Negative emotional and cognitive responses to being unfriended on Facebook: An exploratory study

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of social networking sites (SNSs) is to initiate and maintain existing interpersonal relationships (Foon Hew, 2011; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). These fluid online relationships can be formed, maintained, and terminated on SNSs (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). One specific example of relationship termination via SNSs occurs on Facebook, where, with the click of a button, users can unfriend (or defriend) an individual who they previously mutually agreed to be Facebook friends with. Indeed, the act of unfriending someone has already become so ingrained in our culture that the Oxford American Dictionary named “unfriend” their 2009 word of the year (Oxford word of the year: Unfriend, 2009). Further, 63% of Facebook users unfriended someone in 2011, an increase from 56% in 2009 (Madden, 2012). Though relationship termination can be a major life stressor (e.g., Tashiro, Frazier, & Berman, 2006) and Facebook has become almost a ubiquitous form of online communication, no known research has considered specific cognitive and emotional consequences experienced when an individual is unfriended by someone on Facebook. As such, this study explores aspects of Facebook usage and the unfriended relationship in relation to the rumination and negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended.

1.1. Facebook and relational communication

Started in 2004 by Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook is now “one of the most popular means of communication in North America” (Ross et al., 2009, p. 579) and has an estimated 850 million users worldwide. As such, Facebook is a central tool in modern day relational communication. Further, Facebook plays a key role in creating and maintaining social capital, which refers to the value of SNS connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In fact, Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe’s (2008) research found that sites like Facebook are evolving from their original purpose of connectivity into full-fledged friendship lifelines, as young adults become more and more dependent on their online persona.

As Facebook becomes an increasingly important and ingrained form of relational communication, specific aspects of Facebook profiles have accordingly been examined in terms of relationship perceptions. For example, Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tong (2008) determined that when individuals who posted on a profile user’s wall were perceived as attractive and the wall postings themselves were perceived as positive, the user was rated as more attractive. Similarly, Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, and Walther (2008) found that when a Facebook profile owner had the fewest friends, their level of physical attractiveness was lowest, and perceptions about the profile owner were deemed highest when they had more friends. They also found that the optimum number of friends in relation to social attractiveness was approximately 302 and subsequently concluded that one’s number of Facebook friends indicates social status and physical attractiveness.

That a user can have an optimum number of Facebook friends implies that being unfriended (i.e., having fewer Facebook friends) could be negatively related to one’s social and physical attractiveness. Therefore, an individual may experience negative cognitions and emotions upon being unfriended. Further, because relational termination can be as important and significant a relationship stage as relationship formation and maintenance, extending this body of research by considering Facebook unfriending as a form...
of relationship termination is warranted. Thus, we turn now to the topic of relationship termination.

1.1.1. Facebook unfriending as a form of relationship termination

The dissolution of a relationship is “one of the most distressing and identity-threatening events people experience” (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004, p. 28). Specifically, young adults experiencing romantic dissolution reported high levels of emotional volatility, especially immediately following termination (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Relationship termination typically is unilaterally initiated (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004) and can abruptly end via “sudden death” (Davis, 1973). Indeed, McEwan, Babin Gallagher, and Farinelli (2008) found that the most cited reason for friendship dissolution was purposeful avoidance, which involves reducing or ceasing communication without contacting the friend. Further, Starks (2007) found that computer-mediated romantic dissolution was more likely to occur asynchronously.

Unfriending is a common Facebook behavior (Madden, 2012) that can similarly be viewed as purposeful, unilateral avoidance, as interactions with a particular Facebook friend cease without notification. However, unfriending is distinct from offline relational termination, as Facebook provides “a definite marker when the friendship is dissolved by one member through the unfriend function” (Sibona & Walczak, 2011, p. 1). Facebook users only discover they have been unfriended if they notice that they have fewer Facebook friends and investigate exactly who is no longer in their friend list, or if the unfriender or a third party tells them they have been unfriended. Therefore, viewing Facebook unfriending as a form of relationship sudden death accomplished via purposeful, unilateral avoidance suggests that unfriending is a specific, unique instance of relationship termination.

Despite the significance of this relational event, relationship dissolution has not yet been extensively examined in relation to SNs. According to Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans, and Stefanone (2010), research tends to focus on positive aspects of Facebook, with little attention paid to potential negative outcomes. Facebook users’ networks, or their online social connections, are openly displayed to any Facebook friend, and thus can contribute to a user’s online persona. Often, a Facebook user’s friend list is displayed to individuals with whom they are not Facebook friends, augmenting the potential importance of this aspect of Facebook. As such, that “one’s network” is a common cause of friendship dissolution (Johnson et al., 2004) suggests a comprehensive assessment of the circumstances and repercussions surrounding Facebook unfriending is important.

Though research on Facebook unfriending is scant, a small sample of London students was found to be troubled by the unclear etiquette regarding Facebook unfriending (Lewis & West, 2009). Further, the core motivations for the act of Facebook unfriending have been examined by Sibona and Walczak (2011). Changes in the offline relationship were cited as the most primary reason for unfriending. Moreover, those users who initially received the friend request were more likely to initiate the termination of the online relationship via unfriending (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). Reinke and Burchfield’s (2010, p. 10) research found that “losing Facebook friends should have real, negative emotional consequences” and individuals who are unfriended are not likely to want to be unfriended again. Clearly, Facebook unfriending has the potential to arouse negative emotional and cognitive repercussions and it is to these we now turn.

1.2. Negative cognitive and emotional responses to Facebook unfriending

1.2.1. Rumination

Rumination, or mulling, is defined as “conscious thinking directed toward a given object for an extended period of time” and is a reaction to an unpleasant situation (Gold & Wegner, 1995, p. 1246). Rumination is an unintentional and dominating cognitive activity that is hard to eradicate (Martin & Tesser, 1996). It has also been observed as a specific response to a number of negative relational interactions, including conflict (Bevan, Finan, & Kaminsky, 2008; Cloven & Roloff, 1991), jealousy expression (Bevan & Hale, 2006; Carson & Cupach, 2000), and relationship transgressions (Roloff, Soule, & Carey, 2001).

Relationship termination is also a specific interpersonal situation that can arouse rumination. For example, individuals who ruminated more as a reaction to relationship termination experienced more negative adjustment (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Collins and Clark (1989) found that individuals who were relationally invested and did not understand why their romantic partners ended the relationship also experienced rumination. Further, compared to rejectors, those who are rejected in romantic relationship dissolution experienced greater rumination (Perilloux & Buss, 2007). McCullough, Bono, and Root’s (2007) research indicates that rumination as a response to a negative interpersonal event “prolongs and exacerbates psychological and interpersonal distress” (p. 502) and, overall, is “counterproductive for psychosexual adjustment and interpersonal functioning” (p. 490). Overall, these findings suggest that individuals who are unfriended on Facebook (i.e., who are clearly rejected by one of their Facebook friends) may cognitively respond by ruminating, and understanding it as a cognitive consequence in this online context could serve to alleviate rumination as a negative unfriending response.

1.2.2. Negative emotion

Bevan and Hale (2006, p. 365) define negative emotion as “an affect-laden state that is aversive and psychologically stressful.” As with rumination, negative emotion has been observed as a reaction to such interpersonal situations as jealousy expression (Bevan, 2011; Bevan & Hale, 2006) and interpersonal tension (Birdett & Fingerman, 2003). Romantic termination can also “portend a storm of emotional upheaval,” and this emotional experience is comprised of more negative emotions, including anger and sadness, than positive ones (Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006, p. 224). Sbarra and Emery (2005) noted that, though a romantic dissolution can be associated with a variety of emotions, individuals who are suddenly rejected can be devastated. Though Facebook unfriending is not typically as serious and significant a form of relationship termination as romantic dissolution, it is likely that those who are unfriended will still respond to this online interpersonal act with a combination of related negative emotions.

Research on emotional responses to relationship termination identifies negative affect as central. For example, when compared to individuals in current dating relationships, those whose relationships had terminated experienced more negative emotion (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Further, the more preoccupied individuals were about their relationships, the more negative emotion they experienced post-termination (Barbara & Dion, 2000). In addition, Waller and MacDonald (2010) recently determined that those with low trait self-esteem responded to their partners initiating relationship termination with more emotional distress than the initiators. Finally, individuals who were rejected by their romantic partners (Perilloux & Buss, 2007) and did not understand why their partners terminated the romantic relationship (Collins & Clark, 1989) responded to the termination with more depression. These findings combine to suggest that being unfriended on Facebook could also be a form of relationship termination or rejection where individuals respond with negative emotions.

Studies that examine various negative interpersonal situations such as jealousy (Bevan, 2011; Bevan & Hale, 2006), forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 2007), and relationship dissolution (Collins & Clark, 1989) have consistently observed a
positive relationship between ruminating and negative emotion. Further, in the relationship dissolution context, relationship preoccupation and regret, concepts that are similar to rumination, were both positively related to emotional relational involvement (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Our first hypothesis thus expects that this positive association between ruminating and negative emotion will extend to the Facebook unfriending context:

H1: There is a positive relationship between ruminating and negative emotion that is experienced as a response to being unfriended.

1.2.3. Facebook usage

Two elements of Facebook usage are of interest here in relation to emotional and cognitive responses to unfriending: intensity and use of Facebook to maintain existing social connections. Facebook intensity involves the extent to which users are invested psychologically in Facebook (Vitak, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2011). In the Facebook unfriending context, this intensity is likely to translate to unfriended individuals experiencing greater rejection. As half of Facebook motives are relationally-based (Sheldon, 2008), and relationship maintenance was the strongest Facebook motive across studies (Foon Hew, 2011), being unfriended should be counterproductive to the goals of more intense Facebook users, with greater rumination and negative emotion occurring in response. Hypothesis two thus states:

H2: The more intense individuals’ Facebook use, the more (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion is experienced in response to being unfriended.

The vast majority of individuals utilize SNSs to maintain existing relationships rather than form new ones (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2009) and this is especially true for Facebook (Lewis & West, 2009). Thus, Facebook users are likely to have interacted with the individual who unfriended them face-to-face and/or online and possibly formed strong bonds with them. Thus, hypothesis three predicts:

H3: The more individuals use Facebook for connecting with existing social contacts, the more (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion is experienced in response to being unfriended.

1.2.4. Aspects of the unfriended relationship

Though Facebook is a medium that can foster weak bonds (Ellison et al., 2007), individuals can also be Facebook friends with those who are close to them, such as romantic partners, friends, and proximal family members (Lewis & West, 2009). Indeed, closer romantic partners experienced greater emotional distress when the relationship dissolved (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Simpson, 1987) and closeness prior to a relationship transgression positively predicted rumination and negative emotion upon being unfriended. As such, our fourth hypothesis predicts that individuals who are unfriended by closer relational partners will experience greater rumination and negative emotion than those who are unfriended by more distal relational partners:

H4: Individuals who are unfriended by closer relational partners will experience more (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion than individuals who are unfriended by more distal relational partners.

Finally, our research questions explore three aspects of the unfriended relationship that may relate to varying levels of rumination and negative emotion upon being unfriended. First, individuals may have realized they were unfriended because their total number of Facebook friends is reduced, but be unable to determine who unfriended them. The fact that there are applications that claim to tell a user exactly who unfriended them on Facebook (which are disabled by Facebook for violating developer platform policy; O’Neill, 2010) is evidence that knowing who the unfriender is could be related to the amount of rumination and negative emotion that is experienced. As such, RQ1 asks:

RQ1: Do levels of (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended differ according to whether or not individuals know who unfriended them?

Further, Sibona and Walczak’s (2011) exploratory research found a number of online (e.g., that the friend posted too much about everyday life, unimportant information/posted too frequently, polarizing opinions, or inappropriate comments) and offline (e.g., a disliked behavior or a change in the relationship) reasons for Facebook unfriending. These reasons also differed according to whether the unfriended or the unfriender originally initiated the Facebook friend request. To extend this research, these two aspects of the unfriended relationship are examined in relation to rumination and negative emotion in the final two research questions:

RQ2: Do levels of (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended differ according to the perceived reasons for being unfriended?
RQ3: Do levels of (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended differ according to the source of the original Facebook friend request?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and general procedures

Researchers at a small, private southwestern university surveyed adult (i.e., age 18 or older) individuals who were unfriended on Facebook (n = 547) via online questionnaire. Participants were primarily female (n = 364, male n = 145), white/Caucasian (n = 390, Asian n = 44, Hispanic/Latino n = 21, other n = 18, Black/African American n = 10, American Indian or Alaska native n = 6, native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander n = 11), and averaged 26.72 years of age (range = 18–81, SD = 9.89). Participants’ highest completed education level included no degree (n = 8), high school/GED (n = 173), Associates degree (n = 33), Bachelors degree (n = 143), Masters degree (n = 68), Ph.D./Ed.D./MD (n = 71), JD (n = 1), and other (n = 16). Most respondents were current United States residents (n = 473, not residents n = 30).

In terms of Facebook usage, respondents were most likely to report being on Facebook between 37 months and 5 years (n = 220, less than 3 months n = 1, 3–6 months n = 6, 7 months–1 year n = 23, 13 months–3 years n = 189, more than 5 years n = 108). The majority had more than 400 Facebook friends (n = 258, 10 or less n = 1, 11–50 n = 14, 51–100 n = 27, 101–150 n = 46, 151–200 n = 32, 201–250 n = 48, 251–300 n = 48, 301–400 n = 67). Most participants spent an hour or less on Facebook per day (less than 10 min n = 57, 10–30 min n = 135, 31–60 min n = 164, 1–2 h n = 114, 2–3 h n = 45, more than 3 h n = 32).

Participants were recruited via Twitter and Facebook posts and emails to research team members’ extended networks. Initial

\(^1\) Totals do not add up to the sample size due to some participants not completing the online survey.
participants engaged in snowball sampling by forwarding the link for the survey to others who may be interested in participating. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, took approximately 10–15 min, and did not involve compensation. Upon consenting to participate, individuals read the following definition of unfriending:

Being “defriended” means that someone who you were friends with on the social networking site Facebook removed you from their friend list. Being defriended is therefore different from being blocked, being hidden from someone’s News Feed, or setting your Facebook page settings to private so that others cannot search for you or see all or some of your Facebook page content.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Ruminatiom

Cloven and Roloff (1991) five-item, seven-point semantic differential scale was adapted to measure rumination (e.g., I did not do worry at all about the defriending; 7 = worried very much about the defriending; M = 2.54, SD = 1.51, α = .94).

2.2.2. Negative emotion

Participants indicated their emotions as they thought about the experience of being unfriended on Facebook (i.e., “Right now, that is, at this very moment”) using Thomas and Deiner (1990) five-item negative emotion scale. Each item (depressed/blue, unhappy, frustrated, angry/hostile, worried/anxious) was measured using five-point Likert-type scales (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely; M = 1.48, SD = .71, α = .90).

2.2.3. Facebook intensity and use of Facebook to connect with existing contacts

These two aspects of Facebook usage were measured via Ellison et al.’s (2007) Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Facebook intensity scale was comprised of six items (e.g., Facebook is part of my everyday activity; M = 3.77, SD = .82, α = .84). Three items combined to measure use of Facebook to connect with existing social contacts (e.g., I use Facebook to keep in touch with my old friends; M = 4.17, SD = .75, α = .61).

2.2.4. Close versus distant relational partners

For those participants who indicated that they knew which of their Facebook friends unfriended them, a variety of relationships were represented (family member n = 20, current romantic partner n = 2, former romantic partner n = 54, current friend n = 18, former friend n = 116, acquaintance n = 95, current co-worker n = 12, former co-worker n = 18, friend of a friend who I have met but did not know well n = 33, an individual who I met online but have never met face-to-face n = 7, other n = 42). These relationship types were generally aggregated such that close relationships included all current and former family, friend, and romantic relationships (n = 210) and distant relationships included co-worker, acquaintance, friend-of-friend and online only relationships (n = 165).

2.2.5. Knowledge of unfriender’s identity

Whether participants knew who unfriended them or not was measured by a response option (“I do not know which of my Facebook friends defriended me”) to an item which asked participants when they believed the individual unfriended them (n = 141). Those who chose the remainder of the response options to this item were classified as knowing which of their Facebook friends unfriended them (n = 406). Individuals who indicated that they did not know who unfriended them were immediately directed to the dependent variable measures, and were not asked to respond to additional items about the unfriender and the relationship they share.

2.2.6. Perceived reasons for being unfriended

Respondents who indicated that they knew who unfriended them answered an item that asked what they believed they was the primary or most central reasoning for them unfriended them. Response options were adapted from the reasons that participants unfriended others identified by Sibona and Wallak (2011). They included the participant perceiving that they were unfriended because they posted on Facebook too frequently (n = 2), posted opinions about polarizing topics (n = 11), made crude comments (n = 3), as a response to an upsetting offline event that had occurred (n = 167), as a part of a reduction in friends that occurred because they did not know each other very well or were in minimal contact (n = 100), did not know why they were unfriended (n = 84), or other (n = 54). Due to low cell sizes, the first three reasons were combined into a single Facebook-related reason. The “other” category was also not included in data analyses, as no consistent pattern of reasons emerged from the open-ended responses. Thus, four perceived reasons for being unfriended were examined here.

2.2.7. Source of the original Facebook friend request

Who initiated the Facebook friendship was measured via one item. Participants indicated either they (n = 81) or the friend (n = 150) initiated the Facebook friendship, or that they did not remember who asked (n = 171).

3. Results

Hypothesis 1, which predicted a positive relationship between rumination and negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended, was tested via a bivariate, one-tailed correlation. This relationship was significant and positive, r = .52, p < .001. H1 was supported.

The next two hypotheses, which predicted that the more intense individuals’ Facebook use is (H2) and the more individuals use Facebook for connecting with existing social contacts (H3), the more (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion is experienced upon being unfriended, were tested via simple linear regression analyses. For H2a, the regression model was significant, F = 11.57, p < .001, adjusted R² = .02, and Facebook intensity was a significant predictor of rumination, β = .16, t = 3.40, p < .001. For H2b, the regression model was significant, F = 7.70, p < .01, adjusted R² = .02, and Facebook intensity significantly predicted negative emotion, β = .13, t = 2.78, p < .01. H2 was fully supported.

The regression model for H3a was significant, F = 5.88, p < .05, adjusted R² = .01, and using Facebook to connect with existing social contacts positively predicted rumination, β = .11, t = 2.43, p < .05. For H3b, the regression model was not significant, F = 3.67, p = .06, adjusted R² = .01; use of Facebook to connect with existing social contacts was not a significant predictor of negative emotion, though the relationship was marginally significant, β = .09, t = 1.92, p = .06. Therefore, H3a was supported, but H3b was not.

The remaining hypothesis and the three research questions were tested via univariate ANOVAs. Tukey HSD post hoc analyses were employed for RQ2 and RQ3. Hypothesis four posited that those who are unfriended by closer relational partners (i.e., family, members current or former friends, and current or former romantic partners) will experience more (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion than individuals who are unfriended by more distal relational partners (i.e., current or former co-workers, acquaintances,
friends of friends, and individuals met online). For H4a, those who were unfriended by a close partner (M = 2.97, SD = 1.51) experienced more rumination than those unfriended by a distant partner (M = 2.35, SD = 1.45), F(1, 352) = 15.16, p < .001, $\eta^2_a$ = .04. For H4b, negative emotion levels did not significantly differ according to being unfriended by a close (M = 1.59, SD = .72) versus a distant (M = 1.49, SD = .71) relational partner, F(1, 347) = 1.77, p = .18. H4a was supported, but H4b was not.

Research question one inquired as to whether levels of (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended differed according to whether or not individuals know who unfriended them. The ANOVA for RQ1a was significant, F(1, 509) = 19.00, p < .001, $\eta^2_a$ = .04, and individuals who knew who unfriended them (M = 2.71, SD = 1.53) experienced more rumination than those who did not know who unfriended them (M = 2.04, SD = 1.32). For RQ1b, the ANOVA was also significant, F(1, 502) = 11.78, p < .01, $\eta^2_a$ = .02; those who knew who unfriended them (M = 1.54, SD = .71) experienced more negative emotion than those who did not know who unfriended them (M = 1.29, SD = .65).

RQ2 examined whether levels of (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended differed according to the perceived reasons for being unfriended. RQ2a’s ANOVA was significant, F(3, 342) = 3.54, p < .05, $\eta^2_a$ = .03. Post hoc tests found that those who perceived being unfriended for Facebook-related reasons (M = 3.46, SD = 1.54) experienced significantly more rumination than those who believed they were unfriended because they were not in contact or did not know each other well enough (M = 2.33, SD = 1.41); rumination levels did not differ by any of the other reasons (upsetting offline event M = 2.83, SD = 1.61; do not why I was unfriended M = 2.64, SD = 1.42). For RQ2b, the ANOVA was significant, F(3, 338) = 4.68, p < .01, $\eta^2_a$ = .04, and post hoc analyses found that those who perceived being unfriended for Facebook-related reasons (M = 2.16, SD = .83) experienced significantly greater negative emotion than the other three reasons, which did not differ from one another (upsetting offline event M = 1.59, SD = .81; do not why I was unfriended M = 1.53, SD = .59; not in contact/not close enough M = 1.43, SD = .65).

Our final research question investigated whether levels of (a) rumination and (b) negative emotion that are experienced upon being unfriended varied according to the source of the original Facebook friend request. For RQ3a, the ANOVA was significant, F(2, 380) = 7.38, p < .01, $\eta^2_a$ = .04, and post hoc analyses revealed that more rumination was experienced both when the individual initiated the request (M = 3.05, SD = 1.46) and when the individual did not remember who initiated (M = 2.87, SD = 1.53) compared with when the friend initiated (M = 2.33, SD = 1.51). The ANOVA for RQ3b was significant, F(2, 376) = 4.19, p < .05, $\eta^2_a$ = .02. According to post hoc analyses, when individuals initiated (M = 1.71, SD = .72), they experienced more negative emotion than when the friend initiated (M = 1.42, SD = .62), with those who did not know who initiated not differing from any other group (M = 1.57, SD = .77).

4. Discussion

We sought to explore rumination and negative emotion as responses to being unfriended on Facebook, which is conceptualized here as a form of relationship termination. With this goal in mind, a number of findings emerged. Rumination and negative emotion were positively correlated (H1) and both were positively predicted by Facebook intensity (H2). Using Facebook to connect with existing social contacts (H3) and being unfriended by a close – rather than distant – relational partner (H4) positively predicted rumination, but not negative emotion. Further, individuals responded with more rumination and negative emotion when they knew which of their Facebook friends unfriended them (RQ1), believed that they did so for Facebook-related reasons (RQ2), and when the individual initiated the Facebook friend request (RQ3). How these findings contribute to our emerging scholarly understanding of the consequences of relational termination via Facebook are discussed below.

4.1. Aspects of Facebook usage

The support for H1 is consistent with previous relational dissolution research (e.g., Collins & Clark, 1989; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007), and extends this positive relationship between rumination and negative emotion to an online setting. Further, the results for H2 contribute to the small, but growing, body of research that finds that intense Facebook usage can be related to negative cognitions and emotions, such as SNS jealousy (Muise, Christodides, & Demerais, 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Though research tends to focus on the positive aspects of Facebook (Wang et al., 2010), there appears to be mounting evidence that a “dark side” of Facebook usage exists and warrants additional investigation.

Intense Facebook usage may mean that users are particularly invested in their relationships with their Facebook friends and thus may respond with greater rumination and negative emotion when they lose one of these friends, which compromises how they are presenting themselves and being perceived by others online. This explanation can also apply to rumination’s positive relationship with using Facebook to connect with existing social contacts (H3a), of which there are fewer when they are unfriended. The nonsignificant finding for negative emotion (H3b) could be partially explained by the relatively weak scale reliability for this Facebook usage variable.

4.2. Aspects of the unfriended relationship

Regarding H4, although Facebook is an online environment where weak social ties can be fostered (Ellison et al., 2007; Lewis & West, 2009), being unfriended by someone an individual is typically closer with, which we classified here as family members and current or former friends or romantic partners, was associated with greater rumination than being unfriended by more distant Facebook friends, such as co-workers and acquaintances. On Facebook, negative acts such as unfriending by those in closer relationships appear to carry more cognitive weight than that of more peripheral Facebook friends, despite them both having similar access to the information on a user’s profile (i.e., “leveling” the online relationship playing field).

However, as some close relational partners, such as parents, can be unwelcome Facebook friends for undergraduates (West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009), how relationships that are close offline are uniquely negotiated on SNSs seems to be evolving. Perhaps negative emotional responses did not vary by whether a relationship was close or not because our participants view their face-to-face close relationships differently in an online context. Or, the inclusion of former friends and romantic partners in the category of close relationship types here may have meant that individuals to some extent expected to be unfriended by these individuals and thus did not react with negative emotion, which also can dissipate as the time since dissolution increases (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Overall, how individuals interact with relational partners of different levels of closeness on an SNS like Facebook, and the implications of these interactions, is an interesting topic for future research.

Our research questions found that ruminative and negative emotional responses significantly varied for each of the three aspects of the unfriended relationship. Specifically, more rumination
and negative emotion were experienced when individuals could identify who their unfriender was (RQ1). In other words, when the Facebook user was certain about who unfriended them, the greater their negative response was. This is inconsistent with previous research which observed a positive relationship between uncertainty and rumination (e.g., Bevan, 2011; Ward, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Perhaps how much the unfriending was expected could offer insight as a potential moderator; those who did not expect to be unfriended by this Facebook friend may respond more negatively than someone who expected to be unfriended because the relationship ended. A study that considered Facebook unfriending from the perspective of Burgoon and Hale’s (1988) Expectancy Violation Theory would clarify this possible relationship.

For RQ2, ruminative and negative emotional responses were greatest when individuals perceived that they were unfriended for Facebook-related reasons. This reason was a combination of Sibona and Walczak’s (2011) posting on Facebook too frequently, posting about polarizing topics, and making crude comments due to low cell sizes. Though this reason elicited the greatest negative response, it was the least frequent perceived reason for being unfriended. Consistent with Sibona and Walczak, an upsetting offline event was the most frequently cited reason. Overall, most of the reasons for unfriending initially identified by Sibona and Walczak (2011) emerged here as well. That both our study and Sibona and Walczak’s observed a number of significant differences according to these motivations suggests that further consideration and refinement of these unfriending reasons is warranted.

Finally, greater rumination and negative emotion were experienced in response to the unfriending when the participant initiated the Facebook friend request compared to either the unfriendee requesting to be friends or being unable to recall who ‘friendied’ whom (RQ3). This finding is consistent with Sibona and Walczak (2011), who found that those who initiated Facebook friend requests were unfriended more than expected. To some extent, being the individual who initiates the Facebook friendship – a clear, direct online act that is signified with a marker – places an individual in a less powerful position (Sibona & Walczak, 2011), as they must wait and see if their friend request is accepted, rejected, or simply ignored. Individuals who are unfriended by someone they initially “friendied” may wonder why the unfriender even accepted the friend request, and such thoughts could give rise to rumination and negative emotion.

4.3. Limitations and conclusions

There were a number of limitations present in this exploratory study. First, though our sample size included almost 550 participants, this is but a very small percentage of the almost 850 million individuals who are currently on Facebook. As such, our sample was not representative of adult Facebook users. Future research on the topic of Facebook unfriending should thus strive to collect a larger, more representative sample of Facebook users who have been unfriended. Next, our decision to measure close versus distant relationships by selecting specific relationship types for each category was somewhat arbitrary and subjective. An item that asks participants to report how close their relationship was with the unfriendee at the approximate time of the unfriending would better assess this variable in future Facebook unfriending research.

In conclusion, we determined that being unfriended on Facebook can represent a form of relationship termination that can elicit rumination and negative emotion, particularly when Facebook usage is intense, the unfriender’s identity is known, the unfriending is perceived to have occurred for Facebook-related reasons, and the Facebook friend request was initiated by the individual who was unfriended. The unique politics of Facebook friending are becoming more of a conundrum as the act of unfriending becomes increasingly common (Madden, 2012) and individuals from diverse networks, such as parents, bosses, and professors, join this SNS (Karl & Peluchette, 2011) and should thus be explored in future research. As such, future research should continue to examine these variables by determining how they work together to mutually influence how an individual cognitively and emotionally responds to being unfriended on Facebook.

Indeed, learning when and who may have unfriended an individual is of such interest to individuals that Facebook consistently removes applications that purport to provide such information because they violate Facebook platform policies (O’Neill, 2010). As Facebook continues to grow in size and influence, stories abound regarding its use as a forum for cyberbullying (Dhammi, 2011; George, 2011) and online obsessive relational intrusion (Chaulk & Jones, 2011), as a leading resource for online evidence gathered in divorce cases (American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, 2010), and as a source of information that has put individuals’ jobs in jeopardy (e.g., Beals, 2010; Haning, 2011). Our findings place an emphasis on the need for continued research about both the specific topic of Facebook unfriending and the presence and implications of the “dark side” of relational communication on SNSs in general.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the contributions of Pei-Chern Ang, James Fears, Lauren Hochleutner, Sarah Hudani, Alexandra Kiesellbach, Cristina Kutzbach, Shea Ledbetter, Jacqueline Lynch, Michelle Kernani, William Miller, Rafe Olson, Carson Simms, and Victoria Young to this project. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the National Communication Association in New Orleans, LA.

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