We're a Good Match:

Selective Political Friending on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Political social media use has become the topic of a growing amount of scholarship. In this regard, the role of user behavior in the formation of politically homogeneous environments (so-called echo chambers) is not fully understood. Building on the concept of selective exposure, we introduce the notion of selective political friending, i.e., the preference for political like-mindedness in social affiliations on social networking sites. In a pre-registered laboratory experiment ($N = 199$), we find that users preferably build connections to those who share opinions toward controversial political issues. Political like-mindedness outperforms advantages based on the popularity of another user or the career-related fit with another user. Political friending is particularly pronounced when individuals' pre-existing opinions are strong, while tendencies toward cognitive closure and the desire for shared reality do not impact like-minded friending. The present study unravels psychological patterns in the process of tie-building on SNS and points to the necessity to take motivational complexity into account when studying phenomena linked to political homogeneity. Being the first study to systematically address politically motivated contact choices on social networking sites jointly with their psychological antecedents, this study sheds new light on the debate about like-mindedness in online communication.

Keywords: Political friending, selective exposure, political homophily, political extremity, need for cognitive closure, pre-registered study

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Adding another person to one's list of friends or contacts is certainly one of the most basic functions of all social networking sites (SNS). Yet, *friending* someone is by no means an arbitrary choice, but can be based on a variety of motives, such as maintenance of offline relationships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) and career development (Utz & Breuer, 2016). Recent scholarship suggests that users may also be guided by political like-mindedness when building ties on SNS, thereby avoiding conflict and dissonance and eventually shaping their networks into politically homogeneous environments, so-called echo chambers (Sunstein, 2017).

In a similar vein, studies have shown that SNS users terminate (unfriend, unfollow) virtual ties with those who hold political opinions that are dissimilar to their own opinions (e.g., Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Such opinion-based selectivity can be analyzed within the selective exposure framework (Frey, 1986; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), since it filters what kind of information users receive via their network. Similarly, the homophily principle describes the tendency of members from one's social networks to be similar to oneself in terms of race, gender, and political opinion (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). While homophily is a fundamental principle of any type of social network, echo chambers relate to ideological and opinion-based homophily on SNS. The latter have been associated with a number of negative outcomes such as attitude polarization and reduced political tolerance (Hong & Kim, 2016; Sunstein, 2017). We introduce the term "selective political friending" as a potential cause of echo chambers. It describes users' bias toward congenial tie choices on SNS, i.e., the selective connection to users who hold similar opinions and beliefs. In many cases, users are able to gauge the political views and preferences of their current network ties, for instance, when others make use of "update your profile picture" functions that are implemented to express one's political support of or opposition to a political question (e.g., marriage equality or transparent elections; Chan, Zhu, Chow, & Fu, 2019; Penney, 2015). Furthermore, users often express their political views within their profiles (Himmelboim et al., 2016), thus providing political information that others may use for impression formation. Yet, only a handful of studies have investigated whether SNS users choose their virtual ties based on a match in political stances, and none has so far compared political criteria to other motives of affiliation and included psychological moderators (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Klofstad, McDermott, & Hatemi, 2013; Rainie & Smith, 2012).

Consequently, the present work is intended to address: (a) The extent of selective political friending on SNS (in comparison to other criteria) and (b) potential psychological drivers of this tendency. To this end, a laboratory experiment was conducted to observe

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friendship behavior on social networking platforms. The main assumptions, research design (including the a priori determination of sample size), and a plan of data analysis have been [pre-registered](#) on the Open Science Framework in advance of data collection and can be retrieved online.

Selective Friending in Social Media

Social media platforms serve to connect people to each other. People deliberately choose with whom they wish to connect and share personal information and whose personal information they want to see on SNS. For example, users commonly connect to others who they already know offline, who are physically attractive (Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans, & Stefanone, 2010), or who serve as targets for social comparisons, thereby promoting self-enhancement (Ouwerkerk & Johnson, 2016). We suggest that friending decisions might furthermore be influenced by the congruence of two users' opinions.

Political Friending

Work on the homophily principle suggests that people with similar opinions interact at a higher frequency than people with dissimilar opinions (McPherson et al., 2001). In the context of online dating, Huber and Malhotra (2017) found that users prefer to contact and communicate with others who share their political views. They found that the preference for political like-mindedness in online dating is substantial, comparable in size to racial and educational homophily. While there are only a handful studies addressing selective political friending (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Rainie & Smith, 2012), a growing body of research has dealt with the related phenomenon of political unfriending, which means the exclusion of users with opposing political views from one's network (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang, Barnidge & Rojas, 2017; Zhu & Skoric, 2017). Surveys in different countries and cultural contexts have revealed that only 10–16% of social media users have ever terminated a digital relationship due to political disagreements. Hence, users seem reluctant to terminate virtual connections as this can imply a loss of important social resources (Krämer, Rösner, Eimler, Winter & Neubaum, 2014; Utz, 2016). Earlier findings suggest that the selective exposure to like-minded views is usually stronger than the selective avoidance of non-like-minded ones (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). In this regard, political friending can be conceptualized as selective exposure to political like-mindedness (Frey, 1986; Stroud, 2010; Zhu & Skoric, 2017). As suggested by work on interpersonal impression formation on SNS (Hall, Pennington, & Lueders, 2014) showing that SNS users accurately use cues online, when virtually encountering other users on SNS (for example when browsing through one's friend suggestions), users are exposed to their political opinions, which will consequently

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influence impression formation and interpersonal behavior. Resemblance of own opinions likely results in a higher willingness to create virtual ties, thus allowing a user to avoid cognitive dissonance and uncertainty (Festinger, 1957; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Once these ties are built on the basis of like-mindedness, echo chambers may be more likely to form and foster political polarization in the long run (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017; Sunstein, 2001; Vaccari et al., 2016).

Based on these considerations, we hypothesize that:

H1: Social media users are more likely to friend someone whose political opinion matches their own opinion compared to someone whose political opinion does not match their own opinion.

Predictors of Political Friending

Political homophily and selective exposure are pervasive, but usually only to a moderate extent within SNS (see Bode, 2016; Yang et al., 2017). However, certain dispositions can make specific groups of users more susceptible to such phenomena than others (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017; Stroud, 2010). Three characteristics are particularly important in this regard: The strength with which an opinion is held as well as informational (need for cognitive closure) and relational (desire for shared reality) aspects related to dispositional closed-mindedness.

Opinion Strength. Persuasion research has described attitudes that are resistant and particularly connected to behavior as strong opinions (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). The extremity of one's opinion (how far does it deviate from a neutral point of view?) and the certainty with which it is held (how convinced is the person that their attitude is "correct?") have been conceptualized as core dimensions of opinion strength (Crano & Prislin, 2008). In terms of media use and its effects, strong opinions and ideologies have been linked to a variety of outcomes: Research on strong political opinions showed that they increase selective exposure effects (Stroud, 2010; Zaller, 1992). In a longitudinal study that applied web-tracking methodology, Dvir-Gvirsman (2017) found that, ideologically, more extreme users favored web pages with like-minded audiences to a higher degree than moderate users and that they turned more extreme in the course of the study. Drawing on a representative sample of U.S. citizens, Weeks and colleagues (2017) found that users with strong political party affiliation engaged significantly more often in selective exposure to attitude-reinforcing information. Furthermore, it was shown that strong ideologies increase the likelihood of politically motivated unfriending on SNS (Bode, 2016; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). In the light of this argumentation, we hypothesize that:

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H2a: The more extreme users' opinion toward a controversial issue is, the more likely they are to send friend requests to other users who share their opinion on that issue.

H2b: The more certain users are about their opinion toward a controversial issue, the more likely they are to send friend requests to other users who share their opinion on that issue.

Need for Cognitive Closure and Desire for Shared Reality. A number of studies have demonstrated that individuals vary in their need for affirmative feedback from their informational and social environments, which influences their willingness to process novel information and to get involved in novel social situations (Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos, & Hardin, 2018). On the one hand, so-called *epistemic needs* describe general aspects of closed-mindedness and are well-represented by the need for cognitive closure construct (NFCC; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). On the other hand, relational needs express themselves in an individual's desire for shared reality, i.e., the necessity to socially share a common understanding of the world. Need for cognitive closure is a multi-faceted trait that comprises differences in the preference for order (i.e., preference for clear rules and structures in the environment) and predictability (i.e., preference for predictable future situations and interaction partners), decisiveness (i.e., preference for quick decision-making), closed-mindedness (i.e., avoidance of disconfirming information and opinions), and discomfort with ambiguity (i.e., dislike of open-ended, unclear situations). Individuals high in NFCC are more prone to a range of selective exposure behaviors (for a meta-analysis see Hart et al., 2009). Similar to NFCC, shared reality theory postulates that individuals seek social validation of their views (Stern, West, Jost, & Rule, 2016). The desire for validation is more pronounced for some than for others (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009). These individuals are less likely to interact with non-like-minded others and might hence be more susceptible to a biased selection of virtual social ties. With regard to users' dispositions toward cognitive closure and shared reality, we hypothesize that:

H3: The higher users' need for cognitive closure, the more likely they are to send friend requests to other users who share their opinion on a controversial issue.

H4: The higher users' desire for shared reality, the more likely they are to send friend requests to other users who share their opinion on a controversial issue.

Popularity and Social Support

Political like-mindedness is only one of a number of factors that influence friending decisions on SNS. For instance, being well-networked and having a large number of SNS friends can have an effect on the recipients of one's profile: Such effects have been studied under the term *sociometric popularity* (Tong et al., 2008). Tong and colleagues (2008) found

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that the number of a user's SNS friends is linked to other users' perceptions of that user's social attractiveness. Befriending a popular user can be linked to the expectation that one is able to compensate one's own social shortcomings (Zywica & Danowski, 2008) or receive levels of social support that otherwise might not be attained (Krämer et al., 2014). Another user's sociometric popularity is likely to be perceived as a powerful social benefit and might therefore motivate friending on SNS.

H5: Social media users are more likely to friend another user whose sociometric popularity is high compared to another user whose sociometric popularity is low.

Career Utility

SNS enable users to build networks that include acquaintances from very different social spheres, for instance, private and work-related contacts (which is known under the term of *context collapse*). As a result, SNS like Facebook are used for professional purposes by some users (e.g., Vitak, Lampe, Gray, & Ellison, 2012). By connecting to others who are perceived as relevant in professional terms, users might expect better access to the job market or greater ability to cultivate and expand professional contacts (Utz, 2016). Connecting to those perceived as professionally useful is also linked to informational benefits as it enables users to keep up with recent developments in their own occupational field (Utz & Breuer, 2016). In a nutshell, the potential instrumental utility stemming from career-related friending is self-evident. We thus hypothesize that:

H6: Social media users are more likely to friend another user whose career utility is high compared to another user whose career utility is low.

So far, we have analyzed opinion congruence, sociometric popularity, and career utility as potential drivers of friending on SNS. As research on political homophily suggests that opinion congruence plays a minor role in social networking (Dubois & Blank, 2018; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015) while, at the same time, there are no systematic comparisons of different friending criteria as yet, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Which of the focused features, sociometric popularity, career utility, and opinion congruence, is the leading criterion to friend someone on social networking platforms?¹

Pilot Survey: Selection of Political Issues

To provide evidence for the generalizability of our findings, we used two controversial issues for our study (*Refugee family reunification: Should the relatives of refugees be allowed to join their family members living in Germany?*, see ARD & infratest dimap, 2019, and *Surveillance of telecommunication to prevent terrorism: Should German authorities be allowed to monitor citizens' private communication in order to identify and prosecute*

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potential terrorists?, see Prantl, 2019). The issues were pretested in order to ensure comparability with regard to their perceived controversy and interestingness.

In an online survey ($N = 49$, $M_{age} = 26.73$, $SD = 8.92$, 67.3% female, 63.3% university students, approved by the local IRB: 7 May 2018), participants were recruited via student Facebook groups and asked about their perception of controversy (*How controversial is the issue of family reunification of refugees/surveillance of telecommunication to prevent terrorism?* 1: not controversial at all, 7: very controversial) and interestingness (*How interesting do you personally find this topic?* 1: not interesting at all, 7: very interesting). Informed consent was obtained in advance of the study and participants were invited to take part in a raffle after completing the study. Results indicated that both perceived controversy and interest were high and significantly differed from the neutral scale midpoint (4) for the issue of refugee family reunification ($M_{Controversy} = 5.53$, $SD = 1.28$, $t(48) = 8.39$, $p < .001$, $M_{Interest} = 5.22$, $SD = 1.23$, $t(48) = 6.97$, $p < .001$) and surveillance of telecommunication ($M_{Controversy} = 5.61$, $SD = 1.26$, $t(48) = 8.99$, $p < .001$, $M_{Interest} = 5.53$, $SD = 1.04$, $t(48) = 10.27$, $p < .001$). Importantly, the issues did not differ with regard to perceived controversy, $t(48) = 0.37$, $p = .717$, and interestingness, $t(48) = 1.72$, $p = .092$, and were therefore used in the study.

Main Study: Method

In order to investigate our hypotheses and research questions, a pre-registered laboratory experiment was conducted. Participants were individually assessed via computerized questionnaires. They were informed about the anonymous and responsible treatment of their data and their right to withdraw from participation at any time. The study was approved by the local IRB (4 June 2018).

Sample

According to previous research, selective exposure effects are moderate and detectable in within-subject experimental designs with a sample size of approximately $N = 150$ (with a power level of at least 80%). As there were no other studies on selective exposure with regard to tie selection on SNS, a sample size of $N = 200$ was striven for (see [OSF](#) for our a priori considerations on sample size). Some of the participants ($n = 84$) were recruited and assessed at the campus of a large German university between 27 June and 14 August 2018, while others ($n = 118$) were recruited in the local pedestrian area between 17 July and 21 August 2018. Whereas relying on mere student samples carries the risk of biased and non-generalizable findings, the sample in this study is more heterogeneous with regard to political leanings, gender, and education. After excluding participants who reported not using any

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social media platform ($n = 3$, from the pedestrian sub-sample), the final sample consisted of $N = 199$ participants (40.7 % female), varying in age between 18 and 75 years ($M = 29.48$, $SD = 11.83$). A total of 54.3% of participants reported having a high school degree, 21.1% middle school, and 15.6% a university degree. The remaining participants had a lower secondary degree (4%), no degree (4.5%), or a Ph.D. (0.5%). Participants optionally received course credit or five euros for study participation.

Stimulus and Procedure

Participants were introduced to a cover story in which they were told to test a newly developed social networking site called *Social Connect*. To increase cover story credibility, an ostensible screen shot of a Social Connect user page featuring postings of other users, hyperlinks, and content recommendations was shown to participants (see [OSF](#)). Social Connect was introduced as a social networking site where users connect for professional and private purposes, including a forum for discussions on political issues. Participants created an ostensible user profile (e.g., by providing information on their education, profession, and professional experience) and then had the possibility to connect to other users (i.e., send friend requests). In order to increase engagement in the experiment, participants were told that their profile could be maintained after the study.

Next, participants were shown a page featuring 16 friend recommendations of ostensible Social Connect users (i.e., profiles containing a brief overview of a user's profile information, displayed in a randomized order for each participant; see Figure 1). Each profile contained a manipulation of the three experimental factors, sociometric popularity, career utility, and opinion congruence. The systematic manipulation of these variables makes it possible to detect which of the criteria were decisive to participants when sending friend requests to other Social Connect users. Each short profile additionally contained a neutral profile picture (e.g., a landscape) and a user name. In order to control for identifiability and gender-related bias, neutral user names (*User_2y9*) and profile pictures were used. Participants could send as many friend requests to other users as they wished, which resembles the unrestrictedness that is given in real choice situations. After having sent friend requests, participants were assessed on further items (see below) and provided demographic information. Participants were then fully debriefed on the true purpose and experimental setting of the study.

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Figure 1. The Social Connect user profile displayed as a friend suggestion. The figure, including descriptions of the profile elements (experimental factors), was shown to participants in advance of choosing other users. The original stimulus material was in German.

Experimental Design

The experiment had a 2 (sociometric popularity) x 2 (career utility) x 2 (opinion congruence) within-subjects design. Opinion congruence was manipulated with regard to opinions toward two controversial issues, i.e., family reunification and surveillance of telecommunication, with one of the two appearing in each individual user profile. In order to cancel out confounding influences, opinions were represented by a short and clear phrase within the profiles (e.g., “User_2w4 is against refugee family reunification”). Sociometric popularity was manipulated in two levels (high/low) and operationalized in the form of visual and numerical scores ranging from 5 to 10% (low) and from 90 to 95% (high). Participants were told that the score shows “how well a user is connected to other users on Social Connect” (popularity component) and “how fast a user responds when others seek support or ask questions” (social support component; see Figure 1, which was shown to participants in advance of the selection task). Career utility was manipulated in a similar way, but instead participants were told that the respective scores show “how well a user is connected within the network” and “how relevant that person might be in terms of career.”

Measures

For the comparison of friending criteria (RQ1), *selective friending* was measured by counting the number of friend requests participants sent to users with: (a) High versus low sociometric popularity, (b) high versus low professional utility, and (c) high versus low

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opinion congruence. Based on these measures, an index subtracting the number of selected profiles with low popularity/utility/agreement from the number of selected profiles with high popularity/utility/agreement was created. This approach resembles the procedure commonly used in selective exposure research (e.g., Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016) and allows for a direct comparison of participants' prioritization of the three criteria of interest.

To determine *opinion congruence*, participants' opinion toward the two controversial issues was assessed by dichotomous items: "If you had to decide for or against refugee family reunification (surveillance of telecommunication), what would you choose?", 1 = I would decide against it ($n_{\text{Reunification}} = 70$, $n_{\text{Surveillance}} = 103$), 2 = I would decide in favor of it ($n_{\text{Reunification}} = 129$, $n_{\text{Surveillance}} = 96$).

Opinion strength was operationalized as extremity and certainty of opinions (Crano & Prislin, 2008). Extremity was defined as the deviation from the neutral scale midpoint of the opinion measure: "How is your opinion toward <issue>?" (1: I'm strongly against it, 7: I'm strongly in favor of it, $\min$ of the transformed variables = 0, $\max = 3$, family reunification: $M_{\text{Extremity}} = 1.37$, $SD = 1.10$ /surveillance: $M_{\text{Extremity}} = 1.59$, $SD = 1.08$). Opinion certainty was measured by asking: "How certain are you with regard to your opinion on <issue> (1: not certain at all, 7: very certain, family reunification: $M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.68$ /surveillance: $M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.71$).

Need for cognitive closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) was measured by the 18-items need for structure and predictability subscale (von Collani, 2003, Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). For each item, participants indicated their agreement (1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree), e.g., "I don't like questions that can be answered in multiple ways," "I prefer to be with close friends because I know what I can expect from them²" ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.68$).

Desire for shared reality (Echterhoff et al., 2009) was assessed by two items (i.e., "It is important to me to perceive the world in a similar way to people who generally share my views" and "It is important to me that other people in my surroundings have the same worldview as I do," $r_{\text{SB}} = .60$), which were based on Echterhoff and colleagues' (2009) operationalization and measured on a six-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree; $M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.2$).

Frequency of use of various social media platforms ("How often do you use one or more of the following social networks?", 1: never, 5: every day; $M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.61$), *political interest* (1: not interested at all, 5: very interested; $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1$), *political ideology* (1: left, 10: right, $M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.2$), *cover story credibility* ("Looking back, did you think that Social Connect was a real social network before you learned about the purpose

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of our study?”, 1: yes, $n = 65$; 2: no, $n = 69$; 3: not sure, $n = 64$), and sociodemographic variables served as controls and descriptive measures.

Results

Stimulus materials and additional analyses of this experiment can be found in the [OSF project](#). Participants sent on average 4.68 friend requests ($SD = 2.91$), including participants who sent no request ($n = 19$) and participants who sent requests to all of the 16 users ($n = 3$). Participants took on average 1.76 minutes ($SD = 1.01$) to complete the selection task and 14.28 minutes ($SD = 3.39$) to complete the whole questionnaire.

To test H1, which assumed that SNS users prefer politically like-minded over non-like-minded users, analyses of variance (ANOVA) for repeated measures were conducted with opinion congruence, sociometric popularity, and career utility as factors. Friend requests sent served as dependent variable. For the issue of refugee family reunification, a significant main effect of opinion congruence, $F(1, 198) = 124.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .39$, indicated that participants sent more friend requests to users with a congruent opinion ($M = 1.90, SD = 1.37$) compared to users with an incongruent opinion ($M = 0.64, SD = 0.98, d = 1.06$). This effect was more pronounced for participants who indicated to be in favor of family reunification ($d = 1.48$) than for participants who indicated to be against family reunification ($d = 0.43$). For the issue of surveillance of telecommunication, a significant main effect of opinion congruence, $F(1, 198) = 55.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$, indicated that participants sent more friend requests to users with a congruent opinion ($M = 1.66, SD = 1.25$) compared to users with an incongruent opinion ($M = 0.83, SD = 1.09, d = 0.71$). This effect was more pronounced for participants who indicated to be against surveillance of telecommunication ($d = 0.80$) than for participants who indicated to be in favor of surveillance of communication ($d = 0.63$; see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and effect sizes). H1 was supported by these results. Interaction effects are addressed in additional online material¹.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and effect sizes (Cohen's d and partial eta-squared) with regard to the experimental factors and their effects on the number of friend requests sent by participants.

Variable	M	SD	Cohen's d / η_p^2
<i>Opinion Congruence (both issues)</i>			
Congruent	3.57	2.29	1.03
Incongruent	1.48	1.75	

Issue: Refugee Family Reunification

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Congruent	1.90	1.37	1.06 / .39 (overall)
Participant in favor	2.26	1.29	1.48 ^a
Participant against	1.26	1.28	0.43 ^b
Incongruent	0.64	0.98	
Participant in favor	0.58	0.95	
Participant against	0.76	1.04	
<i>Issue: Surveillance of Telecommunication</i>			
Congruent	1.66	1.25	0.71 / .22 (overall)
Participant in favor	1.50	1.26	0.63 ¹
Participant against	1.83	1.22	0.80 ²
Incongruent	0.83	1.09	
Participant in favor	0.80	0.95	
Participant against	0.86	1.20	
<i>Sociometric Popularity</i>			
Low	1.70	1.61	0.73 / .29
High	2.98	1.91	
<i>Career Utility</i>			
Low	1.73	1.62	0.68 / .25
High	2.95	1.95	

Note. ^a Congruent-incongruent effect of participants *in favor* (controversial issue); ^b effect of participants *against*. Values in bold show the eta-squared of the respective (overall) effect within the ANOVA.

To investigate H2, H3, and H4, which assumed that opinion extremity (H2a), opinion certainty (H2b), need for cognitive closure (H3), and desire for shared reality (H4) increase the effect of opinion congruency, hierarchical multiple regressions were run with opinion strength (i.e., extremity of opinion and opinion certainty), need for cognitive closure, and desire for shared reality as predictors and selective friending scores as criteria. We used standard OLS regressions as the selective friending scores were approximately normally distributed. In a first step, all control variables were entered into the regression, followed by the predictors (see Table 2 for regressions, correlations can be retrieved [online](#)). With regard to the issue family reunification, opinion certainty weakly predicted selective friending, $\beta = .24$, $p = .006$, while opinion extremity did not, $\beta = .14$, $p = .104$. The more certain participants were in their opinion toward refugee family reunification, the more requests they sent to like-minded users. Neither need for cognitive closure, $\beta = -.05$, $p < .537$, nor desire for shared reality, $\beta = .05$, $p = .519$, predicted selective friending. For the issue surveillance of

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telecommunication, opinion extremity weakly predicted selective friending, $\beta = .21, p = .009$, but not opinion certainty, $\beta = .12, p = .143$, indicating that the more extreme participants' opinion toward surveillance of telecommunication was, the more requests they sent to like-minded users. Taken together, H2 was partially supported. Again, neither need for cognitive closure, $\beta = .02, p < .815$, nor desire for shared reality, $\beta = .10, p < .209$, predicted selective friending. Hence, H3 and H4 were not supported.

Table 2

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses with selective friending scores of both controversial issues as criteria.

<i>Refugee Family Reunification</i>					
	<i>b (SE_b)</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2
<i>Block 1 (controls)</i>					.05
Age	-.02 (.01)	-.14	-1.74	.084	
Ideology	-.08 (.06)	-.11	-1.46	.146	
Political Interest	.17 (.12)	.11	1.41	.160	
Social Media Use	.02 (.02)	.05	0.68	.500	
<i>Block 2</i>					.12
Extremity of Opinion	.19 (.12)	.14	1.64	.104	
Opinion Certainty	.23 (.08)	.24	2.80	.006	
Need for Cognitive Closure	-.11 (.18)	-.05	-0.62	.537	
Desire for Shared Reality	.07 (.10)	.05	0.65	.519	
<i>Total R²</i>					.17
Step 1: $F(4,173) = 2.36, p = .056$					
Step 2: $F(8,169) = 4.25, p < .001$					
<i>Surveillance of Telecommunication</i>					
<i>Block 1 (controls)</i>					.10
Age	-.03 (.01)	-.21	-2.66	.009	
Ideology	-.04 (.05)	-.06	-0.69	.491	
Political Interest	.22 (.12)	.15	1.90	.059	
Social Media Use	.04 (.02)	.14	1.77	.080	
<i>Block 2</i>					.08
Extremity of Opinion	.29 (.11)	.21	2.65	.009	
Opinion Certainty	.10 (.07)	.12	1.47	.143	
Need for Cognitive Closure	.07 (.18)	.03	0.40	.690	
Desire for Shared Reality	.07 (.10)	.05	0.63	.527	
<i>Total R²</i>					.19
Step 1: $F(4,160) = 4.56, p = .002$					
Step 2: $F(8,156) = 4.44, p < .001$					

Note. Values in bold indicate significant values.

H5 and H6, which anticipated users' preference for popular (H5) and professionally useful (H6) others, were analyzed via an ANOVA for repeated measures with sociometric

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popularity, career utility, and opinion congruence (one joint factor for both issues) as factors and number of friend requests sent by participants as dependent variable. A significant main effect of sociometric popularity, $F(1, 198) = 70.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$, indicated that participants sent on average more friend requests to users with high sociometric popularity ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.91$) compared to users with low sociometric popularity ($M = 1.70, SD = 1.61, d = 0.73$), thus supporting H5. In support of H6, a significant main effect of career utility, $F(1, 198) = 86.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$, revealed that on average more friend requests were sent to users with high career utility ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.95$) than to users with low career utility ($M = 1.73, SD = 1.62, d = 0.68$; see Table 1).

RQ1 examined the comparative relevance of each manipulated user feature. Therefore, selective friending scores were calculated for sociometric popularity and career utility. To adequately compare the factors, the resulting scores for opinion congruence of both political issues were added together. An ANOVA for repeated measures with selective friending scores of sociometric popularity, career utility, and opinion congruence as levels of one single factor revealed a significant effect, $F(2, 396) = 7.67, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc comparisons revealed that selective friending scores were higher for opinion congruence ($M = 1.99, SE = .18$) compared to sociometric popularity ($M = 1.29, SE = .14, p = .007, d = 0.31$) and career utility ($M = 1.22, SE = .15, p = .004, d = 0.33$), which did not differ from each other. A comparison of the two political issues revealed that selective friending scores were higher for the issue of refugee family reunification ($M = 1.15, SE = .11$) than for the issue of surveillance of telecommunication ($M = 0.84, SE = .11, p = .04, d = 0.12$). All analyses were additionally run separately for the two subsamples, which did not lead to different results.

Discussion

The idea that users connect to the politically like-minded at a higher rate than to their political opponents was supported by our study, at least when users need to decide based on a limited set of available information. It appears that, assuming the opinion of another user is known, SNS users may selectively form ties with those who share their political opinions. This finding is in line with insights from selective exposure research (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), but additionally suggests that confirmation bias is not limited to information (Garrett & Stroud, 2014), but also applies to social affiliation online. The selective exposure to political allies might be one reason why some users are predominantly surrounded by like-minded contents in their online networks (Sunstein, 2017).

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In contrast to work on incidental exposure to political information (e.g., Lu & Lee, 2018), our study highlights that SNS users are not only passive receivers, but instead active constructors of their political environment, which may reduce the odds of getting exposed to cross-cutting views.

Strong Opinions and Selective Friending

In support of earlier work that found positive associations between opinion strength, selective exposure effects, and political homophily (Hart et al., 2009; Stroud, 2010), our results corroborate that SNS users with strong opinions are more selective with regard to opinion congruence when forming new ties. Whether certainty or extremity of an opinion increases selective friending appears to depend on the specific issue at hand. While both of the former are considered indicators of opinion strength (Crano & Prislin, 2008), they also seem to carry unique predictive value, which would be worth addressing in future studies. Most crucially, users who hold strong convictions might be particularly prone to further polarization not only due to increased selective information exposure (Stroud, 2010), but due to stronger selectivity taking place at the very core of social networking, i.e., virtual affiliations.

Selective Friending and Motivational Factors

Contrary to our expectations and findings from selective exposure to information (Hart et al., 2009), need for cognitive closure and desire for shared reality were not related to selective friending. Considering that the respective studies mainly draw on US samples, this might imply that the hypothesized associations are more sensitive to specific societal contexts than previously assumed. The controversial issues used in this study are highly prominent within the general population (ARD & infratest dimap, 2019; Prantl, 2019) and specific issue features (e.g., communication norms related to the so-called refugee crisis) might have blurred a potential influence of NFCC and desire for shared reality.

Differences Based on Issue and Subgroup

Selective political friending was stronger for the issue of refugee family reunification and particularly pronounced for users who were in favor of it. This raises the question of what might distinguish this issue from the issue of telecommunication surveillance. In our view, a pivotal difference is grounded on morals: Moral psychology has shown that the moral dimension of *care* (i.e., taking care of others) is considered particularly important in western societies and even more so among people with left-wing views (Graham et al., 2011). Consequently, users might particularly avoid contact to those who violate the value of care (i.e., reject refugees) and even selectively search contact to moral allies (i.e., refugee

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supporters). Furthermore, anti-refugee sentiments are commonly spread online by far-right and populist groups (e.g., Schmitt, Ernst, Frischlich, & Rieger, 2017), which are rejected by a large part of society. In this case, opinion-based selectivity may reflect the avoidance of a disliked social group.

Social and Career-Related Benefits

In line with previous work, we found that users preferably form virtual ties with those who provide benefits to oneself, such as social support (Krämer et al., 2014) and useful information (Utz & Breuer, 2016). Connecting to such individuals may be a way by which SNS users increase their own social capital (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007). Our results also support the idea that a match in and perceptions of career-related properties can make tie-building more likely as one can, for instance, improve their access to useful job-related information (Utz, 2016).

Comparison of User Characteristics

Compared to sociometric popularity and career utility, opinion congruence appears more important when building new connections on SNS. The fact that like-mindedness outperforms other criteria may challenge the common standing that political homophily on SNS is negligible (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015). Provided that political views become visible (e.g., via personal profiles or user-generated content), they may enter an individual's cognitive calculus of costs and benefits and eventually determine the decisional outcome.

Limitations

Our experimental design, which emphasized only a few very specific attributes of other users salient (e.g., political) opinions, is undoubtedly an artificial situation that is not usually encountered by users of SNS. Also, differences in the operationalization of the manipulated user features might have led to differences between the visual prominence of features. Furthermore, in contrast to real social networking platforms, friend suggestions contained only little individuality and a reduced set of social cues. In this regard, it is important to highlight that our study intended to trigger psychological processes that occur in individuals when they weigh up different criteria in advance of affiliation. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to exert as much control as possible over confounding influences. Lastly, we did not draw on a representative sample of SNS users (even though we took measures to make our sample more heterogeneous), which reduces the generalizability of our findings.

Conclusion

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With a particular focus on opinion congruence, this study investigated criteria that motivate users of SNS when choosing their virtual ties. As the first study to address this phenomenon with a comparative approach, we found evidence that users might preferably connect to those who are politically like-minded. Political like-mindedness seems particularly important for users with strong political views and for specific (e.g., morally charged) issues. Our study showed that selective exposure processes are at work when it comes to social affiliation on SNS and this may explain how some users politically homogenize their networks. As a lack of political diversity is potentially harmful to a society, platforms might be encouraged to implement algorithms that take their users' biases into account and to make users aware of the consequences of excessive selectivity. To test the generalizability of our findings, future research should draw on self-report data and apply web-tracking methodology. Including a more diverse set of social cues and addressing mediators (e.g., discrepancies in moral beliefs and type of issue) and consequences (e.g., political polarization) of selective friending would allow for a deeper understanding of the boundary conditions, causes, and implications of selective exposure to virtual affiliations.

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Footnotes

1 On an exploratory level, we also asked whether users, when selecting ties in SNS, rely on a single user feature or whether there are specific combinations of features that are preferred over others. For both issues, results indicated that participants to some extent prefer users who have several beneficial characteristics, e.g., high popularity, high career utility, and congruent opinion. A more detailed report on the results can be retrieved [online](#).

2 The complete item wordings can be retrieved [online](#).

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