



## Online News Consumption and Unfriending: A Mediating Moderated Role of Disagreement and Religiosity

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### Abstract

Social media platforms provide a space to discuss political matters, and at the same time, their features to filter and select exposure and friend lists lead to unfollowing and unfriending. Unfriending, unfollowing, and hiding are big problems in participatory democracy that create echo chambers on social media platforms. This study has attempted to explore the predictors of unfriending. Quantitative approach of survey methods has been applied to get the responses of 375 valid sample size through a nonprobability sampling technique of purposive sampling. It was found that online news consumption, online political discussion, and online political disagreement have significantly predicted unfriending. Similarly, multiple sequential mediations through the Hayes process were also applied, and it was found that political discussion and political disagreement mediate the relationship between online news consumption and unfriending. Moreover, it was also explored that religiosity did not have any impact as a moderator on the unfriending.

**Keywords:** Online News Consumption, Political Discussions, Political Disagreement, Unfriending, Social Media Platforms, Religiosity, Echo Chambers

### Introduction

In the contemporary media landscape, social networking sites (SNSs) have emerged as dominant spaces for political engagement (Kharel, 2024), offering users not only access to political content but also interaction, discussion, and collective mobilization. With the growing consumption of political news on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, users increasingly find themselves in echo chamber spaces where like-minded individuals reinforce shared opinions, potentially excluding dissenting perspectives (Sunstein, 2007). This phenomenon has raised questions about the quality of democratic dialogue and the role of social media in shaping political tolerance and behavior. Online news consumption has become a central aspect of youth engagement with politics. Unlike traditional media, social media algorithms personalize news content based on user preferences, encouraging selective exposure and reinforcing existing biases (Bakshy et al., 2015; Guess et al., 2018). This personalization often leads users to encounter only ideologically aligned content, intensifying political polarization and contributing to social fragmentation. Scholars have identified this behavior as contributing to the formation of “filter bubbles” and echo chambers, which in turn influence users' willingness to engage in cross-cutting political discussions (Nguyen & Vu, 2019). A notable consequence of this digital segmentation is the increasing trend of unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking individuals on social media due to political disagreement. Unfriending, defined as the conscious removal of a social media contact due to interpersonal or ideological conflict, has become a mechanism by

which users manage their digital environment (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). Several studies have shown that individuals who are frequently exposed to politically charged or disagreeable content are more likely to disengage by filtering their social networks (Bode, 2016; Goyanes et al., 2021). This behavior may be viewed through the lens of rational choice theory, which posits that individuals seek to maximize personal comfort and coherence in their information environment by minimizing exposure to cognitive dissonance (Becker, 1978). The consumption of news on online platforms has been extensively recognized as a primary precondition of political involvement and social network management in the digital space. Political awareness, interest, and participation brought about by exposure to political information on online news sites are likely to be converted into more regular expression and engagement with politics on social media. According to the research of Baysha (2020), politically active individuals who have larger online networks are more likely to lose contact with one or more contacts, indicating that more active people are also more likely to conflict with each other. This trend shows that increased political participation, which is eased using online news, can unwillingly undermine social interactions.

Political discussions, especially on contentious issues, often become uncivil, emotionally charged, or polarizing. Online platforms, while providing space for deliberation, frequently host debates that escalate into conflict due to anonymity, lack of accountability, and the immediacy of digital communication (Skoric et al., 2018). When political discussions deteriorate into disagreement, users may opt to unfollow or unfriend contacts who challenge their viewpoints, further contributing to ideological homogeneity in their digital circles (Yang et al., 2017). In the Pakistani context, the interplay between politics and religion adds another dimension to digital behavior. Pakistan is a society where religious identity is deeply woven into public and private life, and political discourse often overlaps with religious sentiments (Khan, 2014). While religiosity has been linked to increased political participation and moral engagement, it may also be associated with lower tolerance for opposing views. This dual role of religiosity as both a source of ethical guidance and potential rigidity makes it a significant factor to examine in relation to political unfriending.

Yoo et al. (2018) have said that social media presents distinctive features of filtering of the religious and political information, which leads them to choose and unfollow or unfriend friends who differ from their political ideologies. Bakshy et al. (2015) raised the concern that if social media users unfriend or unfollow others on political disagreement, it increases the risk of the construction of echo chambers. Guess et al. (2018) stressed that the selective exposure, echo chambers, and filter bubbles are fueling growing polarization between the parties and divergent views about basic facts, further weakening the state of democracy. Despite the growing body of research on political behavior in digital spaces, there remains a gap in understanding the combined effects of online news consumption, political disagreement, and religiosity on unfriending behavior, particularly within non-Western, highly religious societies. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the mediating roles of political discussion and political disagreement and the moderating role of religiosity on unfriending behavior among social media users in Pakistan. Grounded in rational choice theory, the study aims to explore the predictors of political unfriending and the social-psychological mechanisms that drive users to disengage from dissenting views online.

## **Literature Review**

Perrin (2015) has maintained that there are several elements that affect the people who choose to unfriend others in their network for political purposes. Moreover, being unfriended is most prevalent among those who are very fundamental and extreme in their ideological beliefs and active participation in politics. Unfriending is “a conscious act by one person to end the dyadic relationship,” which “manifests itself through the removal of a link between the dyad” (Sibona, 2014, p. 1677). Sasahara et al. (2021) have stressed that social media provides a very suitable platform in which people have a choice to segregate the information and to unfollow or unfriend others, and their findings endorsed that those who are largely exposed to social media and have disagreeable political views are more likely to unfollow and unfriend others and want to remain in

homogeneous communities. Similarly, the people who consume online news and spend more time on social media are more likely to unfriend or unfollow, or mute others, due to political purposes or ideological differences (Zhu et al., 2017).

Political unfriending is defined as the intentional deletion or disconnection of online social relationships due to political disagreement, ideological conflict, or exposure to a different political opinion on social media. Political unfriending is not like passive avoidance strategies like ignoring content, but rather an active and deliberate attempt to control one's social and informational surroundings. It is described as a voluntary decision of an individual to terminate the dyadic relationship, which is expressed by the elimination of contact between two people in an internet network (Sibona, 2014). This behaviour plays an important role in political life as a means of controlling the ideological frames and decreasing attitudinal dissonance exposure. Baysha (2020) found that people who are more politically active and with more online friends are more likely to disconnect from one or more of them. John and Gvirsman (2015) have found that political unfriending is the most common among people who engage in political discussions. People who consume more political news are more likely to discuss online. Skoric et al. (2018) have maintained that unfriending/unfollowing behaviour together was significantly associated with individuals' outspokenness about the issue. The people who are politically active and discuss online are politically outspoken. Perrin (2015) postulated that politically active and ideologically extreme people tend to unfriend other people more frequently due to political reasons.

The social media platforms also give users unparalleled control of their informational and social landscape. It was pointed out by Sasahara et al. (2021) that such platforms enable individuals to filter what they see and disengage with the unwanted contacts, demonstrating that users who have a high exposure to political content and well-established ideological beliefs are more likely to unfriend people, which could maintain their ideologically homogeneous networks. Again, Zhu et al. (2017) established that those who read more online political news and take increased time on social media platforms have higher chances of unfriending, unfollowing, or muting others because of political differences. The consumption of online news has positive ramifications on the way people curate their social media space, particularly in politically charged situations. The more people read political information on the internet, the more opinions of this kind tend to reaffirm or question their ideologies. Bakshy et al. (2015) proved that the filter algorithm of Facebook reveals its customers to mainly ideologically compatible content that decreases the bandwidth of information and the tolerance to dissident opinions. When this exposure is broken by opposition information presented by other people, users are often keen on unfriending or unfollowing them. Zhu et al. (2017) also demonstrated that time-intensive people consuming online political information are less likely to disagree and unfriend the sign of disagreement, like during an election or a protest, which are high-stakes events.

Political unfriending is also closely associated with the trends of political discourse on social media. Online political debate may be a way to stimulate participation and civic expression, but it tends to make political differences more obvious in personal connections. John and Gvirsman (2015) discovered that the people who often discuss politics on social media have a much higher chance of unfriending others (especially during times of political crisis). Their analysis of Facebook users in the 2014 war in Gaza showed that political discussion can create tension between people so much that users terminate their relationships with those who have different opinions. In the same line, Skoric et al. (2018) also stated that politically vocal people are more likely to unfriend and unfollow, which implies that political discourse serves as a trigger that reveals incompatibilities in ideologies and increases the likelihood of a social conflict. According to Bode (2016), when exposed to political conflict over contentious events, including election campaigns, users tend to cull their social networks as a way of coping with the discomfort in their minds and feelings. Similar findings were also provided by Yang et al. (2017), who showed that the relational strain caused by ideological differences under close social relationships is triggered, and people begin unfriending others to regain ideological homogeneity in their online spaces. Sasahara et al. (2021), in turn, confirmed the findings of the other study by implementing computational modelling and showing that repeated exposure to conflicting political

propaganda leads to more instances of unfriending, promoting the creation of ideologically homogenous echo chambers faster. These studies, in combination, indicate that political conflict, as well as a cause of interpersonal strife, can also serve as a behavioural catalyst encouraging users to engage in the active reorganisation of their online networks.

Emotional and behavioural responses to disagreement are also a mediator in the connection between utilisation of news and unfriending. Neely (2021) revealed that when people are regularly exposed to political content on social platforms such as Facebook during the 2020 U.S. elections, they are more likely to adopt avoidance strategies and unfriend someone. The finding was further extended by Goyanes et al. (2021), who demonstrated how uncivil discourse combined with political news consumption results in direct filtering behaviours. Computational modelling performed by Sasahara et al. (2021) indicated that exposure to politically disparate material leads to higher probabilities of social pruning activity, such as unfriending, which further promotes the establishment of ideologically homogeneous echo-chambers. Taking together, these works confirm that online news consumption does not occur as a neutral act, but instead, it can influence the boundaries of social networks actively by means of unfriending. In line with this argument, John and Gvirsman (2015) found that political unfriending is most common among users who discuss politics often. The consumption of news online facilitates people to comment, share, and discuss political news, and in the process, makes the political attitudes more visible in personal circles. Consequently, there are higher chances that politically expressive users will be faced with disagreement by others. In line with these results, Skoric et al. (2018) showed that the unfriending and unfollowing patterns are strongly connected with political outspokenness, indicating that outspoken people are more susceptible to social friction and tension. Combining these studies, it can be suggested that the use of online news has an indirect role in unfriending through political engagement and facilitating the possibility of disagreement.

Political talk can elicit interaction in social media; however, interpersonal relationships improve when the talks are on subjects of positive or agreeable issues but turn against commitments when brought to the heated or even controversial topics. The study of John and Gvirsman (2015) was able to ascertain that people were found to unfriend people, especially during a political crisis, because of the mismatch that transpired due to the political talk. In their research on the Israeli Facebook users in the 2014 Gaza conflict, they found that there was usually a social tension involved in political discussions and that users would deactivate their friends who portrayed varying opinions. Equally, Skoric et al. (2018) revealed that political outspokenness on the Internet had a close connection with selective avoidance and filtering. People who regularly talk about politics have a higher chance of getting into conflict and decide to unfriend people to save their ideological harmony. These tendencies indicate that the political discourse, particularly in heated settings, may become a catalyst for unfriending. The behaviour correlates with the results given by Bode (2016), according to which, more engaged in discussing politics tend to clean their social networks and filter out those who disagree with them. Therefore, the subject discussed in the political arena regularly is attributed to the likelihood of a conflict, as well as coping behaviour to unfriend.

Goyanes et al. (2021) have conducted cross-sectional, lagged and autoregressive tests and found the positive relationship between uncivil political discussion and unfriendliness. They also found that the people who use social media for news and discuss online politics in an uncivil manner are more prone to filter/block the users they follow or are in contact with. The previous studies suggested that the individuals who are politically active are more likely to unfriend and mute others who have politically opposing views from the existing views of others, hence political disagreement plays as a catalyst in the process of unfriend (Kim et al. 2021). The connection between the consumption of online news and political interaction is also influenced by the means of algorithmic filtering of social networks. Bakshy et al. (2015) proved that algorithms, especially those on Facebook, are more likely to present the user with information that is ideologically aligned, which supports current beliefs and denies the user access to dissenting opinions. Such a selective exposure lowers the tolerance of political dissent, and there is also a possibility that emotional responses can increase when

counter-attitudinal information is received. Ideological differences formed in the context of a person-to-person interaction, instead of algorithmically defined feeds, tend to elicit defensive responses such as unfriending or unfollowing opposing contacts (Zhu et al., 2017). These results indicate that news consumption on the Internet is not a passive or neutral activity, but it has an active influence on the makeup of political practices and shapes the means by which people handle ideological diversity in their social networks.

One of the most consistent predictors of unfriending behavior on social media is an act of political disagreement. Bode (2016) notes that online users tend to prune their online networks through the unfriending and unfollowing practice, especially when there are contentious political campaigns, like during elections. Questions on disagreements in politics. Even though exposure to political disagreement leads to cognitive discomfort, it was found that most users address the issue by getting rid of the dissenting voices. In the same way, Yang et al. (2017) discovered that political differences on social media often lead to network filtering amongst users. They demonstrated that conflicting ideologies with close social acquaintances were the key to tensions that would prompt users to defriend or unfriend those who would allow them to regain a sense of ideological homogeneity in their online worlds. The final support can be traced to Sasahara et al. (2021), who employed a computational model and simulated the outcomes of political disagreement after introducing social influences. Their findings confirmed the presence of clustering among individuals as well as the faster establishment of the echo chamber based on unfriending activity that was caused by similar exposure to contradicting political ideas. A similar finding was made in the research by Goyanes et al. (2021), who noted that active political users, who were described as experiencing incivility or authoritative messages, were more inclined to disengage to retain their messages. Thus, political disagreement is not only a tension-causing factor but also a behavioral individual incentive driving the users to cut certain connections.

Online news consumption is mediated by unfriending behavior through a political discourse on social media. The more people read political news, the higher the chances of them taking part in political debates because they comment, share, or debate political news in their social networks. Even though such discourses may spur political activities and civic involvement, they also tend to heighten ideological differences, especially when there is a political scandal. In their research on Israeli Facebook users in the 2014 Gaza conflict, John and Gvirsman (2015) concluded that political discussions often caused interpersonal tension, which made Facebook users unfriend others who shared different points of view. Their results explain that political discourse may turn the social media space into conflict zones, particularly when the political identities are put to the forefront. In line with this point of view, Skoric et al. (2018) found that repeated talk about politics relates to selective avoidance and network filtering practices. Politically vocal individuals are more likely to face opposition on the part of other people, and thus, there is a high chance of conflict and strained relationships. Political talk increases ideological standpoints, thereby minimizing uncertainty regarding political affiliation and increasing the chances of interpersonal friction. As a result, unfriending can be taken up as a strategy to deal with ideological incompatibility and to keep harmony in their social networks by the users.

The civility and tone of political interactions are also important in developing unfriending behavior, besides the frequency of the discussion. Goyanes et al. (2021) proved that uncivil political conversation is a strong predictor of unfriending, especially when individuals mostly depend on social media as a source of news. The exposure to mean, violent, or disrespectful conversation escalates emotional responses and heightens the desire of the users to stop conflictual interactions. On the same note, when exposed to political content repeatedly, through the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Neely (2021) discovered that the emotional fatigue and avoidance (unfriending) strategies increased. These results may indicate that political discourse not only heightens exposure to conflict, but it also increases feelings, with the effect of causing the user to reorganize his or her online networks. Combined, the previous studies suggest that political discourse is a triggering factor of political disagreement, which, in turn, is a major antecedent of unfriendly behavior. Instead of being an immediate reaction to news exposure, unfriending is a coping mechanism for long-term disagreements and

emotionally charged contacts. This chain reflects the mediating effect of political discussion and political disagreement in describing the way online news use is transforming social relationships within social media. The predictor of unfriending on social media has always been political disagreement because this factor is one of the strongest predictors of unfriending. The exposure to conflicting political opinions tends to create cognitive dissonance and emotional uneasiness, especially when this disagreement is observed in close social networks. Using the example of these controversial political campaigns (including elections), Bode (2016) showed that social media users in this situation actively filter their online profiles by unfriending and unfollowing people as a well-being mechanism to reduce psychological strain and ideological tension. The action is indicative of the attempt to cope with the emotional expenses involved in the continued political incompatibility.

On the same note, Yang et al. (2017) concluded that unfriending is often caused by ideological differences and close social ties when the situation is perceived as irreconcilable instead of comprisable. Their research revealed that users tend to discontinue their relationship with politically dissimilar individuals as a means of recovering their ideological monotony and their social harmony. Political differences become more of a consequence when they question the deeply held beliefs or identity-related positions, and the chances of relationship dissolution become more probable. Additional evidence is provided by computational and network-based studies. Sasahara et al. (2021) modelled their research to show that recurring exposure to conflicting political opinions enhances the likelihood of unfriending, which consequently increases the rate of creating ideologically homogeneous groups or echo chambers. In their results, they postulate the unfriending behaviour as not a random or impulsive reaction to disagreement but systematically restructures the online network structures. By silencing potential opponents of the prevailing views, people will have less exposure to opposing information in the future, which strengthens selective exposure and ideological polarization. Overall, this research suggests that political disagreement is not only an interpersonal conflict but a sort of a behavioral precipitant that influences users to logically cut off unpleasant social connections. Unfriending becomes an adaptive coping mechanism in politically charged situations, whose purpose is to reduce emotional pain, maintain identity integrity, and ideological consistency in the social media surroundings of unfriending people.

Facebook users deliberately filter out differing opinions; they deliberately construct an environment with similar beliefs by unfriending people with opposing opinions (Yang et al., 2017). In a study conducted by Kutlu (2021), it was found that the respondents who have different political views bullied each other and ultimately created an echo chamber. He took a sample of 20 individuals who were politically active and conducted online focus groups in a two-month period. Lee et al. (2018) have found that religion and politics are connected, and that this connection trends in a conservative direction. McClure (2017) has maintained that greater internet use is positively correlated with more religiously pluralistic views and greater religious involvement; it ultimately increases intolerance. Pakistan got independence in the name of religion; however, the Islamization that started under Zia had taken root and religion and religious morality had gradually stepped up into every aspect of public life (Khan, 2014). Religion plays a big role in Pakistani society, so the researcher is encouraged to see the moderating role of religiosity in the process of online political discussion and unfriending.

Religion and politics are mutually supportive and usually correspond to ideological orientations and determine the moral and social views of people in the world. According to the previous studies, religious beliefs often coincide with conservative political values, especially regarding matters of morality, social order, and authority (Lee et al., 2018). A sense of commitment to religion may reinforce the identity-related attachments and make the political stance more inflexible and less willing to compromise. When the political beliefs interconnect with the religious disagreement will more probably be viewed as a moral violation instead of a disagreement of opinion. Patterns of internet and social media use also make the relationship between religiosity and digital political behaviour even more complicated. According to McClure (2017), as more

people use the internet, religiosity does not have to decline, but rather the usage may be accompanied by more religious participation and affirmation of their identity. This coexistence can become even more intolerant of dissenting opinions, especially when both religious and political identities merge. In a virtual world where politics are usually very visible and emotional, a high degree of religious person might feel more uneasy when subjected to ideas that do not align with their ethical orientations.

Religion is a major issue in Pakistan, which determines the social norms, political speech, and even the lives of the people. Religious morality has, since independence and since the Islamization policies initiated by General Zia-ul-Haq, been so entrenched in political narratives and daily social interactions (Khan, 2014). Religious language is often used in terms of political position, which increases the moral value of political disagreement. Consequently, the controversy over political matters can be viewed as an opposition not only on ideological grounds, but also as a protest religious values and identity. Religiosity will tend to mediate the reaction of individuals towards the political disagreement on social media. The religious may be highly religious and, therefore, they can view political disagreement as a moral threat, which will enhance emotional responses and reduce tolerance to dissent. Therefore, unfriending can be considered a logical coping mechanism to evade the state of moral uneasiness and safeguard identity coherence. Although there is an increasing literature on political unfriending, little is known on the moderating effect of religiosity, especially in religiously salient and non-Western settings like in Pakistan. To fill this gap, the current paper looks at religiosity as a major moderator of the relationship between political disagreement and unfriending behavior on social network.

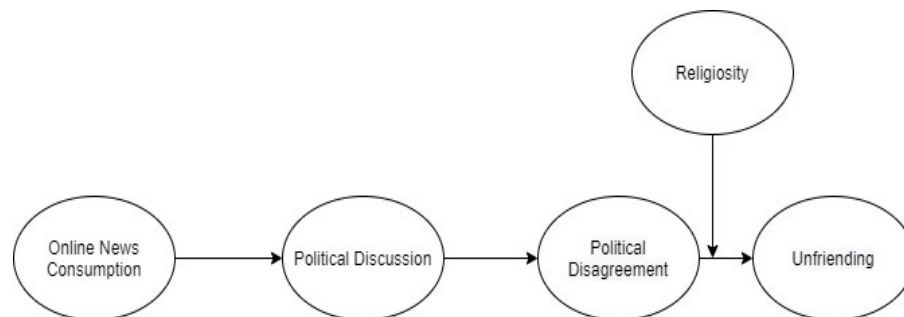
The theoretical basis of this research is the Rational Choice Theory that describes people as goal-oriented individuals who base their decisions on evaluating costs and benefits in an attempt to maximize their personal utility (Becker, 1976; Coleman, 1990). This framework holds that social behavior is not determined by chance or by merely being emotional but rather as a strategic decision amidst constrained conditions. People should choose the course of actions that will reduce the level of psychological discomfort, social conflict, and identity threat and at the same time maintain personal well-being. When it comes to the social media, unfriending may be viewed as an explanation of the rational behavioral reaction to the political disagreement. Issues related to politics and exposure to conflicting opinion usually come at emotional and cognitive costs such as stress, anger, and discomfort (Mutz, 2006). Interaction with politically unlike individuals can result in high costs and therefore in a rational choice, people may want to cut off contact with them so as to avoid any further conflict. Studies of political disagreement indicate that users also often react to attitudinal dissonance by refining information sources and reorganizing social networks (Bode, 2016; Yang et al., 2017), which is very much consistent with the rational choice.

Religiosity as a moderating factor is a very important issue in this cost-benefit analysis. Religious beliefs are moralized, much internalized and highly related to the personal identity (Skitka et al., 2005). When politics is placed in the moral terms, any disagreement is not just viewed as an opinion difference but a transgression against deeply held values. This adds to the subjective costs of continuing to be socially tied to politically disagreeable individuals. Rationally, it can thus be thought that there is a higher likelihood of unfriending by highly religious individuals since the emotional and moral costs of disagreement are greater than the advantages of having a wide variety of social ties. In addition, when political difference poses a threat to identity-based commitments, it is highly likely to result in unfriending. According to social identity research, people behave in a manner that safeguards the identities that they hold dear to them by avoiding contact with the members of an out-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The Rational choice theory adds on to this perspective by explaining how these identity threats are conceptualized into behavioral choices. Unfriending is a cheap and effective tool of exposure to intimidating opinions and psychological balance in online settings (Bode, 2016).

Rational choice theory has been applied as a theoretical framework. Rational choice theory states that individuals use rational calculations to make rational choices and achieve outcomes that are aligned with their

own personal objectives. Using rational choice theory, it is anticipated to get outcomes that deliver individuals with the utmost benefit, advantage and satisfaction in the given scenario of limited options (Becker, 1978). In this context, online news consumption enhances political awareness and participation, and this increases the chances of political discourse and exposure to disagreement. Ideological differences are brought to focus in political discourse, political opposition raises costs to perceived interaction, and moralizing political struggle through religiosity heightens costs. As a result, unfriending turns out to be a logical coping mechanism whereby people are able to regulate the social boundaries and reduce identity-related discomfort. The mediation of the relationships discussed by the Rational Choice Theory, therefore, presents a logical theoretical basis for the explanation of the relationship between online news consumption and unfriending and the role of religiosity, which acts as a moderator. Based on the literature and the theoretical framework, the proposed model is shown below, which leads to the following hypothesis

- **H1:** Online News consumption positively predicts unfriending.
- **H2:** More time spent on political discussion leads to an increase in unfriending
- **H3:** Political disagreement leads to unfriending
- **H4:** Political discussion and political disagreement mediate between online news consumption and unfriending
- **H5:** Religiosity moderates the relationship between political discussion, political disagreement and unfriending



**Figure 1: Proposed Model**

## Methodology

The study aimed to investigate the mediating and moderating roles of political discussion, political disagreement, and religiosity on unfriending. In quantitative studies, survey methods are largely used in testing the relationship or prediction or causation in the field of media. So, the survey was carried out in this study, and the data was gathered by electronic survey methods, in which on Google Forms, links were created and distributed on different platforms to get the data because of the pandemic situation in the country. The population of the study was the youth of Pakistan. The sampling unit of the study was the respondents who used the social media network sites. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of the study. A sample size of 385 was taken for the study. A well-structured questionnaire was used to get the response of the youth, which was adopted from the literature. Pre-test and pilot testing were conducted for the studies. For data analysis, SPSS 23 and Hayes process templates 06 and template 14 have been used for sequential mediation and mediated moderation on 5000 bootstraps at 5% level of significance. In the following study, online news consumption was treated as an independent variable, political discussion and political disagreement were treated as mediators, religiosity as a moderator, and unfriending was a dependent variable. The constructions are adopted from the previous literature because they are more reliable and valid. To

measure Unfriend, an item scale was chosen, 0= strongly disagree to 10= strongly agree, which is adopted by Rainie & Smith (2012). Respondents will be asked: “When using social media, you ever blocked, unfriended or hidden someone because they ...” (1) “posted too much political content” (2) “posted political content that you disagreed with or found offensive” (3) “argued about political issues with you or someone you know” (4) “disagreed with political content that you posted” (5) “posted political content that you worried would offend your other friends or people who follow you”. To measure political disagreement, three three-item scales were chosen, adopted from Zuniga et al. (2018), measured on 0= Never to 10= Always. The respondents will be asked to rate how often they “(1) use social media to have discussions with people who have different views,” (2) “how often do you talk about politics or public affairs online with people who disagree with you,” and (3) “whose political views are different from yours?”

To measure Religiosity (intrinsic and extrinsic), Participants will be asked to answer 26 questions, having two dimensions, 13 items in each dimension, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Items for religiosity are adopted by Khan (2014). (1) “It is every Muslim's personal matter to celebrate or not to celebrate a non-Islamic festival.” (2) “Telling petty lies in everyday routine is not a sin.” (3) “Religion and the world are two different things. They cannot be amalgamated.” (4) “I often raise my hands for prayer while experiencing obstacles in my matters”. (5) “It feels like abandoning the good deed for which one is not getting the reward in this world”. (6) “It gets difficult for the ones who follow the teachings of Islam”. (7) “I have a strong faith in religion, but there are other things that are important too” (8) “If covering the head or wearing a beard is an obstacle in the way of progress, then it should be abandoned”. (9) “At times I do not follow religion so that the people may not consider me conservative” (10) “People are reluctant of those who are always found disseminating the word of Islam” (11) “Life's every decision cannot be taken keeping in front God's favour” (12) “I prefer to go to religious gatherings or mosques because it gives me an opportunity to meet many people there” (13) “Giving and taking for the purpose of your legitimate work cannot be considered as a bribe” (14) “Islam keeps me hopeful on such occasions, where I feel like falling a prey to hardships” (15) “I often Worry about the afterlife” (16) “Reciting Qur'an is included in my daily routine” (17) “Often I feel deeply the existence of God” (18) “I make every effort that my acts shall accomplish God's pleasure” (19) “My acts of devotion done in private or public have no difference” (20) “Nearness to religion purges many evils” (21) “I like spending some time in the remembrance of Allah daily” (22) “I read religious books” (23) “For Allah's favour I abandon my favourite works” (24) “For me, religion is important because it explains the purpose of life” (25) “I try to take some time from leisure and offer my prayer on time” (26) “I do not care that because of observing religious dictates, people consider me an orthodox”

The online political news consumption scale are adapted from Zúñiga et al. (2018) measured on 0= Never to 10= Always and = strongly disagree to 10= strongly agree, having five items. (1) “How often you get the political news from social media” (2) “how often they use social media to stay informed about current events and public affairs” (3) “how often they encounter news when using social networking sites or micro-blogging sites” (4) “How often you stay informed about the local community” (5) “How often you get news about current events from social media.” Political discussion was measured on one item scale that how often you discuss politics in your circle online and responds are taken on 1=0–20%, 2=21–40%, 3=41–60%, 4=61–80%, and 5=81– 100%

## Analysis

The mean, standard deviation (SD) and Cronbach alpha of all the constructs have been found (Table 1). Unfriending has a Cronbach alpha value is 0.85 (*Mean*=6.78 , *SD*=1.60), News consumption have the alpha value is 0.73 (*Mean*=7.63, *SD*=7.63), the mean value of online news consumption is on higher side which shows that youth are more interested in having information online. The alpha value of political disagreement is 0.71 (*Mean*=7.21, *SD*=1.65), and Religiosity has an alpha value is 0.83 (*Mean*=3.05, *SD*=0.60). The variation in the responses to religiosity is very small. Moreover, political discussion is measured with one

item having a mean of 2.99 and  $SD=0.99$ . All the constructions have the Cronbach alpha value well above 0.70, which is considered sufficient in social sciences. Hence, the reliability for the constructions remained between 0.71 - 0.85.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics & Cronbach Alpha**

	N	Mean	SD	Alpha	Items
Unfriending	375	6.78	1.60	0.85	5
Online News Consumption	375	7.63	1.17	0.73	5
Online Political Disagreement	375	7.21	1.65	0.71	3
Religiosity	375	3.05	0.60	0.83	26
Online Political Discussion	375	2.99	0.99		1

Table 2 is also found, which shows that all the constructions have positive relationships with each other. Unfriending and online news consumption have a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.433^{**}$ ) at the 0.01 level of significance, which means that as online political news consumption increases, the chances of unfriending also increase. Unfriending and political disagreement also have a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.526^{**}$ ) at the 0.01 level of significance, which suggests that as the political disagreement increases, respondents show a tendency to unfriend or unfollow others. Religiosity and unfriending also have a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.211^{**}$ ) at the 0.01 level of significance. This shows that as religiosity increases, people tend to be unfriended. Similarly, unfriending and political discussion also have a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.309^{**}$ ) at the 0.01 level of significance. As the political disagreement increases, the trend of unfriending or unfollowing also increases.

The relationship between online news consumption and political disagreement has a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.390^{**}$ ), so as online news consumption grows, the chances of political disagreement also grow. Online news consumption and religiosity also have a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.165^{**}$ ), which means that as religiosity increases, people are more interested in online news consumption. Online news consumption and political discussion also have a significant positive relationship ( $r=0.276^{**}$ ), which suggests that online news consumption leads to online political discussion. Political discussions and political disagreement have a positive relationship with each other ( $r=0.292^{**}$ ). So, the chances of political disagreement add up as the political discussion grows. Religiosity and political disagreement also have a significant positive relationship between ( $r=0.353^{**}$ ) each other. As religiosity strengthens, the chance of political disagreement also strengthens. Similarly, religiosity and political discussion also have a positive relationship ( $r=0.119^{**}$ ).

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix**

	Unfriending	News Consumption	Political Disagreement	Religiosity
News Consumption	.433 <sup>**</sup>			
Disagreement	.526 <sup>**</sup>	.390 <sup>**</sup>		
Religiosity	.211 <sup>**</sup>	.165 <sup>**</sup>	.353 <sup>**</sup>	
Political Discussion	.309 <sup>**</sup>	.276 <sup>**</sup>	.292 <sup>**</sup>	.119 <sup>*</sup>

<sup>\*\*</sup>. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

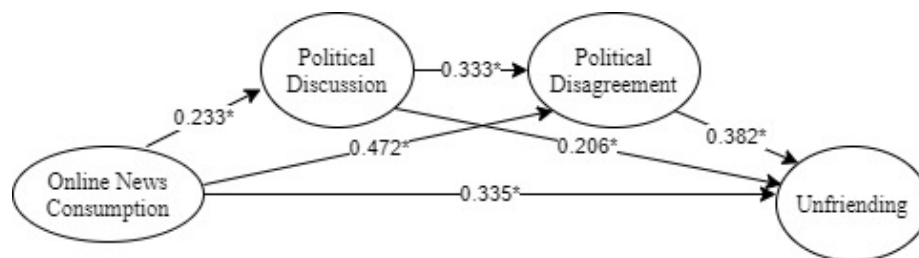
<sup>\*</sup>. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Hypothesis Testing

For testing the first hypothesis, H1: Online News consumption positively predicts the unfriending, regression analysis was conducted, and it was found that online news consumption significantly predicts the unfriending or unfollowing. The one unit increase in online news consumption causes 0.593 change in unfriending, as  $t=9.2277$ ,  $b=.593^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ . The R-square value of this hypothesis was 0.187, which means that 18.7% can be explained of unfriending by online news consumption. H2: More time spent on political discussion leads to an increase in unfriending. This hypothesis is also accepted as  $t=8.502$ ,  $b=0.501^{**}$ ,  $p<0.05$ . The R-squared is very small, which encourages the researcher that there are other factors that become the cause of unfriending. But this hypothesis is also supported. Hence, spending more time on online news consumption encourages the respondents to unfriend. Hypothesis 3, Political disagreement leads to unfriending, also supported as  $t=11.96$ ,  $b=0.51^{**}$ ,  $p<0.0001$ . Political disagreement plays a significant role in unfriending.

To test hypothesis 4, political discussion and political disagreement mediate between online news consumption and unfriending, the sequential mediation model 6 from the *Hayes process* has been used in SPSS. This way of finding out the mediation effects has multiple benefits, as it gives all the coefficients of all variables, which can be verified. At the same time, the individual path and collective part can easily be seen; moreover, it also gives a comparison of the effects of Hayes (2013). Table 3 shows the details of direct paths and indirect paths. The model is significant, keeping online news consumption as an independent variable, unfriending as a dependent variable, and political discussion and political disagreement as the mediators ( $RSq = 0.353$ ,  $F(3, 371) = 67.359$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ). As can be seen in Table 3 that online news consumption and online political discussion have a positive and significant relationship ( $B=0.233$ ,  $SE=0.042$ ,  $p<0.005$ ). Online news consumption also significantly predicts the political disagreement ( $B=0.472$ ,  $SE=0.069$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Similarly, online news consumption also predicts the unfriending ( $B=0.334$ ,  $SE=0.063$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Online political discussion and political disagreement also have significant relationships ( $B=0.333$ ,  $SE=0.081$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Online political discussion significantly predicts unfriending ( $B=0.382$ ,  $SE=0.072$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In the last direct path, political disagreement significantly predicts the unfriending ( $B=0.382$ ,  $SE=0.045$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ).

The indirect effect is also significant, as shown in Table 3. Path 1 is significant ( $B = 0.048$ ,  $SE = 0.018$ , 95% CI [0.014, 0.086]), which explores that online political discussion mediates between online news consumption and unfriending, as there is no zero value in the confidence interval. Similarly, path 2 is also significant. Similarly, path 2 is also significant in which political discussion mediates between online news consumption and unfriending ( $B = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.041$ , 95% CI [0.107, 0.268]) as there is no zero in the interval. In the last the path 3 is also significant, hence sequential mediation exists between online news consumption and unfriending through online political discussion and political disagreement. ( $B = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.107$ , 95% CI [0.012, 0.056]). Since the direct path is not insignificant, or zero effect hence partial mediation exists in the presence of two mediators.



**Figure 2: Sequential mediation model with regression weights**

**Table 3. Direct and Indirect effects of online news consumption and unfriending**

Paths	B	SE	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<b>Direct Effects</b>				
ONC -> OPD	0.233	0.042	0.151	0.316
ONC -> PDIS	0.472	0.069	0.337	0.607
ONC -> UNFR	0.334	0.063	0.21	0.459
OPD -> PDIS	0.333	0.081	0.173	0.493
OPD -> UNFR	0.206	0.072	0.064	0.347
PDIS -> UNFR	0.382	0.045	0.294	0.47
<b>Indirect Effects</b>				
Path 1: ONC -> OPD -> UNFR	0.048	0.018	0.014	0.086
Path 2: ONC -> PDIS -> UNFR	0.18	0.041	0.107	0.268
Path 3: ONC -> OPD -> PDIS -> UNFR	0.03	0.107	0.012	0.056

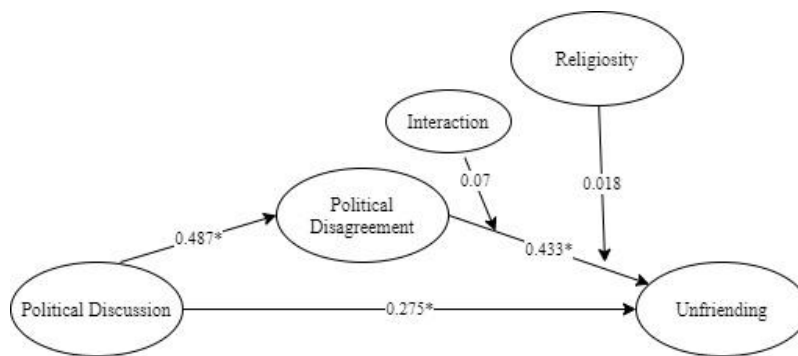
Note: ONC= Online news consumption, OPD= Online political discussions, PDIS= Political Disagreement, UNFR= Unfriending

To test Hypothesis 5, Religiosity moderates the relationship between political discussion, political disagreement and unfriending. Hayes' Process model 14 has been used to check moderated mediation. The results are shown in Table 4. Online political discussion and unfriending have a significant positive association (B= 0.275, SE= 0.074, 95% CI [0.13, 0.422]) in the mediated moderation model. Similarly, political discussions and unfriending also have a positive relationship, which means as political discussions increase, the chances of unfriending also increase (B= 0.433, SE= 0.138, 95% CI [0.161, 0.705]). There is no zero value in the interval on 95% confidence interval. On the other hand, religiosity did not play any role in the unfriending significantly (B= 0.018, SE= 0.332, 95% CI [-0.635, 0.67]). There is zero value in the 95% confidence interval. Similarly, the interaction term also did not moderate the effect on unfriending (B= 0.007, SE= 0.045, 95% CI [-0.082, 0.096]); there is also a zero value in the 95% confidence interval. So, religiosity did not play any role as a moderator between online political discussion, political disagreement and religiosity. Figure 3. Also shows that all three lines remain parallel and there is no intersection between these lines, which also confirms that there is no role of religiosity in unfriending through political disagreement and political discussion.

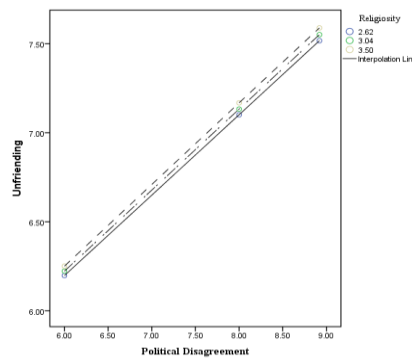
Table 4. Effects of moderation

Paths	B	SE	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
OPD -> UNFR	0.275	0.074	0.13	0.42
PDIS -> UNFR	0.433	0.138	0.161	0.705
REL -> UNFR	0.018	0.332	-0.635	0.67
PDIS*REL -> PDIS	0.007	0.045	-0.082	0.096

Note: REL=Religiosity, OPD= Online political discussions, PDIS= Political Disagreement, UNFR= Unfriending



**Figure 3: Mediated Moderated effect**



**Figure 4: Religiosity moderation between political disagreement and unfriending**

## Discussion

Social media platforms provide users with diversified information, unlimited interaction and conversation, and with the advancement of technology, it is unavoidable to escape from the exposure of this information (Bakshy et al., 2015). They are exposed to polarized information, offensive comments and debates which disturb them, so these platforms provide the users with potential opportunities to meet those challenges by social media unfriending, unfollowing, blocking or hiding their polarized comments (Skoric et al., 2018). The present study attempted to explore the predictors of unfriending, so it examines that what are the influence of online social media news consumption, online political discussions, online political disagreement and the role of religiosity in unfriending. The first set of findings includes the one-by-one impact of unfriending. It was found that online news consumption and unfriending have a significant positive relationship. People who are more exposed to online news consumption are more expected to unfriend or unfollow others. It confirms the findings of Goyanes et al. (2021) and Zhu et al. (2017), who have emphasized that the use of online news led to unfriending. Similarly, online news discussion also positively predicted the unfriending. People discuss online, and ultimately, it causes disagreement or uncivil discussions, which cause unfriending or unfollowing. It also confirms the results of Rojas et al. (2017) and Goyanes et al. (2021). Neelay (2021) also supported that polarized and non-credible postings cause disagreement and ultimately avoid that user.

The second set of findings includes the indirect effects and moderated effects of religiosity on unfriending. In this study, the mediating role of political discussion and political disagreement was examined in the relationship between online news consumption and unfriending. It was found that political discussion and political disagreement mediate in the online news consumption and unfriending, although it was a partial mediation but it still had a significant impact on unfriending people who disagree politically with each other. Kim et al. (2021) also confirm that political discussion or spending more time on social media leads to political disagreement. People are more frequently discussed in platforms where their cognitive thinking matches with

others, and if they find disagreement in their sphere, they quit and unfriend others. Jones-Jang et al. (2021) supported this argument that political discussions change into uncivil discussions or disagreement and ultimately result in unfriending. In this study, online political discussions mediate in online political news consumption and similarly, political disagreement also mediates in the relationship between political discussion and unfriending. Pakistani society is very religious in its practices, so the researcher attempted to check the moderated effect of religiosity in the relationship between unfriending, political disagreement, and political discussion. It was found that there is no moderate effect of religiosity in that relationship. It could have main reason could be that in Pakistani society, people are very religious in their practices. This factor had very low variation, so people who unfriend or not, it was very constant in its nature, so it did not affect them all. Usage of social media is increasing day by day; hence, it is considered that for encouraging participatory democracy, it is very important to give space to others and avoid unfriending.

Even though the role of religiosity as a moderator is not explicitly developed in the research, religiosity is a critical contextual measure of political unfriending behaviour especially in religiously salient societies. Religion will influence moral values, social norms, and identity formation, which in turn affect the way a person understands political information and how they respond to political disagreement. According to previous studies, religious commitment can also support moral confidence and ideology fixation and may make people less accepting of conflicting opinions (Skitka et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2018). In this way, religiosity offers a significant background on which political differences and unfriending behaviours are held. According to the literature available, it is evident that religious beliefs are often interwoven with political attitudes, particularly on matters to do with morality, governance and social order (Layman and Green, 2006). When political office is viewed as an impact of religious beliefs, the conflict can be resolved as a threat to moral beliefs that are strongly held, instead of an alternate choice. This politicization of moralities may escalate emotional reactions to disagreement and augment the tendency to conflict avoid actions, such as unfriending. In this way, despite the lack of a moderator role, religiosity has the potential to indirectly influence the social context of the political discourse on social media.

Given the situation in Pakistan, the role of religiosity is particularly important in the life of the population and politics. Political discourse has always been deeply rooted in religious identity, and the issues of politics are commonly discussed in the framework of morality or religion (Khan, 2014). In turn, the contact with the political opposition on social media can have an increased emotional and symbolic weight for religious people. In this regard, unfriending can serve as a means of moral consistency and the unwanted perceived conflict inside the social network. Rationally speaking, religiosity can affect the way people consider the costs and benefits of political participation, although it might not actually be modelled in the analytical framework. Religious people might experience greater emotional or moral costs of continuing to relate with politically dissimilar individuals, and in this regard, disengagement is a logical reaction to continuing disagreement. Thus, in what way can religiosity be viewed as a structural and cultural aspect informing the users of their perceptions of political disagreement and, consequently, their further choice of selecting their online social networks? All in all, religiosity is not operationalized as a moderating variable in this study; however, this is a valuable context as to why political disagreement can be especially consequential in some sociopolitical contexts. Further studies can be enhanced by integrating religiosity into the analytical framework to the extent of exploring its impact on digital political behavioral formation.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed at investigating the predictors of unfriending on social media, especially online news consumption, online political discussion, political disagreement and the role of religiosity as a contextual factor in Pakistani society. In general, it can be pointed out that the results show that unfriending is not a case of random or mostly personal behavior but rather a systematic behavioral reaction to information exposure patterns and politics in the digital environment. The findings prove that online news reading has a strong

tendency to increase the chances of unfriending, which indicates that the more people are exposed to political news, the more they are exposed to divergent or polarized opinions. On the same note, online political discussion also proved to be a good predictor of unfriending, suggesting that interactive contact, not mere passive consumption, tends to escalate disagreement and incivility, and thus, users tend to stop interacting with political strangers. The political disagreement also took centre stage as a major mechanism where the news intake and talk are converted into unfriending. The results support the idea that even though social media settings are meant to result in a conversation, they may also contribute to strife and selective avoidance.

The mediation analysis is a significant addition to the interpretation of this process. Online political discussion and disagreeableness mediated the effect of online news use on unfriending partially and validated the idea that exposure to political information results in interaction that promotes the likelihood of disagreement that subsequently causes social disconnection. This trend is symptomatic of a larger trend into homophily and echo chambers, where people choose to associate with ideologically like-minded networks and drop out of areas, they feel threatened. Even though the role of religiosity did not work as an effective statistically significant moderator in the relationships under test, the contextual significance of religiosity should not be underestimated. Religiosity is a consistent cultural framework in a very religious society such as Pakistan and influences moral, ethical values, political meanings and feelings towards disagreement. The absence of a moderating effect could be explained by a small range of religiosity in the sample of respondents, but the discussion indicates that maybe the religious identity is playing an important role in mediating the experience of political disagreement and the reason to unfriend as a way of ensuring that moral and ideological consistency is maintained. Religiosity, therefore, is a structural and cultural setting rather than an interactional variable in the analysis model.

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

Despite a lot of contributions to the study, this research work also has some limitations. The sample size of the study is small, mainly restricted to educated youth, and the respondents of the study were from the urban area. Besides youth, there must be a significant number of senior citizens who have more tolerance. So, the sample size should be larger, and the respondents should be covered from both urban and rural areas of the targeted population. The measuring scale used in the study was general in nature. It could be very useful if the survey were conducted from the perspective of specific political events or an election campaign. More variables should be included in this model, i.e., uncivil discussion, to study the phenomenon of unfriending. Religiosity should be used in two dimensions: one is internal, and the other is external, to understand its effect more specifically.

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