

# You Got Yourself A Whole New Life, and All I've Got is Half This Old One: Breaking Up and Moving On in the Social Media Age

Anthony T. Pinter  
anthony.pinter@colorado.edu  
University of Colorado Boulder  
Boulder, Colorado, USA

## ABSTRACT

Going through a break-up can be difficult. Break-ups are emotionally fraught; two people have to untangle their lives. While prior research has paid attention to the implications of a break-up on the involved parties' mental and emotional well-being, and identified best practices for healing and growing from a break-up, these findings and practices are not well suited to how people's lives and experiences are represented in social media. People know how to break-up offline; however, they – and by extension, social media algorithms that recommend or remind – lack the ability to accurately represent the experience of breaking up online. Features that encourage connection or reminiscence are ill-suited for handling break-ups, making suggestions at a time when they may not be perceived as appropriate or desired. In my dissertation, I use three interpretivist, interview-based studies to investigate people's expectations of what is or is not appropriate behavior online after a break-up, and who to remain connected with on social media sites. My prior work established that algorithms are not always attuned to the nuances of human experiences like break-ups. Building on that work, my dissertation explores what people want when it comes to their online audiences and sharing behavior after going through a break-up, and leverages that understanding to offer design suggestions to improve both user experience and algorithmic systems in social media. My dissertation will result in empirical and design contributions that improve people's online experiences when going through a break-up.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; *Social networks*; Social networking sites.

## KEYWORDS

relationship dissolution; life transitions; social media; digital identity; empirical work

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Romantic break-ups can leave behind broken hearts and hurt feelings. Online, a break-up also leaves behind posts, pictures, and connections to others on social media sites. Remaining connected to an ex, their family, or their close friends can lead to further hurt and harm when expectations about what to share are violated by someone (either the individual or those connections). For example, an individual could post a picture indicating they are in a new relationship. But if they are still connected to their ex on that SMS, seeing the picture could hurt the ex's feelings because the ex might not yet have moved on from the relationship or break-up. In this way, seeing that an ex-partner has moved on via that posted picture could be detrimental to one's mental or emotional well-being.

Social media sites often serve as spaces to disclose life transitions, like romantic relationships ending, that people go through [2]. Researchers have used a variety of terms to denote these experiences, including life events [6], life experiences [3], life disruptions [5], and life transitions [2]. In my dissertation, I use the term life transitions to acknowledge that while there are negatives associated with these events, there is also the possibility of something better coming from this new normal.

When a relationship starts, disclosures around its existence can take many forms. Sites like Facebook support features that can note the change in relationship status (aptly called "Relationship Status"). Even in the absence of explicit features like Relationship Status, one might post updates or pictures that include the information or person or update their profile to include the information (for example, including it in the "Bio" section on Twitter or Instagram).

When a relationship ends, individuals can be left to sift through the digital remnants of a relationship lost. What was once a source of joy – the pictures, posts, connections, and other information that sprung up because of the relationship – can become painful reminders. Worse, social media systems are frequently designed to encourage connection and reminiscence predicated on these remnants, leveraging potentially painful markers of a relationship to populate feeds and features like "Memories" and "People You May Know." These reminders and suggestions can make it difficult for healing and growth to occur in the aftermath of a break-up and are examples of what designers and researchers have termed algorithmic cruelty [4, 7].

Social media platforms like Facebook have introduced features that tailor what pictures or posts might be included in the recommendations algorithms provide users. Features like muting or filtering are meant to help mitigate the chances of harmful suggestions or recommendations from occurring. However, these algorithmic recommendations rely on more than just the digital possessions in doing their work – they also leverage things that were peripheral to and sprung up from the relationships, like connections (*e.g.*, friends, follows), groups, and events. Just as with pictures or posts, these peripheral connections can also result in painful encounters online.

Remaining connected or disconnecting from someone on social media requires individuals to evaluate their relationship with that person, and ultimately make a decision that can then be technically carried out in the system. For example, one might have to ask themselves, “Is this person closer to me, or my ex?” However, the factors that people weigh in asking those questions and making decisions about who to remain connected with are understudied, particularly when compared to the work focused on how people manage their digital possessions.

Further, when one remains connected to an ex-partner or those who are close to an ex-partner, it can become difficult to navigate conflicting expectations around what is or is not okay to share. For example, one might want to post a picture with a new romantic partner, but not want to contend with the online or offline reactions of those connections. Thus, deciding what or what not to share (and accordingly, what identity is or is not okay to share) becomes highly dependent on who one remains connected to in the wake of a break-up.

With these issues in mind, my dissertation work is guided by three research questions:

- (1) What factors do people consider when making decisions about what connections to maintain on social media sites in the wake of a romantic break-up?
- (2) When remaining connected online to their ex-partner or those close to an ex-partner, how do people navigate differing expectations of what is or is not appropriate to post on social media sites in the wake of a romantic break-up?
- (3) What practices would people use, or tools would they want available after a break-up?

Through these research questions, my dissertation investigates these issues and will offer empirical contributions to our understanding of how break-ups play out on social media as well as broader contributions to the life transitions literature in HCI and CSCW. Additionally, my dissertation will leverage these empirical findings to provide design recommendations to improve the online experiences that people have after a break-up.

## 2 PRIOR WORK

My prior work begins with a qualitative investigation of people’s upsetting experiences with content involving ex-romantic partners on Facebook [9]. Through interviews with 19 people who had had an upsetting encounter on Facebook, we sought to understand what types of content was surfaced by curation algorithms like those that power News Feed, and where on the social media site these encounters occurred. From our interviews, we identified design

opportunities that might help mitigate these experiences, improving people’s experiences in the wake of a breakup.

Even when participants had used every available feature to help prevent upsetting encounters in the wake of a breakup, they told us of instances of algorithmic insensitivity in a variety of different places on Facebook. Some blamed the platform for not being better; others blamed themselves for not being better about using features or just because they had no one else to blame.

Regardless of whether they used relationship management features or not, participants told us that these tools came loaded with implied assumptions about what using them would mean for their social relationships with others. For example, we heard from participants that blocking someone was a “nuclear option” – one that totally disconnects two people online, but might also have ramifications for how they interact offline. Further complicating the problem, these features were often not applicable to the overlapping social networks that come to surround a relationship. For example, while one might unfriend an ex-partner, they might not unfriend the mutual friends they share with that ex... particularly if those friends are friends that were made while in the relationship.

To describe the various relations and the places in which they occur, we use the term *social periphery*. The peripheries around relationships presents designers with interesting challenges to address when they design systems that rely on algorithms to accomplish tasks like content curation. In systems such as Facebook, which are predicated on the idea of fostering connections and communities, the algorithms that create features like News Feed or Memories often rely on simplistic representations of people’s lived experiences. However, human experience is much more complicated than the data we choose to provide to Facebook, meaning designs for connecting and community might not be as straightforward as Facebook’s design might imply. Simply removing the digital connection between two ex-partners ignores the social networks and spaces that those two people still share, which can lead to inadvertent encounters with upsetting content that algorithms think are “ideal,” like suggestions to friend an ex’s new partner or showing pictures or posts the ex is part of.

We found that the periphery appears in unexpected ways (*e.g.*, in untagged photos, in mutual friends’ posts, or on events pages) and can lead to upsetting encounters in the wake of a breakup. Thus, a challenge we present for designers is to consider the periphery when designing representational systems like Facebook to account for not only breakups but also any lived human experience that involves contextually nuanced social connections.

My prior work shows that the algorithms that underpin social media sites are not designed to account for individual needs or desires in the wake of a break-up. In my proposed dissertation work, I aim to address the challenges presented by the social periphery in creating empathetic algorithmic curation and recommendation features, particularly after a romantic break-up, by stepping back from the framework of my prior work (humanizing algorithms to prevent algorithmic cruelty). By taking a more human-centered approach and focusing instead on how people make decisions about who and what they should or should not remain connected to or what is or is not okay to post after a break-up, I can leverage that understanding to offer concrete design recommendations and implications that social media designers could implement into their

systems to create algorithmic systems that are more attuned to human experiences.

### 3 FUTURE DISSERTATION WORK

Building on my completed work on algorithmic cruelty in the wake of a break-up, my dissertation will include three additional studies. The first study explores how people make decisions around who to remain connected to in the wake of a break-up; the second study explores how remaining connected to an ex or those close to an ex can complicate recovery from a break-up; the third study leverages the prior two studies' findings to investigate what people would want or find beneficial in the event of a break-up using co-design workshops.

#### 3.1 Study 1: How Do People Decide Who To Be Connected With Online

My prior work shows that the algorithmic systems that underlie recommendation features do not “understand” what is or is not an acceptable recommendation to make to someone in the wake of a break-up. Additionally, my work shows that people struggle with reconciling the ease at which they can accomplish audience management (*e.g.*, unfriending, blocking, unfollowing) with the potential social implications. When someone does not want to use the “easy” workflow to delete someone from their social media audience because it does not map onto their social network accurately, it leaves that connection as a valid bit of data that algorithms can leverage to make (bad) recommendations.

The simplicity of accomplishing something like unfriending someone through the technical feature does not match the perceived social implications of using the feature. In turn, the mismatch between technical ease and social difficulty raises questions about how actions accomplished via technical features have inherent social considerations that may not be well represented in the system. Understanding what these considerations are could assist designers in creating better features to help people better manage their audiences in the wake of a break-up, limiting algorithmic systems' opportunities to leverage connections and make bad recommendations.

In the first study of my dissertation, I use activity packets and semi-structured interviews to explore the issue of who is in one's audience after a break-up – what do people consider when managing who their audiences are after a break-up? What social considerations do they weigh in this decision-making process? How do technical features make the process easier to accomplish but more difficult to understand (or decide to accomplish)? What social situations do people seek to avoid through the use of technical features?

#### 3.2 Study 2: Navigating Disparate Expectations

After making decisions about who or whom not to remain connected to after a break-up, individuals are left with networks of connections that represent real-world relationships to others. However, these people may be “closer” to that person's ex, or connected to the ex via social media.

The connections that one maintains can lead to algorithmic cruelty – features like People You May Know on Facebook leverage

the ties that people maintain in making recommendations for others to Friend – even when those recommendations are objectively bad. For example, being recommended to Friend an ex's new partner is certainly undesirable by human standards, but by algorithmic standards it may be a reasonable recommendation given shared mutual friend(s) and other factors.

Moreover, remaining connected to people in the aftermath of a relationship can create tensions as one attempts to grow past their break-up. Adding new friends or posting photos with people might be seen by an ex-partner (if still connected) or seen by someone close to an ex-partner. The opposite can also happen: hearing about what an ex is doing from a friend, or seeing an ex appear in the stories or posts of friends.

In the second study of my proposed dissertation, I again use pre-interview activities and semi-structured interviews to investigate how people navigate what might be disparate expectations between themselves, their ex, and the wider network of people they are connected with on social media sites (as well as the sites themselves). How do people decide on their expectations of what is or is not appropriate to post online after a break-up, and how do those expectations align with or contradict the expectations held by others? How do people enact these expectations through social or technical actions, and cope with experiencing an expectation violation?

#### 3.3 Study 3: Designing for Better Break-ups

Studies 1 and 2 of my dissertation will provide insight into what people want online after a break-up. They will result in an understanding of how people decide who to remain connected with, form expectations around acceptable behavior, and enact, uphold, and respond to violations of those expectations in the wake of a break-up. In turn, I will leverage that understanding to identify tensions and trade-offs that exist when considering the design of algorithmic systems that might suggest upsetting or otherwise inappropriate content.

However, the outcomes of studies 1 and 2 (as well as the focus of other work on break-ups in HCI, *e.g.*, [1, 8]) come with the assumption that nothing can be done before a break-up to improve the experience of the break-up if – or perhaps, more appropriately, when – it happens. Inspired in part by the ideas of the prenuptial agreement and death planning, I ask: can we improve the experiences of breaking up and dealing with how that break-up is represented online by identifying features and practices that would be useful in those situations?

Leveraging the results from studies 1 and 2, I will conduct co-design workshops with people still in relationships. The workshops will focus on what their values and expectations are for online behavior if the relationship ends, and how systems and features can support the enactment of those values. In pre-interview activities, participants will complete a questionnaire of what they would want in the aftermath of a break-up. Then, in focus group-like settings of 2-3 couples, we will work through these scenarios and talk about why participants decided for one outcome over another, and co-design ways of setting up social media to make enacting those decisions easier.

## 4 EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

Experiencing the end of a romantic relationship is a ubiquitous and emotionally fraught part of being human. With the growing importance we place on social media as a place to represent and archive our lives, individuals going through a break-up must contend with the online possessions and connections in addition to the offline. In many ways, decisions around the digital remnants that persist in the wake of a break-up require the same types of conversations that are had around offline around possessions. However, online, it is far easier to remain connected online to an ex or those close to an ex in a way that inhibits healing and growth from the break-up.

The contributions from my dissertation work will be two-fold in nature. First, it will bolster our understanding of how one of the most ubiquitous human experiences is translated into, and complicated by, sociotechnical systems such as social media. Second, using that understanding, my dissertation will provide suggestions for both system designers and users on how to create “better” break-ups – or, at least, give suggestions for how to handle the online aspects of break-ups in ways that acknowledge the significance of the loss without impeding the ability for one to move on.

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