Better to Unfriend You!: The Effect of Ostracism and Group Membership on Unfriending Behavior

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Abstract

A growing body of literature has revealed that there are various reasons for unfriending in SNSs (Social Network Sites) such as posting too frequently and polarizing topics, making crude comments, and getting minimal contact. The present study aims at the effect of ostracism and group membership on unfriending behavior in SNSs. We used Cyberball Paradigm to manipulate ostracism in the study and conducted this study online in Psytoolkit. All participants were sent a link to participate. The research sample consisted of 240 participants (164 female, 76 male) aged between 18-63. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions in which they were exposed to ostracism or inclusion. Afterward, participants were asked to complete several filler questions about the game, manipulation check questions, and The Need Threat Scale. Finally, participants reacted to a person posting 15 different sexist images in terms of unfriending or ignoring the person. According to Chi-Square analyses for each image, the ostracized participants compared to the included participants are more likely to unfriend than ignore the target person. Also, we did not find a significant difference between participants' gender in terms of reaction to the target person posting those images. These findings contribute to our understanding of unfriending in the scope of ostracism and group membership for future research. One of the limitations is the generalizability of the obtained results because the sample with only university students. Further studies on unfriending might investigate cultural factors and demographic characteristics of the target person.

Keywords: Unfriending, Social Network Sites, Ostracism, Psychological Needs

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1. Introduction

One of the most essential needs of human nature is the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In order to meet this need, people try to expand their social contacts and relationships with others. It is obvious that the more the need meets, the more people feel satisfied. Web 2.0 allows people to fulfill their social needs online. Although they do not physically try to get together, it is seen that the bond between friends, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances continues online (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). Therefore, individuals are constantly together during the day. Social media both gives people a chance to get in touch with people all over the world to construct new social bonds, contacts, and relationships and allows for express their attitudes toward almost everything which is exhibited online (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Therefore, people tend to test their social contacts' attitudes constantly (Kert & Kert, 2010). It can be said that the face-to-face attitude testing process is more difficult than online interactions due to saving face. Traditional interactions contain some concerns about the dynamics of the relationship. People do not want to break others' hearts because of the confronting their attitudes. On the other hand, online interactions alleviate the social burdens of attitude testing process. All processes can happen with some clicks in a short time. In this way, expressing attitudes on any kind of Social Network Sites (SNSs) leads to two potential consequences that one of them is in a benign way and another one is in a malicious way. To start with the benign one, your attitudes towards the post shared by a friend of yours can both maintenance your relationship with him/her and reinforce your relationship. The second one is a malicious way in which you can end your relationship with him/her as a reaction against the post. Imagine that for what reasons you would unfriend one or more friends of yours. As surmised, there is not only one answer. There are many reasons and dynamics underlying our reactions that cause an end with a relationship or a contact. Hence, the main goal of this post is to basically investigate why people unfriend their friends on SNSs. In this context, it is important both to examine what kind of reasons can influence people's reactions relating to unfriending and to assess its consequences.

1.1. The definition of unfriending

Firstly, Raynes-Goldie and Fono (2005) mentioned unfriending in their study. Although they focused on friendship from various perspectives on SNSs, the verb "defriend" emerged as opposed to "friend". After Raynes-Goldie and Fono's study (2005), Oxford American Dictionary described it as "removing someone from your list of friends on a social networking website" (Oxford University Press, 2009). Although Cambridge Dictionary has the same definition, the dictionary defining it as "unfriending" instead of "defriending". Consequently, both can be interchangeably used.

There are many studies that define unfriending in several ways. For instance, unfriending someone is described as a sudden disengagement (Gashi & Knautz, 2015), an ending event or the bond (Pena & Broady, 2014), online boundary management including emotional act or an act to reduce and stop communication (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012) or regulating the online boundary setting (John & Gal, 2018). Despite several various definitions of unfriending, their common point includes termination. This termination can be comprehended differently such as a desire to regulate someone's social environment.

1.2. The reasons for unfriending on social network sites

Researchers state that various reasons can occur in the process of unfriending. In a study by Bevan et al. (2012), four basic reasons are addressed when people tend to unfriend someone on SNSs. Those are posting too frequently, posted polarizing topics, making crude comments, and getting minimal contact.

Posting too frequently: When people are exposed to social media posts excessively shared by a friend, that person is considered as the potential one for being unfriended. Considering that people tend to use SNSs to take another's perspectives by looking through different posts, they might be exposed to the posts shared by the same person. In this case, %63 of people can choose unfriending options (Madden, 2012).

Posted polarizing topics: Especially, posts relating to political views can lead to polarizing between people even though they are friends on SNSs. This situation can be explained based on (with the aid of SIT) Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the essential opinion of this theory, people obtain their self-concepts through the social groups where they are in. Furthermore, they tend to focus on similarities with the in-group, whereas they tend to distinguish themselves from the out-group. The more the importance of social identities increases for people, the more they feel strong emotional ties to the in-group. Because of this reason, people are more likely to be aggressive against out-groups. In sum, people can unfriend or be unfriended in response to posts including polarizing topics (Bronstein & Aharony 2015).

Making crude comments: Face-to-face and computer-based communication (CBC) are quite different from each other. Mostly, CBC provides one-way communication, whereas face-to-face communication occurs in two-way communication. Compared to face-to-face, CBC gives people the opportunity to comfortably make rude, harsh, and impolite comments as responses to the posts. In this regard, people who get those comments are more likely to unfriend the one who leaves those comments in response to the comments (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). As demonstrated above, people need to protect and positively maintain their self-image. Thus, the act of unfriending is seen as an intentional avoidance of harmful comments.

Getting minimal contact: The level of perceived contact among people is important (Lai, 2019). It is more likely to explain how close or distant relationships people have. As assumed, people tend to unfriend geographically distant individuals, whereas they tend to maintain relationships with close ones. A striking finding in a study by Gashi and Knautz (2015) is that perceived geographical distance affects terminating relationships or bonds. By doing so, people try to avoid future contact with them.

Besides the findings of Bevan et al. (2012), various reasons such as gender, age, status, and physical attractiveness might lead to unfriending. A study conducted by Pena and Brody (2014) demonstrates that women and young adults aged between 18-29 are more likely to unfriend someone compared to older users. Moreover, people unfriend those with low social attractiveness rather than physical attractiveness. Hence, this finding plainly indicates that social attractiveness has more influence on unfriending than physical attractiveness.

In the light of these findings, we assumed that there might be a relationship between ostracism and unfriending behavior. Therefore, the current study mainly aimed to reveal the

effect of ostracism on unfriending behavior on SNSs. In addition to the results of Bevan et al. (2012) about posting polarized topics, we supposed that group membership might have an impact on selecting a target person for unfriending.

2. Methods

Previous studies (Pickett & Gardner, 2005, Williams & Zadro 2005) demonstrated that ostracism threatens psychological needs such as self-esteem, belonging, perceived control, and meaningful existence. Williams (2001) states that exposure to ostracism leads to both short and long-term negative behavior and emotion. A study by Twenge et al. (2001) showed that the ostracized people are more likely to have aggressive behavior. Also, the ostracized people tend to express more anger compared to the included people (Warburton et al. 2006). In the light of these findings, we hypothesized that there might be a relationship between ostracism and unfriending. The main objective of the present study is to examine how ostracism effects on unfriending behavior in SNSs. We hypothesize as follows.

H1. The ostracized people compared to the included people will report more unfriending behavior against the target person sharing sexist images.

Many studies have established that behavior can be psychologically tied to social groups that provide social identities. Tajfel and Turner (1979) stated that people tend to define their identities related to social groups and this identification leads people to categorize themselves as in-group or out-group. Reynolds et al. (2000) emphasized that such categorization causes in-group bias or out-group degradation. That is, people might have more aggressive attitudes toward out-group whereas they might have more protective and helpful attitudes toward in-group (Tajfel et al. 1971). When gender as social identity is salience, it is expected that women are more likely to identify themselves with their gender as men does (Maldonado et al. 2003). We assume that gender can affect people's reaction to when they are exposed to the context related to gender. Considering these results, we aim to reveal how ostracism affects unfriending behavior based on gender in the current study. We proposed the hypothesis as follows.

H2. The ostracized women as an ingroup member compared to the ostracized men will report more unfriending behavior against the target person sharing sexist images.

2.1 Participants

All participants were undergraduate students recruited from a public university in Türkiye. A total of 240 participants (164 female, 76 male) with ages ranging from 18 to 63 (M=22.01, SD=5.72) attended the current study. An a priori power analysis for Chi-square testing was computed to determine the required sample size. Alpha error of .05, a statistical power of .80 and an estimated effect size of 0.18 were assumed, which indicated N=226 observations necessary to identify a small to medium effect. The educational level of the sample varies from high school to Ph.D.. %10.8 of the participants graduated from a high school, %86.3 of participants studied in a university, %2.1 of the participants are postgraduate students, and % 0.8 of the participants are Ph.D. students. The income level of the sample varies between 0 and 6000 Turkish Liras and more in a month. %60.8 of the participants earns between 0-1500 Turkish Liras, %9.2 of them earn between 1501-2500, %7.9 of them earn between 2501-4000, %10.4 of them 4001-6000, and %11.7 of them earn 6000 and more in a month. Also, we asked participants to rate how often they use social media in order to better understand

how actively they use it. In terms of using social media, participants reported that they spend their time on YouTube (%21.2), Instagram (%40.8), Facebook (%0.8), Twitter (%10.8), WhatsApp (%23.3), Snapchat (%0.8), and other applications (%2.1). Besides using social media, the number of social interactions in SNSs are an important indicator. Hence, participants were asked to report how many friends, followers and people followed they currently have. On average, they stated that they have 221.9 friends, 447.7 followers and 392.7 followed people. We received ethics approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: HRE2017-0060).

2.2. Measures

The Need Threat Scale: This scale was developed by Van Beest and Williams (2006) to measure the effects of psychological exclusion on basic psychological needs. The Cronbach Alpha of the scale was .92. The Need Threat Scale aims to measure the levels of belonging, self-worth, control, and meaningful existence needs of people with being ostracized. The scale has four sub-dimensions in connection with the four basic needs. There are five items in each sub-dimension. The scale with 20 items is a seven-point Likert-type scale. A high score from the subscales means that the level of satisfaction of the relevant need is also high, and therefore less threat is perceived against this need. The scale was adapted to Turkish by the Hacettepe University Social Psychology Laboratory Research Group within the framework of the TÜBİTAK Project, numbered 109K094, "Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral Consequences of Being Exposed to Psychological Exclusion" (Aydın & Şahin, 2011). Since the principal investigator of this study was part of the team that carried out the Turkish adaptation of the scale, separate permission was not obtained. The internal consistency coefficients of the scale are .91, .86, .84, and .88 for the sub-dimensions of belonging, self-worth, control, and meaningful existence needs, respectively.

Dependent Variable: Participants were asked to react in terms of unfriending or ignoring the person who shares sexist images which was determined by the preliminary study.

2.3. Procedure

We conducted this study in Psytoolkit (version 3.4.2). Psytoolkit (Stoet, 2017) is a software package to program and run psychological surveys and experiments online and offline. All participants were invited to the study via social media. They were asked to first read the informed consent and asked to accept to be a volunteer participant in our study. Afterward, participants were asked to complete several questions related to their demographic information such as age, gender, income, education, and the usage of social media.

Then, we used the Cyberball Paradigm to manipulate ostracism in our study. This paradigm is one of the most used paradigms in studies related to ostracism. In this paradigm, participants are informed about the game they are virtually playing with two other people (see Figure 1). They are asked to pass the ball to one of the other players whenever they take it. Based on this paradigm, we formed the two conditions that those are being ostracized or included. All participants were randomly assigned to one of those conditions. Participants in the inclusion condition get the ball as much as other players, while participants in the ostracized condition get the ball only twice during the game. As soon as the manipulation ended, participants were asked to complete several filler questions about the game and The Need Threat Scale. Finally, participants were asked to give a reaction (unfriending or ignoring) to fifteen sexist images that are ostensibly shared by a friend of participants in

social media. All participants were informed about the study and thanked for participating at the end of the study.
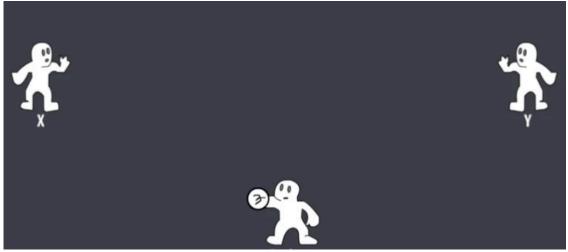

Figure 1. An image from the Cyberball game

2.4. Results

We randomly assigned a total of 240 participants to one of the two conditions where 140 participants were exposed to ostracism, whereas 100 participants were not. We first tested the effect of ostracism on the sub-dimensions of The Need Threat Scale (Table 1). According to analysis, the results showed that the ostracized participants (M=2.27, SD=1.03) reported significantly less a feeling of belonging to the group compared to not the ostracized participants (*M*=4.55, *SD*=1.45), *t*(238)=13.47, *p* < .001, *d*=1.73. Similarly, the ostracized participants (*M*=2.27, *SD*=1.08) reported significantly less control compared to not the ostracized participants (M=4.33, SD=1.13), *t*(238)=12.84, *p* < .001, *d*=1.68. In terms of the third sub-dimension of the Need Threat Scale, the ostracized participants (*M*=3.88, *SD*=1.57) reported significantly less self-esteem compared to not the ostracized participants (*M*=5.17, *SD*=1.16), *t*(238)=7.35, *p* < .001, *d*=0.97. In the last sub-dimension, the ostracized participants (*M*=2.39, *SD*=1.18) reported significantly less meaningful existence compared to not the ostracized participants (*M*=4.42, *SD*=1.15), *t*(238)=11.17, *p* < .001, *d*=1.47. Overall, our results showed that the ostracism manipulation via the Cyberball paradigm was successful for each dimension of the Need Threat Scale.

Table 1: The results of the Need Threat Scale based on conditions

Dimension of the NTS	Condition		t	Cohen's d	df
	Inclusion	Ostracized			
Belonging	4.56 (1.45)	2.27 (1.03)	13.47***	1.76	238
Control	4.33 (1.31)	2.27 (1.08)	12.85***	1.68	238
Self-Esteem	5.17 (1.16)	3.88 (1.57)	7.35***	.96	238
Meaningful existence	4.42 (1.51)	2.39 (1.18)	11.17***	1.46	238

In the next step, we conducted Chi-Square Test for 15 images to examine the relation between ostracism (being ostracized or inclusion) and reaction (unfriending or ignoring). The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in unfriending behavior between two conditions in six images (Figure 2), whereas there was not a statistically significant difference in nine images. The relation between these variables was significant for six images, respectively, χ^2 (1, N = 240) = 5.70, p = .017, χ^2 (1, N = 240) = 7.56, p = .006, χ^2 (1, N = 240) = 4.87, p = .027, χ^2 (1, N = 240) = 4.87, p = .027, χ^2 (1, N = 240) = 3.76, p = .052, χ^2 (1, N = 240) = 4.84, p = .028. Participants in the inclusion condition reported unfriending behavior more compared to participants in the ostracism condition for each image.
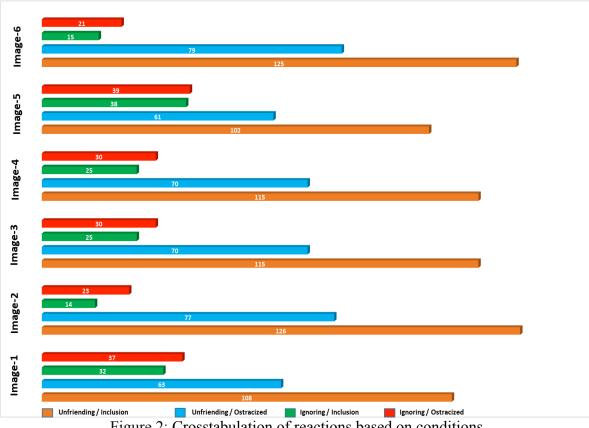

Figure 2: Crosstabulation of reactions based on conditions

Our other assumption is related to participants' group identity. We hypothesized that the presence of ostracism leads more unfriending compared to the presence of inclusion when the person sharing the sexist image is an ingroup member. That is, we expected that women would give more unfriending reaction to the sexist images than men. However, the results demonstrated that our hypothesis was partly supported for some images (see Table 2, 3, and 4). We did not strictly find a significant difference between participants' gender in terms of given reactions.

Table 2: Crosstabulation of reaction and condition based on gender for image 1

Gender	Reaction	Condition		χ^2	p
		Inclusion	Ostracized		
Male					
	Unfriending	25 (22.066)	14 (16.934)	1.85	0.17
	Ignoring	18 (20.934)	19 (16.066)		
Female					
	Unfriending	83 (78.073)	49 (53.927)	4.84	.028
	Ignoring	14 (18.927)	18 (13.073)		

Note. *= $p \le .05$. Expected count appears in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 3: Crosstabulation of reaction and condition based on gender for image 2

Gender	Reaction	Condition		χ^2	p
		Inclusion	Ostracized		
Male					
	Unfriending	33 (29.987)	20 (23.013)	2.304	0.12
	Ignoring	10 (13.013)	13 (9.987)		
Female					
	Unfriending	93 (88.720)	57 (61.280)	5.922	0.01
	Ignoring	4 (8.280)	10 (5.720)		

Note. *= $p \le .05$. Expected count appears in parentheses below group frequencies.

Table 4: Crosstabulation of reaction and condition based on gender for image *3*

Gender	Reaction	Condition		χ^2	p
		Inclusion	Ostracized		
Male					
	Unfriending	27 (24.895)	17 (19.105)	0.974	0.32
	Ignoring	16 (18.105)	16 (13.895)		
Female					
	Unfriending	88 (83.396)	53 (57.604)	4.436	0.03
	Ignoring	9 (13.604)	14 (9.396)		

Note. *= $p \le .05$. Expected count appears in parentheses below group frequencies.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

This study mainly aimed to examine the effects of ostracism on unfriending behavior on Social Network Sites. Our findings showed that ostracized people tended to ignore behavior rather than unfriend behavior toward the target person sharing sexist posts. We expected that ostracized women would choose unfriending behavior more than ostracized men when they witness the target person sharing sexist posts on SNSs. Consequently, our hypotheses were partly supported in some cases.

Williams and Zadro (2005) expressed that ostracism threatens psychological needs (self-esteem, belonging, control, and meaningful existence). Thus, this causes short and long-term unfavorable behavior and emotion (Williams, 2001). For instance, one study by Twenge et al. (2001) showed that ostracized people are more likely to have aggressive behavior. Also, ostracized people tend to express more anger than included people (Warburton et al., 2006). In contrast to these findings, we found that ostracized people tend to ignore rather than unfriend. One reason might be related to suppressing aggressive behavior to stay connected to the group that they belong to. Because being ostracized not only leads to anger but also sadness and pain with losing a sense of belonging (Williams et al., 2000). Furthermore, many studies supported that ostracized people show a tendency to conform to a norm or comply with a request (Carter-Sowell et al., 2008, Riva et al., 2014). Consequently, ostracized people may have more normative and prosocial behaviors that give social connectedness to their group rather than aggressive behaviors such as unfriending the target person or group. Previous studies on this (Lakin & Chartrand, 2005, Pickett et al., 2004) proved that ostracism leads people to behave in ways to strengthen their threatened social needs.

As mentioned above, connecting socially with others is a fundamental need of human nature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Many studies have established that behavior can be psychologically tied to social groups that provide social identities. Tajfel and Turner (1979) stated that people tend to define their identities related to social groups and this identification leads people to categorize themselves as in-group or out-group. Reynolds and colleagues (2000) emphasized that such categorization causes in-group bias or out-group degradation. Thus, people may have more aggressive attitudes toward the out-group, whereas they may have more protective and helpful attitudes toward their group (Tajfel et al., 1971). It is expected that women are more likely to identify themselves with their gender as men do (Maldonado et al., 2003) when their gender is salience. We assumed that gender could affect people's reactions when gender is salience. Considering these findings, even though we hypothesized that ostracized women would report more unfriending behavior than ostracized men when the target person posts sexist images on Social Network Sites, our findings were inconsistent with prior works. We found that for both genders, ostracized people show a tendency to ignore the target person whereas not ostracized people are more likely to unfriend that target. This might be related to social identity threat for women. One study (Steele et al., 2002) has established that social cues in the environment may activate negative ingroup stereotypes, and this causes reminding the devalued status of the ingroup. Therefore, ostracized women might have felt lower belongingness to their ingroup because of the presence of masculine cues on SNSs (Cheryan et al., 2009). Another potential explanation is that social cues related to social identity threat might lead to more withdrawal behavior instead of aggressive behavior (Molden et al., 2009). Similarly, Stout and Dasgupta (2011) conducted an experimental study that demonstrated that exposure to exclusive gender-related cues reduces women's sense of belongingness to their ingroup. Consequently, ostracized women's reaction to sexist images on Social Network Sites might have been related to

withdrawal behavior (e.g. Ignoring) the target person instead of behaving aggressively (e.g. Unfriending) that target.

There are several limitations in the current study. One limitation might have been related to the research sample. Although our research sample was adequate for the Chi-Square analysis according to the power analysis, but for the larger effect size, further research might have a bigger sample than we had. Another potential limitation is related to the data obtained as self-report. In the present study, we measured participant's intentions rather than the actual cases of unfriending or ignoring on Social Network Sites. This might have caused a biased answer in case participants are forced to choose one intentional behavior out of two. That is, participants' reaction was limited to two preferences, namely unfriending and ignoring as categoric variable. However, future research might focus on adding other preferences such as blocking or reporting. The last limitation is that we conducted the study online. As it is known, although online studies have many advantages in terms of time and effort, they have some disadvantages such as an uncontrollable environment. In the current study, we used the Cyberball Paradigm to manipulate ostracism, but we lacked control of participants' environment when they participated in the study. Hence, future studies might focus on direct ways of unfriending as behavioral data in real time in a face-to-face environment.

Consequently, previous studies have not examined the relationship between ostracism and unfriending behavior on Social Network Sites. In this study, we aimed to reveal the effect of ostracism on unfriending. Our results showed that the ostracized people are less likely to unfriend the target person compared to not ostracized people. Although we expected that women tend to unfriend the target person compared to men, the findings based on gender demonstrated that there is no difference between men and women in terms of unfriending the target person for some cases.

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