant posts, polarizing posts (politics and religion), inappropriate posts (sexist, racist remarks, etc.) and everyday life posts (child, spouse, eating habits, etc.) and in that order of frequency. The two offline reasons were disliked behavior and changes in the relationship. The research also showed that 55% of people unfriended someone for their online posting behavior, 28% for their offline behavior and 17% unsure.

Relationship dissolution in computer-mediated settings may resemble dissolution in non-mediated settings although little is known about either phenomenon [20, 18]. Hatfield et al.’s [11] noted that reactions to dissolution include a range of emotions including: shock, disbelief, denial, anger and bitterness, guilt, sadness and depression, loneliness, desperation, indifference, relief, euphoria. The reactions are moderated by gender, culture, self-esteem and overall approach to the relationship. Those who experience relationship dissolution often contemplate the causes of the dissolution through attributional-search or account making [27]. The members tend to have different narratives regarding the cause of the dissolution regarding the same event; the stories members create tend to be simple, linear and more logical than the actual events [4]. This process of account making often involves both discussing the dissolution with the partner, and “going public” about it with others in the immediate network. Duck [4] and Weber & Harvey [27] argue that this is the key to gaining a sense of finality and completion of the event, and to the restoration of positive affect.

Relationship dissolution is less researched than friendship formation partly because longitudinal datasets are required to compare the ties at different times [18]. Friendship dissolution research in non-computer-mediated settings is largely based on close relationships including close friends, romantic partners and divorce [18], emotional reactions to unfriending on Facebook may differ simply due to the greater preponderance of weak-ties [7]. McPherson [18] found that network structure has a role in tie dissolution; members who are less central to the group (those are have fewer connections to core members) are more likely to leave the group. Some real-world friendships end in conflict but most simply fade away [24]. Facebook users might only hide the posts of weak ties, rather than choose to unfriend them, and instead reserve that action when one is making a point about the end of formerly meaningful relationships, not
unlike the process of going public proposed by Duck [5]. Quercia et al. [20] examined how online unfriending between Facebook dyads may differ from offline unfriending and found few differences. The research found that important factors that predicted friendship dissolution were whether the dyad was embedded in the same social circle, the age difference between the dyad, and whether one of the two members were neurotic or introverted. Relationships that had a common female friend were more stable than those with common male friends.

Williams et al. [28] examined the emotional effects of ostracism in computer-mediated environments (cyberostracism) through a series of experiments. Williams et al.’s model of ostracism has two factors; (1) the *needs-threatened* which includes a sense of belonging, control, meaningful existence and self-esteem and (2) the *aversive impact index* which includes lowered mood, intensity of ostracism and lowered group cohesiveness. Unfriending on a social network may resemble cyberostracism which is a form of exclusion and ignoring that occurs in computer-mediated environments [28]. Ostracism differs from other forms of rejection in that it is less clearly defined and more ambiguous; those who are ostracized are often kept from participating with others without an explicit confrontation or explanation. Ostracism in online settings can be more ambiguous than in real-life settings because there is a lack of real-time cues that occur in face-to-face settings [28]. In one experiment, participants were placed in an online chat room and were intentionally left out of conversations. Subjects who experienced cyberostracism had lower moods, feelings of belonging, control, self-esteem and meaningful existence [28]. People who are unfriended may face similar psychological effects as cyberostracism because unfriending may be viewed as a form of social exclusion.

2. Study Design

The research was conducted using a survey to determine the survey respondents’ opinions and behaviors about unfriending on Facebook. The survey was conducted solely on the Internet using a commercially available survey tool. The survey questions are a combination of established questions from previous studies and new questions to examine friendship dissolution in online settings plus demographic questions.

Part one of the survey asked questions about the type of person unfriended, whether it was for online or offline behavior, questions about the friendship and questions about online and offline behavior. Part two mirrors part one of the survey and asks questions about the type of person who unfriended the survey respondent, their perception of whether it was for online or offline behavior, questions about the friendship and questions about their offline behavior. Part two adds additional questions to part one to determine how the survey respondent was affected by the unfriending. Part three asks questions about how many friends the survey respondent has, how many people they have unfriended, how many people they regularly interact with, and questions about their online posting behavior. Part three also asks questions about satisfaction, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of Facebook. Part four asks demographic questions: age, gender, education, the number of years of social network use and whether the person lives in the United States of America. The analysis of this study concentrates on part two of the survey.

2.1. Data Collection

Survey recruitment was conducted by sending Twitter users who posted about unfriending a reply asking them to take a survey about the topic. The respondents were found and recruited through Sibona and Walczak’s method of Twitter recruitment [23]. Twitter was used to recruit survey participants for several reasons: Twitter has a large user population where the majority of users have publicly accessible messages; Twitter users had a good fit with research (social network sites); it is a simple process to contact a person on Twitter through the @reply mechanism; and the tweets can be screened for recruitment purposes. It is also helpful to recruit people to the survey who had a recent experience with the matter for two important factors [2]: (1) Those who experienced an event more recently may be able to provide more accurate answers because the event occurred recently. (2) Those had recently experienced an event may be more willing to take a survey about the topic because they may still be thinking about the topic. Experiences need to be reported immediately after they have happened in order to be remembered [2]. There is not a random sample in this research; a purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants. The recruitment tweet was sent in a single tweet of 140 characters and provided enough information to the Twitter user to take the survey. The recruitment tweet was designed to follow the methodology of Dillman [2] as much as possible within the constraints of Twitter.

Surveys were collected between April 17th and September 15, 2010 for 151 total days. 7,327 recruitment tweets were sent during the time period. A total of 2,865 surveys were started and 1,552 were completed; 54% of those who started the survey completed the survey. The number of surveys in the analysis varies depending on
the path the user took during the survey as not every survey respondent answered all four parts of the survey. The analysis of future contact avoidance analyzed 582 survey responses. The surveys were started by 39.6% of those who were sent tweets and completed by 21.3%. Twitter respondents were gathered by screening tweets that had the term “unfriend,” “defriend,” or “unfriending.” Tweets that met a screening criterion were sent replies inviting the person to take the survey about unfriending. The tweet reply sent was retweeted by many people who received the initial tweet.

2.2. Method

The raw data was collected from a commercially available survey tool (Survey Monkey) and analyzed with SPSS version 18. The survey used methods such as factor analysis to find commonalities among the questions, Cronbach’s alpha to measure reliability and linear regression to determine the relationship of independent variable on the dependent variable. Factor analysis was used to partition questions into meaningful groups. Constructs were generated based on the factor analysis and interpretation of the results. Cronbach’s alpha measure of reliability was calculated for each construct. Constructs were generated by averaging the individual Likert-type questions into a single composite variable. Linear regression was used to determine how the independent factors predicted the dependent variable (future contact avoidance).

The constructs network vigilance, dyadic discussion about unfriending, grave-dressing, offline behavior, geographical distance, peak tie strength, personal responsibility and affect were generated and used to predict future contact avoidance. The constructs represent both internal motivations for future contact avoidance and dyadic motivations. That is, network vigilance is not related to the person who unfriended them but an internal motivation. Measuring the peak tie strength is dependent on the perception of one member of the dyad about the other.

Statistical tool selection is based on the appropriateness to the model and unit of analysis. Linear regression was used to determine how both continuous and discrete variables are related to the dependent variable. The dependent variable in this study is continuous and discrete variables related to the study (e.g. number of friends in common) then the demographic variables. In each subsequent step of the analysis a variable would be removed if its statistical significance was greater than .10.

There are several control variables used to adjust the primary constructs in the study; the control variables are: age, gender, location (reside in U.S. or outside U.S.), number of interactions with Facebook users, number of friends on the site and years of social network site use. Madden noted significant gender differences in the way men and women manage their profiles; women were more restrictive in how they managed their privacy settings [17]. Age has been shown to be correlated with unfriending behavior as well; Madden noted that younger Facebook users unfriended members of their social networks more often than older users [17]. Several studies have found cultural differences (based on location) in how information systems are perceived by the user [15, 13]; this study uses location as a proxy to culture to determine whether U.S. Facebook users have different behaviors regarding unfriending compared to those who reside outside the U.S. The number of interactions measures the number of friends with whom the user typically interacts and may be related to the bridging social capital that users obtains from the site [30]. Joinson [12] found several differences in frequency of use and time spent on the network site that varied based on the number of friends on the site and may have an unfriending behavior. The variable years of social network site use is used as a proxy for SNS self-efficacy. Users who have used SNS for longer periods of time (which includes sites other than Facebook, such as Twitter) may be related to that user’s SNS self-efficacy and may have an effect on the dependent factors. The control variables are not the primary predictive variables in this research but are used to control for user differences.

3. Results

3.1. Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to determine appropriate clusters for the individual questions. Factor analysis provides a method to condense the information from a number of original variables into a smaller set with minimal losses of information [9]. Principal component analysis was used to determine whether
the affect/behavior questions asked were distinct factors based on Eigenvalues greater than 1. The factors were rotated using the Varimax function to determine factor loadings. Component groupings were then analyzed and named according to the questions in the group. Three constructs were confirmed and generated for affect and behavior: affect, avoid contact & network vigilance. Two constructs were confirmed based on Duck’s dissolution model: dyadic phase and grave-dressing phase.

The overall model fit was assessed on two models - the affect/behavior model and Duck’s Dissolution Model and are considered acceptable. KMO measure of sampling adequacy for the affect/behavior model and Duck’s Dissolution model are .857 and .640, respectively, and are considered acceptable by Hair [9]. The three factors in the affect/behavior model explain 75% of the variance for the factors. The two factor loadings for Duck’s Dissolution model explain 75% of the variance for the factors. Factor analysis is considered acceptable for social science research where more than 60% of the variance is explained [9]. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity is statistically significant for the both factor models at the .001 level.

3.2. Construct Creation & Reliability Results

Constructs were generated based on the factor analysis results – see Table 2. The Cronbach’s alpha for the constructs were calculated. The six constructs are considered reliable: Cronbach’s alpha measures above .70 are considered acceptable [9]. Table 2. shows the reliability of the nine constructs and number of questions in the construct. Fifteen types of friends were analyzed in the research; these friend types are: church, college, common interest, family member, friend of a friend, friend through a child, friend through a parent, friend through a spouse, grade school, graduate school, high school, neighbor, romantic partner, work and other.

3.3. Future Contact Avoidance Histogram

Future contact avoidance is skewed to the right where a large percentage of survey respondents who were unfriended stated that they would not avoid future contact (13%) – see Figure 1. This research shows that there is a wide range in the future contact avoidance of friends on Facebook and those who are unfriended appear to experience a wide range of responses from avoidance to non-avoidance but the largest group was unlikely to avoid future contact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affect/Behavior Factors</th>
<th>Affect</th>
<th>Avoid Contact</th>
<th>Network Vigilance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It bothered me that this person unfriended me</td>
<td>.862</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt sad after this person unfriended me</td>
<td>.838</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was surprised to be unfriended by this person</td>
<td>.736</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was amused to be unfriended by this person</td>
<td>-.665</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would avoid seeing this person in real life after the unfriending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to see this person in real life after the unfriending</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be uncomfortable for me to see this person in real life after the unfriending</td>
<td>.904</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would avoid seeing this person in real life after the unfriending (2)</td>
<td>.901</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to see this person in real life after the unfriending (2)</td>
<td>.864</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be uncomfortable for me to see this person in real life after the unfriending (2)</td>
<td>.246</td>
<td>.853</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duck’s Dissolution Model</th>
<th>Dyadic</th>
<th>Grave-Dressing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person who did the unfriending stated dissatisfied with relationship</td>
<td>.923</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person who did the unfriending stated friendship in trouble</td>
<td>.919</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common friends know the relationship is over</td>
<td>.851</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual friends know through Facebook</td>
<td>.790</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriended told others</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross-loadings above a .200 threshold are shown in the summary table

Table 1. FACTOR ANALYSIS

3.4. Avoidance Descriptives

Three questions were used to determine a survey respondent’s position of future contact avoidance after being unfriended; survey respondents were asked if they avoid, did not want to see, or would be uncomfortable after being unfriended – see Table 3. The three questions were combined into a single construct future contact avoidance with factor analysis and reliability shown in
Table 2. Construct Descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>bothered, sad, surprised, amused</td>
<td>.794</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid Contact</td>
<td>avoid, do not want to see again, uncomfortable, avoid (2), do not want to see again (2), uncomfortable (2)</td>
<td>.950</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Vigilance</td>
<td>look at friends number, find person who unfriended</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic Discussion</td>
<td>stated dissatisfaction with relationship, stated friendship in trouble</td>
<td>.846</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grave-Dressing</td>
<td>common friends know relationship is over, mutual friends know through Facebook, unfriended person told others</td>
<td>.748</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline Behavior</td>
<td>did misdeed, distrust, dislike, disliked behavior, betray broke rule, disliked personality, new information</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Distance</td>
<td>lives far away, do not see often, will probably not see again</td>
<td>.707</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak tie strength</td>
<td>very good friends, committed to relationship, spent lots of time together</td>
<td>.907</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Responsibility</td>
<td>could have tried to maintain relationship, could have eased tension in relationship</td>
<td>.747</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid (listwise)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>571</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All questions are based on a 1-7 Likert-type scale

Table 3. Avoidance Descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>No Opinion %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It would be uncomfortable for me to see this person in real life after the unfriending</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to see this person in real life after the unfriending</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would avoid seeing this person in real life after the unfriending</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5. Regression Analysis for Future Contact Avoidance

Linear regression was used to determine whether the eight constructs (affect, network vigilance, dyadic discussion about unfriending, grave-dressing, offline behavior, geographic distance, peak relationship and personal responsibility) are significant factors in whether a person who is unfriended will avoid contact with that person. There are nine discrete variables included in the regression equation: (1) the number of friends a person has on Facebook, (2) the number of friends with whom the person interacts, (3) number of times the person has unfriended others, (4) frequency that the person looks at Facebook for updates, (5) frequency that the person updates their own Facebook account, (6) the number of
friends in common between the dyad, (7) the type of friend, (8) frequency that the person was seen in the last year, and (9) the length of the friendship. There are five demographic variables included in the regression equation: age, gender, education, years of social network site use, and whether the person lives in the US. The number survey responses analyzed for this regression analysis is 582.

The analysis uses avoid contact as the dependent variable to model how the independent continuous and discrete variables may predict whether a Facebook user will avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them. All of the constructs were measured with a 1-7 Likert-type scale; avoid contact was measured from 1 (will not avoid future contact) to 7 (will avoid future contact). The coefficient of determination was measured using the adjusted R² measures. The adjusted R² for the 12 variable equation is .283; which means that approximately 28% of the variance in the construct avoid contact may be explained by the factors in the equation. The residuals of the regression equation are heteroscedastic and show no signs of bias in the equation. Six of the constructs were statistically significant: grave dressing, offline behavior, affect, dyadic discussion and how the person valued peak of the relationship; three discrete variables were statistically significant. Personal Responsibility was omitted from the regression analysis because it had missing correlations with the dependent variable avoid contact. Positive coefficients indicate that the person was more likely to avoid future contact and negative coefficients indicate that the person was less likely to avoid future contact. See Table 4. for details.

The regression equation coefficients for the continuous and discrete variables may be interpreted as follows. Six of the constructs were statistically significant and an examination of the coefficients indicates the magnitude and direction of the effect. Grave-dressing was the most important factor in whether the survey respondent would avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them. The more the survey respondent perceived that they discussed the unfriending with someone (not the person who unfriended them) the more likely that survey respondent will avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them. The second construct, affect, had the second largest effect and indicates that the more negatively affected (e.g. sad, bothered) the survey respondent is about the unfriending the more likely the survey respondent would avoid future contact. The third construct, offline behavior had the third largest effect and indicates that the more the survey respondent perceived the unfriending was related to their own offline behavior the more likely the survey respondent would avoid future contact. The fourth construct, geographical distance, indicates that the larger the perceived geographical distance between the dyad the more likely that the survey respondent would avoid future contact. The fifth construct, dyadic discussion, indicates that the more the survey respondent perceived that the person who unfriended them discussed the unfriending prior to its occurrence the more likely that they would avoid future contact. The last construct, peak, indicates that the higher the survey respondent valued the peak of the relationship with the person who unfriended them the less likely they were to avoid future contact. Two of the discrete variables are negative in their direction and one, gender, is positive. Negative coefficients indicate that the person is less likely to avoid future contact. An example from the Table 4. is that if the friend type is a family member then the survey respondent is less likely to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them compared to all other friend types. The discrete variable, gender, is positive and indicates that women are more likely to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them compared to men.

### Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Continuous Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.803</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grave Dressing</td>
<td>.430</td>
<td>.396</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline Behavior</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Distance</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed unfriending in dyad</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>-.101</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discrete Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yrs soc networking (6)</td>
<td>-.525</td>
<td>-.069</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type: Family Member</td>
<td>-.622</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>.048</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Yrs Soc Networking (6) >10 year of social network site use, Gender: Male (0), Female (1).*
offline behavior, (4) whether difficulties were discussed between the dyad prior to the event, (5) the perceived geographical distance between dyad, and (6) how the person valued the peak-tie strength of the relationship.

Facebook users who discussed the unfriending with someone (not the person who unfriended them) after it occurred, what Duck [6] terms grave dressing, had the strongest predictive power, overall, for how strongly a person may avoid or be uncomfortable around the person who unfriended them. Duck [6] has hypothesized that relationship dissolutions pass through at least four stages before achieving closure. These are an intrapsychic stage, a dyadic stage, a social stage, and a grave-dressing stage. Each of these refers to a specific means of coming to terms with problems in the relationship, depending on whom a dissatisfied partner discusses their problems with, and whether this discussion occurs before or after the breakup. Both the dyadic and grave-dressing stages were examined in the present research in order to test whether Facebook unfriending is at all related to the current understanding of relationship breakups.

Grave-dressing occurs because people feel a need to publish a record of the relationship’s demise and work through a post-mortem of the relationship so that future relationships may not develop the same issues [6]. Facebook users who perceived they went through a grave-dressing process by discussing the unfriending event with others were more likely to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them and may indicate that the person discussed the event and is ready to move forward. It is unlikely that those who discussed the unfriending with others simply had weak-tie relationships with the Facebook user and thus may be more likely to discuss the event. The peak-tie strength construct remains in the analysis (although is the weakest predictor in the model) and is a distinct construct from grave-dressing and the effects are disambiguated through the step-wise regression analysis.

Dyadic discussions between two Facebook friends occasionally occur prior to unfriending where a dissatisfied member addresses concerns regarding the relationship in attempt to fix the issues before dissolution may occur. This research does not differentiate who initiated the conversation about the trouble in the relationship; it could be the person who did the unfriending or the person who was unfriended. Facebook users who felt more strongly that they discussed trouble in the relationship prior to its dissolution were more likely to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them. Dyadic discussions are the fourth strongest predictor for future contact avoidance and are also part of the Duck model of friendship dissolution. Facebook users may want to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them because the one member knew that there was an existing issue that caused friction in the dyad, that the issue remained unresolved, and that the eventual unfriending was a signal that relationship is over. One of the technical affordances that Facebook has that face-to-face relationships do not is that there is a clear signal regarding the relationship through the symbolic link that connects users on social network sites online that does not exist offline. Often in face-to-face settings one member does not know who dissolved the relationship because most relationships fade away [24].

Users who experience a larger negative emotional response to being unfriended (affect) were more likely to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them compared to those who experienced a less negative emotional response. Affect is the second strongest predictor for future contact avoidance. It is notable that this construct is the second strongest predictor since it most directly measures the psychological state of the person who was unfriended. Facebook users who have processed their emotions by discussing the unfriending with someone else (grave-dressing) is a stronger predictor for future contact avoidance compared to the negative emotions regarding the particular unfriending. This result supports cognitive-behavioral therapy perspective where how a person processes an event can be have a larger role than the event itself.

Users who felt more strongly that their own offline behavior was negative said they would avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them. The offline behaviors in this survey are strongly negative in tone, e.g., “I betrayed this person in real life,” and, “This person unfriended me after I violated a rule in real life,” so those who believe they did these types of misdeeds appear to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them more than those who did not engage in these behaviors. The person who was unfriended may recognize that their own behavior was unacceptable, and, after the unfriending, may believe that the person is sent a signal that they no longer want to see the survey respondent. The negative behavior was based on self-report survey items so the survey respondent realized that their behavior was negative; this is not a case where the person did not realize their actions could be interpreted negatively. Negative offline behavior was the third strongest predictor for future contact avoidance.

Facebook users who perceived larger geographical distances between the dyad said they were more likely to avoid future contact with the person who unfriended them. Geographical distance was the fifth strongest predictor for future contact avoidance. Having a larger physical distance between the dyad may make it easier to avoid contact with the person who unfriended the survey
as described by Duck [6]. While most relationships in the
relationship is over they make a public declaration online
network site users have a sense of integrity, i.e. when the
One reason that unfriending may still occur is that social
members do take the step to publicly dissolve the tie.
no longer be displayed in the news feed but some
could simply hide the members’ posts so they will
too frequently about political subjects. Facebook users
have blocked, unfriended or hidden someone for posting
Rainie & Smith [21] found that 10% of Facebook users
appear to be more troubling in online conversations.
from 56% in 2009 [17]. Certain topics, like politics,
unfriending still occurs and has increased to 63% in 2011
over time; the site has attempted to present users with
more relevant information through news feed improvements and customizations, generates smart lists based on organizational settings (e.g. education and work) and geographic proximity to more narrowly cast a message, and allows users to hide all posts from a specific member from the news feed. The news feed is the center of the Facebook home page where there is a constantly updating list of posts from the member’s social network and the organizations that a person follows. The news feed attempts to show the most relevant content based on proprietary algorithms and includes factors like how many friends are commenting on a post, who posted the content, and type of content (link, photo, etc.).

Despite the new technical capabilities on Facebook, unfriending still occurs and has increased to 63% in 2011 from 56% in 2009 [17]. Certain topics, like politics, appear to be more troubling in online conversations. Rainie & Smith [21] found that 10% of Facebook users have blocked, unfriended or hidden someone for posting too frequently about political subjects. Facebook users could simply hide the members’ posts so they will no longer be displayed in the news feed but some members do take the step to publicly dissolve the tie. One reason that unfriending may still occur is that social network site users have a sense of integrity, i.e. when the relationship is over they make a public declaration online by unfriending the user - this is similar to grave-dressing as described by Duck [6]. While most relationships in the real world simply fade away [24], some relationships end as a consequence of a particular event and unfriending someone may feel like the appropriate action for a user e.g. after romantic relationship dissolution one member may unfriend the other on the social networking site to signal that this relationship is over.

5. Limitations

Participants in the present study were not recruited randomly. Respondents were recruited via Twitter by approaching users who had used the terms “unfriend,” “defriend,” or “unfriending.” The goal this sampling method was to reach people from whom Facebook’s unfriending tool was meaningful and relevant, but it may also have led to the over-representation of those who had been strongly affected by a recent experience. Future studies will work to reach a broader range of participants in order to widen the generalizability of our results.

The recruitment method may be biased toward survey respondents who had higher levels of grave-dressing as they were tweeting about unfriending on Twitter. It remains unclear how many users feel that tweeting about unfriending is the same as publicly declaring the end of the relationship. Approximately 37% of survey respondents agreed that they told others that they are no longer friends with the person who unfriended them despite their tweeting about unfriending.

Finally, the coefficient of determination (R²) may be considered relatively low and indicates that approximately 28% of the variance in the construct future contact avoidance may be explained by the factors in the equation. The low coefficient of determination indicates that there are factors that may explain whether someone will avoid future contact with someone who unfriended them that are not measured in the model. The coefficient of determination is likely to be acceptable given the difficulty in measuring the psychological response to unfriending at this stage of research.

6. Conclusion

The goal of the present research was to investigate factors that predict whether a Facebook user will avoid contact with a person after being unfriended on Facebook. The research results show that six factors can predict whether a person will avoid future contact with the individual who unfriended them: (1) whether the person discussed the event after it occurred, (2) the emotional response to the unfriending, (3) whether the person who was unfriended believed it was related to their offline behavior, (4) the perceived geographical distance between dyad, (5) whether difficulties were
discussed between the dyad prior to the event and (6) how the person valued the peak-tie strength of the relationship.

These findings help place unfriending within the greater context of relationship dissolution. The extent to which social network sites are different from offline relationship dissolutions will need to be examined further in subsequent research, but the present study makes clear that unfriending is meaningful and has important psychological consequences for those to whom it occurs.

References