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We're a good match: Selective political friending on social networking sites

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Abstract: To date, the role of user behavior in the formation of politically homogeneous online environments (oftentimes called echo chambers) is not fully understood. Building on selective exposure research, we introduce the notion of selective political friending, that is, the preference for political like-mindedness in social affiliations on social networking sites. In a pre-registered laboratory experiment with users of social networking sites in Germany (N = 199), we find that users preferably build connections with those who share their opinions toward controversial political issues. Political like-mindedness outperforms other friending criteria such as popularity or career-related fit with another user. Political friending is pronounced when individuals' pre-existing opinions are strong. The present study points to the necessity to take the motivational complexity into account when studying phenomena linked to political homogeneity on SNS.

Keywords: political friending, selective exposure, political homophily, political extremity, need for cognitive closure

1 Introduction

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, and Lampe, 2007) and career development (Utz and Breuer, 2016). Recent scholarship suggests that users may also be guided by political like-mindedness when building ties on SNS,

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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 and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015).

Such opinion-based selectivity can be analyzed within the selective exposure framework (Zillmann and Bryant, 1985), since users are exposed to a number of 'objects' (i. e., other users) varying in their congruence with their own political attitudes and from which they can freely choose. Other users are, in turn, (potential) sources of political information, which makes selectivity toward like-minded users an indirect form of selective exposure to like-minded information. 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, and 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 and 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, that is, 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, and Fu, 2019; Penney, 2015). Furthermore, users often express their political views within their profiles (Himelboim et al., 2016), thus providing political information that others may use for impression formation (while in other instances it may be more difficult for users to infer other's political views, e. g., when their profile is set to 'private' or when they do not disclose any information about their political opinions). 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 and Malhotra, 2017; Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi, 2013; Rainie and 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 with users of SNS in Germany was conducted to observe friending 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. Additional material to the present work can be found there as well.

Selective friending in social media

Social media platforms serve to connect people to one another. 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, and Stefanone, 2010), or who serve as targets for social comparisons, thereby promoting self-enhancement (Ouwerkerk and 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 and Malhotra, 2017; Rainie and 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 and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang, Barnidge, and Rojas, 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, and 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 and Stroud, 2014). Both, selective disconnection from politically disagreeing contacts and selective connection with agreeing ones on SNS may be conceived of as a specific form of selective exposure.

Selective friending as a type of selective exposure

Research into selective exposure shows that individuals prefer information that is congruent with their (political) attitudes over incongruent information (for a meta-analysis, see Hart et al., 2009). For selective exposure to take place, individuals need to be exposed to, and aware of, alternatives (e. g., like-minded and opposing news articles) from which they can freely choose. As individuals tend toward decreasing and avoiding cognitive dissonance and ascribe higher credibility to information they agree with (Festinger, 1957; Taber and Lodge, 2006), they are more likely to select and engage with congenial information. As suggested by work on interpersonal impression formation on SNS (Hall, Pennington, and Lueders, 2014) showing that SNS users accurately use cues online, when virtually encountering other users on SNS (for example, when browsing through their friend suggestions), users are exposed to their political opinions, which will consequently influence impression formation and interpersonal behavior. Resemblance of one's own opinions fosters the perceptions of interpersonal similarity and therefore trust and predictability, which likely results in a higher willingness to create virtual ties, thus allowing a user to avoid cognitive dissonance. In consequence, by being selective about interpersonal connections, users are at the same time selective regarding the information (potentially) shared by these connections. Selective friending of like-minded individuals may therefore be conceived of as a way by which users of online networks selectively expose themselves to like-minded information.

Despite these similarities between selective exposure to information and selective friending, there are also important differences. On the level of psychological processes, selective friending could primarily serve to avoid future dissonance by selecting interaction partners who may not expose one to disagreement (but instead rewarding interactions; Byrne, 1961), while selective exposure to information may more often be related to the reduction of presently experienced dissonance. On the level of consequences, selective friending is likely more consequential than selective exposure to information as the former is embedded in a relational context. Building ties with others directly impacts the structure of one's (virtual) social network and therefore decides with whom a person will interact in the future. Against this background, users may be more cautious and weigh costs against benefits when forming new interpersonal ties on SNS (see Neubaum, Cargnino, and Maleszka, 2021), at least to a greater extent than they do when deciding about reading a news article or not. Lastly, while selective exposure to information may contribute to a homogenization of users' informational networks (e. g., regarding the kind of news appearing in their feeds), selective friending impacts both the interpersonal network and the informational network

(as like-minded contacts will be more likely to share like-minded content). In sum, selective friending on SNS may be regarded a type of selective exposure which shares basic characteristics of selective exposure to information but can also be clearly distinguished from it, especially regarding the role of future interactions and potentially experienced dissonance. Based on these considerations, we hypothesize that:

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

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-Gvirsmann, 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 and 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 and 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, Lane, Kim, Lee, and Kwak (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 and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). In the light of this argumentation, we hypothesize that:

H2a: The more extreme users' opinions toward a controversial issue are, the more likely they are to send friend requests to other users who share their opinions on that issue.
H2b: The more certain users are about their opinions toward a controversial issue, the more likely they are to send friend requests to other users who share their opinions on that issue.

Need for cognitive closure and desire for shared reality. Several 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, and 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 and Kruglanski, 1994). On the other hand, *relational needs* express themselves in an individual's desire for shared reality, that is, 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 (Hart et al., 2009). Like NFCC, shared reality theory postulates that individuals seek social validation of their views (Stern, West, Jost, and Rule, 2014). The desire for validation is more pronounced for some than for others (Echterhoff, Higgins, and 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. Regarding 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 several 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, Van Der Heide,

Langwell, and Walther, 2008). Tong and colleagues (2008) found 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 and 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, and 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 and 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 and Blank, 2018; John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015) while, at the same time, there are no systematic comparisons of different friending criteria 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]

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

2 Methodology

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 potential terrorists?*, see Prantl, 2019). The issues were pretested to ensure comparability regarding 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, d = 2.42, $M_{Interest}$ = 5.22, SD = 1.23, $t(48)$ = 6.97, p < .001, d = 2.01) and surveillance of telecommunication ($M_{Controversy}$ = 5.61, SD = 1.26, $t(48)$ = 8.99, p < .001, d = 2.60, $M_{Interest}$ = 5.53, SD = 1.04, $t(48)$ = 10.27, p < .001, d = 2.97). Furthermore, distribution of issue opinions also pointed to a certain degree of actual controversy within our sample (refugee family reunification: 69.4 % in favor, 30.6 % against; surveillance of telecommunication: 61.2 % in favor, 38.8 % against). 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.

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others. For both issues, results indicated that participants to some extent prefer users who have several beneficial characteristics, for instance, high popularity, high career utility, and congruent opinion. A more detailed report on the results can be retrieved in the OSF.

Main study: Method

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). All study materials (pre-registration, questionnaire, stimulus material), the SPSS data analysis syntax, and reports on additional findings can be found in the OSF repository.

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 % and an alpha-level of .05). 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 June 27 and August 14 2018, while others ($n = 118$) were recruited in the local pedestrian area between July 17 and August 21 2018. While 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 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 as 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 screenshot of a Social Connect user page featuring postings of other users, hyperlinks, and content recommendations was shown to participants. 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). 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 username. In order to control for identifiability and gender-related bias, neutral usernames (*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.

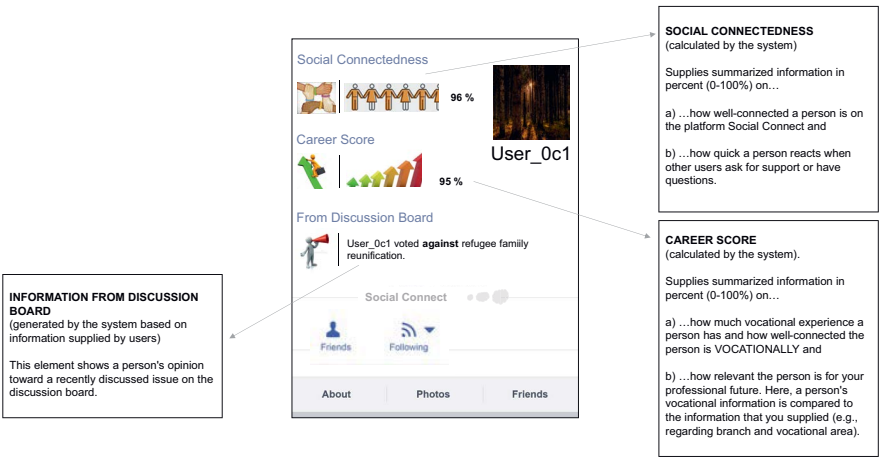

Figure 1: The Social Connect user profile displayed as a friend suggestion. The figure, including descriptions of the profile elements, was shown to participants in advance of selecting other users. The original stimulus material was in German.

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, that is, 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 participants were told that the respective scores show "how much vocational experience a person has and how well-connected the person is vocationally" and "how relevant the person is for your professional future".

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 career utility, and (c) high versus low 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 ("selective friending scores": opinion congruence: $M = 2.09$, $SD = 2.62$; career utility: $M = 1.22$, $SD = 2.10$; sociometric popularity: $M = 1.29$, $SD = 1.99$). This approach resembles the procedure commonly used in selective exposure research (e. g., Winter, Metzger, and 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 ($n_{Reunification} = 70$, $n_{Surveillance} = 103$), 2 = I would decide in favor of it ($n_{Reunification} = 129$, $n_{Surveillance} = 96$).

Opinion strength was operationalized as extremity and certainty of opinions (Crano and 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: $M_{Extremity}$ = 1.37, *SD* = 1.10/surveillance: $M_{Extremity}$ = 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 and Kruglanski, 1994) was measured by the 18-items need for structure and predictability subscale (Von Collani, 2003, Cronbach's α = .80). For each item, participants indicated their agreement (1: strongly disagree, 6: strongly agree), for instance, "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 them" (*M* = 3.63, *SD* = 0.68).[2]

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_{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 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.

3 Results

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (ver. 26). 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).

2 The complete item wordings can be retrieved in the OSF.

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 material[3].

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/ηp2
Opinion congruence (both issues)			
Congruent	3.57	2.29	1.03
Incongruent	1.48	1.75	
Issue: Refugee family reunification			
Congruent	1.90	1.37	1.06/**.39** (overall)
Participant in favor	2.26	1.29	1.48
Participant against	1.26	1.28	0.43
Incongruent	0.64	0.98	
Participant in favor	0.58	0.95	
Participant against	0.76	1.04	

3 A more detailed report on the results can be retrieved in the OSF.

Variable	M	SD	Cohen's d/ηp2
Issue: Surveillance of telecommunication			
Congruent	1.66	1.25	0.71/**.22** (overall)
Participant in favor	1.50	1.26	0.63
Participant against	1.83	1.22	0.80
Incongruent	0.83	1.09	
Participant in favor	0.80	0.95	
Participant against	0.86	1.20	
Sociometric popularity			
Low	1.70	1.61	0.73/**.29**
High	2.98	1.91	
Career utility			
Low	1.73	1.62	0.68/**.25**
High	2.95	1.95	

Note: 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). 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 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' opinions toward surveillance of telecommunication were, 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.

	Refugee family reunification				
	b (SE_b)	*β*	*t*	*p*	ΔR^2
Block 1 (controls)					.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	
Block 2					.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	
Total R^2					.17
	Step 1: $F(4,173) = 2.36$, $p = .056$ Step 2: $F(8,169) = 4.25$, $p < .001$				
	Surveillance of telecommunication				
Block 1 (controls)					.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	
Block 2					.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	
Total R^2					.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 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 on average sent 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). Furthermore, there was also a significant effect of opinion congruence when looking at both issues jointly, $F(1, 198) = 127.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{p^2} = .39$.

RQ1 examined the comparative relevance of each manipulated user feature. A one-way ANOVA for repeated measures was conducted with "overall selective friending" (i. e., selectivity regarding opinion congruence, career utility, and sociometric popularity) as dependent variable and dimension of selectivity (opinion congruence, career utility, and sociometric popularity) as independent variable. In other words, the selective friending scores (see measures section) were directly compared to each other with respect to their magnitude. This revealed a significant effect, $F(2, 396) = 9.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{p^2} = .05$. Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc comparisons revealed that selective friending scores were higher for opinion congruence ($M = 2.09$, $SE = .19$) compared to sociometric popularity ($M = 1.29$, $SE = .14$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.34$) and career utility ($M = 1.22$, $SE = .15$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.37$), 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.

Furthermore, to rule out that results were influenced by varying perceptions of cover story credibility among participants, main analyses were conducted separately for those who believed the cover story, those who did not, and those who were unsure about it. As a result, it can be stated that cover story credibility did not change the pattern of results (see OSF repository).

4 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 and Bryant, 1985) but additionally suggests that confirmation bias is not limited to information (Garrett and 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). In contrast to work on incidental exposure to political information (e. g., Lu and 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. More precisely, in our study certainty of opinions increased selectivity with regard to the issue of family reunification, and extremity of opinions increased selectivity with regard to the issue of telecommunication surveillance. While both variables are considered indicators of opinion strength (Crano and 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, that is, 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 popula-

tion (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 supporters). Furthermore, anti-refugee sentiments are commonly spread online by far-right and populist groups (e. g., Schmitt, Ernst, Frischlich, and 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 and 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 one's 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, and 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.

However, the fact that not only congruence in political opinions but also other features appear to influence selection may point to the particularities of interpersonal selective exposure (i. e., selective friending) on the levels of cognitive processes and potential consequences. More pronouncedly than in information choices, users appear to take into account several costs and benefits of an interpersonal choice on SNS. For some, connecting with a user who has similar political views and is unlikely to expose them to cognitive dissonance appears to be more important than connecting with someone who provides instrumental benefits, while for others the opposite may be true (Neubaum et al., 2021). Choosing in favor of those who are politically like-minded may sometimes imply not getting social resources, which, to a certain degree, can make interpersonal choices on SNS a 'zero-sum situation' in which individuals will be more hesitant than in informational choices. In short, besides politics, other dimensions play an important role when users make choices about connecting to other agreeing and disagreeing individuals on SNS, and this circumstance may crucially distinguish situations in which selective exposure occurs on the informational level from those in which it occurs on the interpersonal level.

Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that different reasons for forming new connections on SNS vary between social networking platforms. For instance, while users may regard political like-mindedness higher on platforms in which politics and the consumption of news play a larger role (e. g., *Twitter* and *Facebook*), users might be more selective toward instrumental utility of contacts in platforms that are focused on career-related networking (e. g., *LinkedIn*). Moreover, the formation of new ties may depend on the visibility of user features, the motivation that such visibility triggers (e. g., information on users' profession and their list of contacts), and norms related to the use of certain platforms (for instance, some may perceive it as intrusive to send friend suggestions on Facebook to their work colleagues). Addressing potential platform-dependent differences in selective friending in future studies would provide a more nuanced perspective on selectivity toward contacts in real-life settings.

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.

5 Conclusion

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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