**Punching up or turning away? Palestinians unfriending Jewish Israelis on Facebook**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the Facebook unfriending of users from a majority group by members of a minority group, focusing on Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel. Indeed, this is the first study to focus on power differentials among Facebook users in the context of unfriending. The article thus adds depth to our understanding of unfriending, while also shedding light on the experience of social media use from the perspective of an oppressed minority. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 ’48 Palestinians (Palestinian citizens of Israel), we present various triggers for unfriending (mainly, encounters with racism and surveillance), and show that Palestinians’ stories of unfriending Jewish Israelis are sometimes about punching up, and sometimes about stepping away. However, while unfriending is broadly considered an apt response to abuse, it also distances Palestinians from centers of power in Israel. This suggests an important way in which social media reproduce inequality.

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This article explores the phenomenon of Facebook users from a minority group unfriending members of the majority group, taking as its case Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel. The Israeli context has already produced a number of studies of politically-motivated unfriending (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). These studies, though, relied only on Jewish respondents. In this article, which is based on interviews with Palestinian respondents, we explicitly ask whether the power differential between Jews and Arabs in Israel makes a difference to unfriending activities and the meaning attributed to them by Facebook users, and if so, how. This is the first study of unfriending that takes structural inequality and intergroup power relations explicitly into account, thereby contributing to the emergent literature on online tie disconnectivity. However, we also show how online racism can create the conditions for its continued expression, precisely as a result of people from a minority group unfriending people from the majority, which, somewhat ironically, is exactly how the platform would want them to behave.

In the following we present a review of the research literature about Facebook unfriending and offer a very brief explication of Arab-Jewish relations within Israel. After outlining the qualitative methods used in this study, we put forward our findings. In the final sections of the article we highlight the novelty of our findings and argue that, by unfriending, our interviewees were acting in accordance with the internal logic of Facebook while at the same time reducing their own access to social and cultural capital. This reveals a new understanding of how social media can reinforce structural inequality.

# Unfriending

We focus here on Facebook unfriending, as opposed to Twitter or Instagram unfollowing, for instance. This is because unlike following, Facebook friending requires two parties: one to initiate and one to accept a friendship request. This necessarily makes friending social in a way that following need not be. By extension, this necessarily makes unfriending a social act in a way that unfollowing does not necessarily have to be: on Facebook, a user can know they have been unfriended, but not that they have been unfollowed. Indeed, the centrality of the social in acts of unfriending is emphasized by Lopez and Ovaska (2013), who showed that Facebook users often forgo certain technical features due to considerations of saving face—that of the unfriender and unfriended. Moreover, one of the earliest studies of unfriending found that Facebook users unfriend for reasons to do with people’s online and offline behavior; that they tend to unfriend people with whom they do not have strong ties; and that unfriending is more often carried out by the person to whom the offer of Facebook friendship was extended (Sibona, 2014; Sibona & Walczak, 2011, 2012). Even a study that asks why people refrain from unfriending (Krämer, Hoffmann, & Eimler, 2015) argues that while Facebook users are able easily to identify superfluous ties among their Facebook friends (henceforth, “Friends”), they prefer to keep them due to their need to belong, and a fear of losing touch with someone they may want to contact in the future.

Another strand of unfriending research that is relevant to the current study has looked at politically-motivated unfriending. Findings across a range of contexts have proved consistent: politically-motivated unfriending tends to be carried out by people with strong political views, and they tend to unfriend weak ties (Bode, 2016). This appears to hold in routine times (Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017), war time (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), and times of deep political tension (Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2016). While these studies were all based on surveys, interview-based research on unfriending has also been carried out in the contexts of Israel/Palestine (John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016) and Russia/Ukraine (Asmolov, 2018). Regarding the latter, Asmolov (2018) argues that disinformation has been introduced into online discourse in order to heighten ingroup/outgroup identification, which turns into unfriending practices further down the line. Asmolov’s interviewees report unfriending people for liking or sharing certain content, or for expressing a view they find unacceptable. Schwarz and Shani (2016) attribute politically-motivated unfriending among Israelis during the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza to differences in group styles of communication. This approach understands unfriending as reflective of a group-based identity, though shifts the focus from content to style. Also drawing on interviews that asked about unfriending behaviors among Jewish Israelis in the 2014 war, John and Gal (2018) conceptualize unfriending as a form of social exclusion through which Facebook users exercise a kind of sovereignty over their own Facebook feeds and Friends’ lists. They report that almost all of their interviewees said that there was content they no longer wanted to see on Facebook, while recognizing that unfriending did not make the content vanish from Facebook as a whole. They develop the notion of the ‘personal public sphere’ to account for this tension between the inward and outward facing aspects of unfriending: that is, unfriending is conceived of as a combination of content filtering (removing content I do not want to see), social exclusion (excluding people from my social milieu with whom I want no contact), and communication (conveying to the unfriended person and my Friends that I am excluding them).

While these studies have advanced our understanding of unfriending as an act of online unsociability in political and other contexts, they have not focused on the power relations between unfrienders and those they are unfriending.[[1]](#endnote-1) There are hints of attentiveness to this in John and Gal’s (2018) contribution when they quote (Jewish) interviewees who refrained from unfriending Facebook users from weaker social positions, and Schwartz and Shani (2016) acknowledge power differentials between different sections of Jewish Israeli society. However, none of the scholars working in this context have considered the possibility that the meaning of a Jewish Israeli unfriending a Palestinian citizen of Israel might be quite different—for the people involved, and for academics studying this—than when a Palestinian citizen of Israel unfriends a Jewish Israeli. In order to understand why this might be the case, it is necessary to understand something about Jewish/Arab relations within Israel.

# Palestinians in Israel

This research deals with Palestinians who live within the borders of Israel and who are citizens of that country. Also known as ’48 Arabs or ’48 Palestinians, they are distinct from Palestinians who live in the Occupied Territories, and also from diasporic Palestinians. For the purposes of this study it is relevant that they—unlike the other populations of Palestinians—have frequent mundane contacts with Jewish Israelis, such as at work or places of (tertiary) education. We lack the space here to present an in-depth description of Arab society in Israel, restricting ourselves to relations between ’48 Arabs and the state on the one hand, and its Jewish citizens on the other, as well as to the centrality of the surveillance of Palestinians in Israel by both the state and Jewish citizens.

Israeli society is characterized by deep and broad inequality between Palestinians and Jews (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 1993). As Maoz (2011) has put it, ‘the Jewish majority (some 80% of the Israeli population) is in control of most material and political resources and determines the national character of the country’ (p. 115), including the encoding in law of a hierarchy of languages, for example. The disadvantages endured by Palestinians can be seen in the fields of medical care and life expectancy (Saabneh, 2015), education (Okun & Friedlander, 2005), and in terms of socioeconomic status more broadly (see the collected chapters in Khattab, Miaari, & Stier, 2016). Given this, it is not surprising that Palestinians in Israel lack trust in the government, the army, the parliament, and city councils (Hermann, Anabi, Heller, & Omar, 2018).

’48 Arabs’ relationship with the Israeli state has been characterized by ongoing efforts by the state to maintain the settler-colonial aspects of their citizenship (Rouhana & Sabbagh-Khoury, 2015) and to suppress the Palestinian historical narrative (Sabbagh-Khoury, 2018), along with continuous resistance to these efforts by the Palestinian community in Israel. Given this, a central feature of the relations between the Israeli state and Palestinian society in Israel—and one that is central to this article—is the intense surveillance of the latter by the former. Indeed, drawing on a strongly Foucauldian tradition (Foucault, 1977), the literature discusses a ‘generalized feeling by Palestinians of being watched and surveilled’ (Zureik, 2011, p. 14), a feeling that reaches back into pre-state colonial times (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015, 2017). One objective of this surveillance has been to stifle critical speech. As argued by Sabbagh-Khoury (2010), since the foundation of the state of Israel, ‘[c]ontinued pressure from the military government—arrests, intimidation, punishments, dismissal from work, informant planting—sent a message to Palestinians about the limitations of what was permitted and prohibited in political discourse in Israel’ (p. 177).

At the same time, a sense among ’48 Arabs of being surveilled not only by the state but also by Jewish citizens, some of whom see ’48 Arabs ‘as a demographic threat [that has] existed since the state’s inception’ (Sabbagh-Khoury, 2010, p. 173). Sorek (2011) has described this as the ‘Jewish civic gaze on Arab public behavior’, observing that it is less institutionalized and harder to identify than formal state surveillance. He adds that ‘it is a consistent, random scrutinizing of the public sphere without pre-determined attention to specific individuals’ and that it is ‘effective as a disciplinary mechanism’ (p. 119).

# Possible motivations for unfriending

Given these fraught relations between ’48 Arabs on the one hand, and Jewish Israelis and the state itself on the other, we suggest two quite contrary motivations for Facebook unfriending by the former of the latter, alongside a third option. The first motivation can be described as *punching up*. Although mainly referenced in the context of comedy and satire, we see punching up as an act carried out by someone from a structurally weaker or oppressed group on someone from a stronger, oppressive group. From this perspective, unfriending might be an act by which a member of an oppressed group exercises what power they do have in order to convey a defiant message to someone they perceive as oppressing them. We might consider it akin to flipping someone off. As noted by Jamal regarding broadcast media: ‘in cases of minority groups in states dominated by other ethnic majorities, the communicative behavior and media consumption patterns of minority groups reflect their protest against hegemonial efforts and their resistance to framing their minds according to the interests of a dominant majority. Hence minorities may turn the media structure available to them into an opportunity, instead of viewing it as a trap’ (Jamal, 2009, pp. 19-20). This invites us to consider Facebook use by ’48 Arabs as an opportunity to tell racist Jewish Israelis that they will not tolerate them.

The second, and quite different, motivation, could be a withdrawal from interaction with someone from a more powerful group, what we here call *turning away*. Here, the unfriender might be seeking to escape the disciplining gaze of the majority group. In the current context, this might take the form of a Palestinian Facebook user acknowledging their relative lack of power compared to Jewish citizens, and so turning away from confrontation rather than possibly getting into trouble. It might also be an attempt to avoid hate speech in a mode we might see as self-care, an approximation of which has been described in studies of how LGBTQ+ people manage their identity online (Cassidy, 2013; Duguay, 2016). Either way, this mode of unfriending lacks the sense of power and agency we might see in instances of unfriending as punching up.

A third possibility is that unfriending someone from a structurally stronger social group has no special features and can be conceptualized similarly to unfriending among people from hierarchically similar social groups. We turn now to our method for examining these possibilities.

# Method

Twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with Palestinians with Israeli citizenship aged 21-37 (11 women and nine men). 18 of the interviewees have an academic degree or were students in higher education at the time of interview. Their religious orientation (secular, religious or traditional) was diverse.

To recruit participants, an announcement about the research was published on Facebook groups for ’48 Arabs (such as *Ask Wadi Ara* and *Sabaya Elkheir*). We faced two main challenges in recruiting participants and gaining their trust. The first stemmed from the fact that the researchers—a Jewish man and a Palestinian woman, both with Israeli citizenship—are affiliated with an Israeli university, and some Palestinians refused to take part in a study associated with our institution for ideological reasons. The second was to do with potential interviewees’ fear of self-exposure in the interview. Studying the act of unfriending Jewish Friends was perceived as ‘political’, with some potential interviewees expressing fear that harm could come to them. One potential interviewee said that participating in the study could ‘cause them problems’; another said he was ‘afraid of talking’ about what he had done on Facebook. One Facebook user who offered to help in recruiting participants reported back as follows: ‘To be honest, I did ask some of my friends to participate, but they wouldn’t since it is a political study. I tried to tell them that it is academic stuff but that didn’t help.’ We cannot know how many people ruled out participating in this study for such reasons, but it was not a one-off response. One possible outcome of this is a lack of representation of people from the social or political margins.

To understand the experiences of ’48 Arab Facebook users unfriending Jewish users, an interview schedule was constructed that included questions about the experience of unfriending, social media use, habits around tie-building and breaking, and relations with Jewish Israelis in general. To ensure that the interviewees felt comfortable and safe in talking about their experiences, and also to ensure that they were able to express themselves as precisely as possible, the recruitment process and the interviews themselves were conducted in Arabic—the interviewees’ first language—by the Palestinian author. Anonymity was promised for the interviewees; indeed, at no point has the Jewish author of this paper been privy to the interviewees’ real names.

Following a short telephone conversation in which the researchers and the study were described, a time and place for the interview were set. Nearly all of the interviews, which lasted between 45-90 minutes, were held in places chosen by the interviewees (such as a café, their home, a library). One interview was conducted over the phone due to the interviewee’s desire not to be recognized by the interviewer. Another interviewee agreed to participate via email, as he thought it would be too ‘dangerous’ to record his comments. In order to enable the interviewees to talk freely about their experiences, and when it seemed necessary, the interviewer reminded them that they were not being judged and that their identity would be kept anonymous. All interviewees gave their consent to participate, and all were given the interviewer’s personal cell number. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into Hebrew to enable analysis by both researchers together (the Jewish author does not speak or read Arabic). The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA for analysis.

The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), a method in which the collected data is organized by theme to better answer the research questions. After reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, the main themes were detected and categorized according to motivations to unfriend and the role of national identity in doing so.

# Findings

There are many examples in the interviews of instances of unfriending that appear very similar to those already reported and conceptualized in the literature. For example, Ziad (23M) spoke in terms that recall the personal public sphere (John & Gal, 2018), explaining that he unfriended someone because, ‘At the end of the day, it’s my page and I’ll decide who’s on it’. Eman (23F) also gave voice to the belief that one has certain rights over one’s Facebook space: ‘I didn’t like what she was writing and I didn’t want to see what she was writing, so I deleted her’. We also note that in many cases the interviewees unfriended people with whom they were not in significant contact any more—perhaps an old university friend, or an ex-colleague—which reinforces earlier findings (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015).

However, of greater interest here are those experiences and instances of unfriending that reflect the asymmetrical power relations between the social groups to which the unfriender and unfriended person belong. In the following we present three central themes in relation to the stories of unfriending related by our interviewees: a sense of personal betrayal; encounters with racism; and an acknowledgment of constant surveillance. We then ask whether our interviewees were punching up or turning away.

## ‘I thought we were friends’

A number of interviewees had stories about unfriending a Jewish Israeli whom they had, up until that moment, considered a real friend. For example, Lubaba (29F) told of a religious Jewish man, a colleague, whom she had hosted at her home, together with his wife and children. During the war of 2014, though, he wrote generalizations about Arabs and Muslims that Lubaba found deeply offensive. She understood that times were tense, but said, ‘at the very least show respect to someone you work with, I’m a real person and I’m here in front of you’. Noor (23F) had a similar experience with a friend at university:

This girl who I used to help, everything was cool, and suddenly I see that she’s posted… I think it was during the war […] and she posted ‘death to Arabs’ [...] At university she was all ‘sweetheart’ and ‘darling’ and things like that, and on Facebook she [...] wrote totally unacceptable things about Arabs.

Likewise Shirin (32F):

We’d get to university and sit and study together for twelve hours or more, I’d give them food my mom had made. […] Suddenly there’s a situation where I see them writing like that, and I don’t get it. […] I was surprised, I was shocked, and I thought, is it possible that they’ve forgotten that I’m part of their lives, that they’ve forgotten the three years we studied together? Sometimes it even made me cry.

Ganem (32M) also had a story of disappointment in a Jewish Israeli whom he considered a very good friend: ‘We worked together, we were close friends, [...] I went to her house, she came to our house, [...] we’d talk for hours on the phone’. But then came the war in 2014:

And then I saw that on Facebook [...] It wasn’t comprehensible, especially for me, I’m an Arab, and you treated me as equal to all the Jews, so why do you think that the people in Gaza... that it’s better that they die? [...] I asked her, what’s going on, you really liked me and now you hate Arabs?

Ganem, and the other interviewees just quoted, find themselves disappointed and shocked at the racist talk published by people they had considered to be close friends. They thought that being friends with a Jewish Israeli would mean that they would not post anti-Arab content. For some of them, reading that someone they considered a friend had posted ‘death to Arabs’ felt like their very existence was being negated. In other words, they were offended once by the expression of racist sentiment, and once again—and perhaps even more so—by its expression in their presence.

## Racism

While not all of the interviewees had stories of betrayal by friends, almost all of them spoke about encounters with racism and hate speech.[[2]](#endnote-2) Indeed, as the immediate trigger for unfriending, encountering racist comments on Facebook was the most prevalent. Not all of the interviewees actually pointed to specific events (Shirin (32F): ‘a racist comment to any kind of event, I delete them immediately’), though when they did, they sometimes referred to use of the phrase, ‘death to Arabs’. Amna (24F), Noor (23F) and Shirin all unfriended people who had written that slogan. Schwarz and Shani (2016) also cite (Jewish) interviewees who unfriended Jewish Israelis for writing ‘death to Arabs’, though they see such comments as ‘expressive declarations’ that are ‘part of a group style’ (p. 12). They add, ‘Not everyone who engage [sic] in this ritual talk and say they wish “death to Arabs” or the destruction of Gaza would necessarily act on these expressions had they had the power to do so’ (p. 12). This, though, is of scant comfort to those Arabs who encountered this talk on Facebook, and who strongly suspect, as Noor explicitly pointed out, that they could not get away with posting ‘death to Jews’.

Other expressions of racism included seeing all Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, as reported by Lubaba (29F), or writing things such as ‘you can’t trust Arabs’ or that ‘you shouldn’t hire Arabs’, as reported by Shirin. To an extent, encountering racist talk on Facebook was not especially surprising for our interviewees, but their responses to it were certainly shaped by their position as a national minority.

## Surveillance and freedom of expression

A key theme lies in the interviewees’ feeling of being under surveillance, both by the state and by Jewish Israeli Friends (on the difference between institutional and social surveillance, see esp. Marwick, 2012; Trottier, 2012). Given this, unfriending serves two purposes: it helps the interviewees avoid getting into trouble, and it helps them to create a space where they feel they can express themselves more freely.

For many of the interviewees, their Facebook experience is shaped by the belief that a single post, or even a Like, could get them into trouble with the state, their employer, or their place of study. This resonates with de Vries’ findings from interviews with Palestinians from East Jerusalem (de Vries, 2018). For instance, Noor (23F) said that she knew of a number of fellow students who were expelled from their college because of political comments they made on Facebook. Noor explained the lesson she learnt from this: ‘I don’t feel I can express myself, even though we’re in a democratic country, in inverted commas’. She talked about a specific instance of an argument with a Jewish student that she backed out of:

I couldn’t say everything that I thought because her view is that of the dominant group. I was against National Service,[[3]](#endnote-3) but I couldn’t say everything I wanted because it could have got to the management and then they’d most likely have kicked me out of college.

Similarly, Eman (23F) said that ‘I can’t post my political opinions if they’re against government policy’.

Even without concrete fears of arrest or expulsion from college, interviewees felt that having Jewish Facebook friends had a chilling effect. For instance, Madeleine (23F) told us that,

at first, I used to write patriotic posts, and I talked a lot about the Occupation. When I added them [her Jewish Facebook friends] it was no longer possible. [...] They’re on my page, they’re following me, if I write something they’ll see it.

As a result, Madeleine said that she became more moderate in her writing. These findings recall strategies adopted by LGBTQ+ Facebook users as they seek to control information that might reach intolerant Friends (Cassidy, 2013). Sometimes, this overarching experience of being surveilled, of their Facebook use potentially leading to serious and life-changing sanctions, was translated into unfriending. We now turn to the question of whether our interviewees, by unfriending, were punching up or turning away.

## Unfriending as punching up

Some interviewees described cases of unfriending Jewish Israelis as a kind of punishment. Of course, because Facebook does not notify people when they are unfriended, it is possible that the unfriended person remains unaware that being unfriended was intended as a punishment. We are led here, therefore, by the subjective experiences reported by the interviewees. For example, Amna (24F) told us about a Facebook group that she and her fellow Jewish and Arab nursing students belonged to. The group was meant to be exclusively for study-related matters, but during the war of 2014, some of the Jewish students starting posting political content, according to Amna, and continued to do so despite requests from Arab students that they cease. Moreover, if two Arab students wrote to one another in the group in Arabic, the admins would delete the messages and remind them that only Hebrew was allowed in the group, so that everyone could understand. In the context of fraught majority-minority relations, this was experienced by Amna as a provocative assault on her identity. Amna explained:

When we sat together in the classroom, we could feel the tension. It was a really difficult period and we [Arabs and Jews] hardly spoke to one another. [..] And then there was the issue with the [Facebook] group when they said not to talk in Arabic. Everyone started saying they were leaving the group and deleted all of the Jewish people [from their Friends lists]. It was a punishment.

Shirin (32F) also said ‘It’s a kind of punishment. [...] As far as I’m concerned, yes, he lost a friend’, implying that the person she unfriended is worse off for that.

The stand-out example of unfriending as punching up came from Marwan (32M), who had grown angry about his perceived status as a second-class citizen in Israel. He said that he used to have a very good Jewish friend: they had been at school together, hung out together, and even lived together for six months. He introduced his friend to a (Jewish) woman he knew, and eventually they married. However, his friend’s partner turned out to be racist, and insisted that the friend stop seeing Marwan. This had quite a profound effect on Marwan’s outlook on relations with Jewish Israelis:

I didn’t see things like that until that friend just gave me up. Before then I was naive, but now I’ve got no problem deleting anyone, because it turns out that I’ll never be equal. I’ll always be a second-class person because I’m Arab, so why not return the insult and unfriend them?

Both Amna and Marwan describe unfriending as a conscious response—or even as a retaliation—to being on the receiving end of racism. Other interviewees were also aware of being the subjects of racism, and unfriended as a result, but not with the intention of punching up, as we shall now see.

## Unfriending as turning away

A recurrent theme in many of the interviews was a desire to avoid getting into trouble as a result of online interactions with Jewish Israeli Facebook users. This kind of talk has not been reported in previous studies of unfriending and opens up a swathe of considerations regarding majority/minority relations in social media. In one version of this theme, interviewees were quite clear that unfriending Jewish Israeli Facebook friends gave them a greater sense of freedom of speech, as discussed above.

Aya (33F) was quite explicit that she unfriended because she did not want trouble on account of content she uploaded to Facebook. ‘What do you think could happen?’, she was asked in interview, to which she responded:

I didn’t experience this but I saw with other people that they [Jewish Israeli Facebook users] took a screenshot of posts with their names and put them on various Pages. I didn’t want to be in a situation where I’m getting abusive messages.

She also said, ‘We were in our final years of studying and we didn’t want any trouble. They hate us as it is, so why give them a reason to get back at us’. Aya told us that ‘There were lots of times when Arabs wrote things and Jewish students snitched on them and it harmed their studies, or they were grassed up to their classmates and then ostracized’. Given this context, when a Jewish university friend of Aya’s started posting what she described as ‘provocative’ content during the 2014 war, Aya preferred to unfriend rather than to try and discuss. ‘I didn’t want to come to university and have to deal with problems, so I deleted her’, she summarized.

Osama (22M) had a very similar experience that combines the expression of a viewpoint that is uncomfortable to some Jewish Israelis along with a retreat from an argument out of a fear of what the consequences of keeping it going could be. He told us that before he had started studying, he posted on Facebook that ‘their [Jewish Israelis’] Independence Day is our [Palestinians’] Nakba [catastrophe]’. He went on

What happened was that I went to college and there was this Jewish guy there who started dropping hints. He wasn’t saying things directly to me, but started to talk about Umm al-Fahm [Osama’s home town] and stuff. So I checked and I saw that he’d Liked my post, to show me that he’s seen it. I started to put two and two together: he gave me a Like to show that he knows what I’d said, and then he started talking and directing everything at me. We had a stormy argument which almost became violent, but I thought, I’m not here to make trouble, I’m here to study. So I said I’ll remove him and just unfriend him.

The point here, of course, is not that Osama simply unfriended someone after an argument, but that he, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, unfriended a Jewish Israeli after an argument because of the potential to get into trouble of which he is aware precisely because of his social position as a member of a national minority with a deficit of rights.

The themes of punching up and withdrawing from interaction were sometimes interwoven in complex ways. For instance, Sabreen (24F) spoke about a Jewish friend from university with whom she discussed Islam and religion. At one point, the friend started a private chat on Facebook with Sabreen ‘about the political issue of Jerusalem and whether it belongs to us or to them’. At this point, Sabreen unfriended her. She said,

I started to worry that she might be from the intelligence services, looking at my posts and trying to get me to talk, even though I know her outside Facebook, but still, it was important to be careful. So yes, I deleted her.

So far, this looks like stepping away from a relationship from someone who, in Sabreen’s view, could harm her. However, when asked whether after unfriending this woman Sabreen was afraid, she said, ‘No, I actually felt stronger than her’. In response to the question of why, she replied: ‘The fact that you’re unfriending is an expression of power, in my opinion’. Sabreen thus unfriended because she wished to avoid interacting with someone who could be affiliated with the state, and more specifically with the security forces, while at the same time claiming that this gave her a sense of power and agency.

With Ziad (23M), the story was somewhat different. He unfriended a Jewish Israeli whom he did not know; he accepted the Friend request on the assumption that they knew each other from somewhere. However, having accepted the Friend request, Ziad’s new Friend ‘started insulting me, [...] he said you should die, stuff like that. I didn’t reply at all, not because I’m weak, but because, you know, I preferred to stop things there’. However, although unfriending (and then blocking) this person prevented their racist invective from reaching him, Ziad was still anxious that this person might track him down. In interview, though, and despite admitting that he was worried, Ziad denied that he had unfriended from a place of weakness:

I didn’t answer back, not out of weakness, but so as not to get into an argument… a racist argument. If someone’s talking to you and they’re racist, nothing’s going to come of it […] So I said, why should I argue with him, get into a conflict, and we’ll insult one another, then he might say, for example, I hope you die, and then I’ll answer in kind, then he’ll take the conversation and show it to the police, and he’ll say to them, look, this is an Arab guy who said such and such to me and threatened me, and he’ll make trouble for me, so it’s better not to.

There is a clear dissonance between Ziad’s claim that he refrained from engaging with this other Facebook user in order to avoid getting into trouble and his simultaneous claim that he was not acting out of weakness. After all, his strategy is based on his understanding that the police are likely to treat a complaint about threatening talk on Facebook more seriously when a Jew is complaining about an Arab.

# Discussion

We have seen that some of the patterns of unfriending of Jewish Israelis by ’48 Arabs are similar to those reported in previous research, and that some aspects of the accounts of their acts of unfriending resonate with earlier findings as well. However, this study highlights the importance of attending to structural inequality when researching practices of tie breaking on Facebook. This is because it enables us to see new backgrounds to and motivations for unfriending to which previous studies have not directed explicit attention, and specifically because it brings power relations back into discussions about the potential of social media to serve as a site for deliberation.

Two major concerns expressed in the literature about political talk and deliberation are that western democracies are becoming increasingly polarized (Adamic & Glance, 2005), and that people are talking less about politics with people who have different views to their own (Wells et al., 2017). These are undoubtedly grave issues, and have provided a compelling backdrop to previous studies of political unfriending. At the same time, earlier work has also shown how people who unfriend for political reasons often describe their interlocutor (and now ex-Friend) as having transgressed the boundaries of legitimate discourse (John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016), which raises questions about the extent to which unfriending is actually an obstacle to political talk. In this article we go beyond this, though, as our findings point to a common assumption that does not extend into the current case, namely, that there are two more or less equal sides to the talk that is being ended.

Acknowledging structural power differentials between groups of Facebook users requires us to rethink the meaning of unfriending when carried out on someone higher up a social hierarchy. For instance, among our interviewees were those who chose to unfriend a Jewish Israeli instead of arguing with them, on the grounds that arguing could get them into trouble in ways that only members of the oppressed group would fear. These included being reported to the authorities at university or college, to one’s boss, or even to the police. In other words, in what would seem to be an expression of the ‘deep sense of constant fear among Palestinians’ described by Shalhoub-Kavorkian (2017), fear of a more powerful majority emerges as a reason for unfriending that previous research has not reported.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Racist language was mentioned in relation to unfriending by almost all of our interviewees, though in different ways. Some interviewees unfriended because they themselves were directly addressed in a racist manner. Others unfriended because they encountered racism of a generalized kind (such as the ‘death to Arabs’ slogan). It is notable that the first kind of encounter was not necessarily more hurtful than the second. Encounters with generalized hate speech were painful for the interviewees in that they entailed a negation of their identity, often by someone with whom they felt a genuine connection. If oppressed groups are concerned with maintaining their dignity—as suggested by Scott’s (1990) analysis of a range of stratified social structures—then unfriending someone after encountering racist speech on Facebook can be interpreted as a strategy for regaining lost dignity.

Moreover, Calvert’s (1997) analysis of hate speech stresses the distinct harm of ritual expressions of racism. Calvert writes,

The harm caused by hate speech that the ritual model points to is the production and maintenance of a reality of subordination and discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities. In brief, ritualistic use of racist epithets facilitates and promotes disparate, unequal treatment of particular groups (p. 11).

In this sense, intention is not central. Eliasoph (1999) pioneered the idea of a ‘group style’ to explain how a ‘racist civil society can be created despite most members’ intentions’ (1999, p. 491). Unsurprisingly, the black son-in-law of one of Eliasoph’s white informants preferred not to hang out with his mother-in-law’s group, even though some of them felt that to be a shame (p. 489). We mention this in order to point to our understanding of calls of ‘death to Arabs’ on Facebook, and the outcome as reported by some of our interviewees, namely, the formation of a more homogenous online space for both the ’48 Arabs who unfriended and the Jewish Israelis whom they unfriended.

This brings us, then, to the consequences of unfriending in a context of structural inequality. While data on Facebook users’ social graphs are not available, our interviewees reported having only a small number of Jewish Friends. That is, Palestinians and Jews in Israel have quite separate networks; but, as we saw above, they are far from equal. Putting it schematically, to the extent that resources flow through networks (Wellman, 1983), by unfriending Jewish Israeli Facebook users, who are representatives of the more powerful group in the country, ’48 Arabs are distancing themselves from the centers of power in Israel.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The sting in the tail, though, is that in producing these separate and unequal Facebook networks, the ’48 Arabs we interviewed are actually behaving in precisely the way intended by Facebook. Facebook is an individualized service that is meant to be pleasant to use; Facebook users are meant to curate an experience that is to their liking, and to disengage (by hiding, blocking, or unfriending) from content or people that make their Facebook experience negative (a similar point is made in Light & Cassidy, 2014). *Inter alia*, this is how Facebook attracts advertisers. This is an insight expressed through John and Gal’s (2018) notion of the ‘personal public sphere’. They quote an interviewee as saying that unfriending someone does not imply isolating them, because they’ve still got other Friends on Facebook, or, as he put it when describing someone whom he had unfriended, ‘He’s got his own sea’. As noted above, there is an assumption here that people are more or less equal, and that unfriending will have more or less the same consequences for everybody. This assumption does not hold, though, when dealing with minority/majority relations. When a member of the minority unfriends someone from the majority group—even if they are punching up—they are distancing themselves from the centers of power.

Put differently, where there is structural inequality, the price to pay for cutting ties is unequally distributed, in a way that recalls discussions about the cost of digital detoxing or social media non-use. It would appear, therefore, that there is a problem with how Facebook incorporates minorities—not as a sphere for deliberative discussion, but as a site for sociality broadly understood. The point is this: regardless of whether unfriending is punching up or turning away, or even if it is carried out for reasons reported in previous research (mostly because of a desire not to see certain content any more), when a member of a minority group unfriends someone from the majority, this entails a detachment from the mainstream. And in both cases, the individual user is acting in the ‘right’ way: she is curating her social media experience so as to make it more pleasurable (or less awful).

# Conclusions

In this paper we have examined unfriending in a context of structural inequality. In keeping with the existing literature on Arab-Jewish relations in Israel, our interviewees said that their social media experiences were shaped by an awareness of state and social surveillance, and decried what they felt to be limitations to their freedom of expression. Interviewees thus spoke about unfriending up the power hierarchy in ways that have not been reported in the existing literature on tie dissolution. While some of their reasons for unfriending were not new—especially the desire to remove certain content from their sight—certain of their considerations when unfriending are a function of their relatively lower status vis-à-vis Jewish Israelis. This is particularly the case when interviewees spoke about what we call punching up—unfriending a Jewish Israeli to make a point, to punish them, to show them that they will not be treated in a certain way—or withdrawing from interaction—unfriending in order to avoid getting into trouble further down the line.

Over and above these new findings about unfriending, and their implication that power relations must be considered when trying to understand this important online phenomenon, this study has also shown an important way in which social media reproduce inequality. On an individual level, unfriending someone who has directed hate speech at you, or at the group of which you are a member, is rational, not to say sensible. Acknowledging the impunity that some Jewish Israelis feel when writing racist comments, and the fear among our interviewees of responding in kind—both of which are a function of unequal power relations between these two groups—makes the decision to unfriend even more understandable. Zooming out, though, we can see how unfriending contributes to the disconnect between ’48 Arabs and Jewish Israelis online; ironically, one aspect of this is that the person publishing racist content now has a less hostile audience and is less likely to be challenged. When the response to hate speech is individualized (and not one interviewee said they reported such speech to Facebook, which we see as a reflection of the minority’s lack of trust), the logic of Facebook serves to reproduce inequality. If we think about this in terms of Lukes’ conception of power as A effecting B ‘in a manner contrary to B’s interests’ (1974, p. 27), we are posed with the problem that B has an interest in protecting herself from hate speech, while also having a competing interest in remaining as close as possible to the centers of power.

In his work on resistance to oppression, Scott (1990) argued that, ‘to the degree structures of domination can be demonstrated to operate in comparable ways, they will, other things equal, elicit reactions and patterns of resistance that are also broadly comparable’ (p. xi). We quote this as we issue a call for further research into unfriending by people from other oppressed social groups. These may be national or ethnic minorities in other national contexts, or they may be from more or less stigmatized social groups, such as LGBTQ+ people, or people with a disability. With a broader set of cases at its disposal, the academic community may be able to make a practical contribution to the problem of racist talk on social media, one that is able to bridge the utterly reasonable individual step of unfriending abusive users, while also taking into account the broader social implications of minority/majority separation online.

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1. We adopt here the conceptualization of power offered by Lukes: ‘A exercises power over B when A effects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests’ (1974, p. 27). We are aware of the debates over this conceptualization, though for the purposes of this article, we find it sufficient. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Encounters with racism were so common that one wonders how different Barnidge and colleagues’ (2019) study would look if conducted in Israel. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Voluntary national service is usually undertaken by young Jewish religious women instead of going to the army. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Interestingly, previous research, especially concerning LGBTQ+ people’s use of social media, has discussed ways of dealing with stigma, such as trying to communicate with a lowest common denominator among one’s online ties (Hogan, 2010) or trying to reinstate boundaries between collapsed contexts (Duguay, 2016) though it has not considered unfriending as a tactic in this regard. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There are debates among ’48 Arabs as to the best strategy for dealing with the Israeli state that in some ways recall the debates over separatism among feminists in the 1970s and ‘80s. They lie beyond the scope of this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)