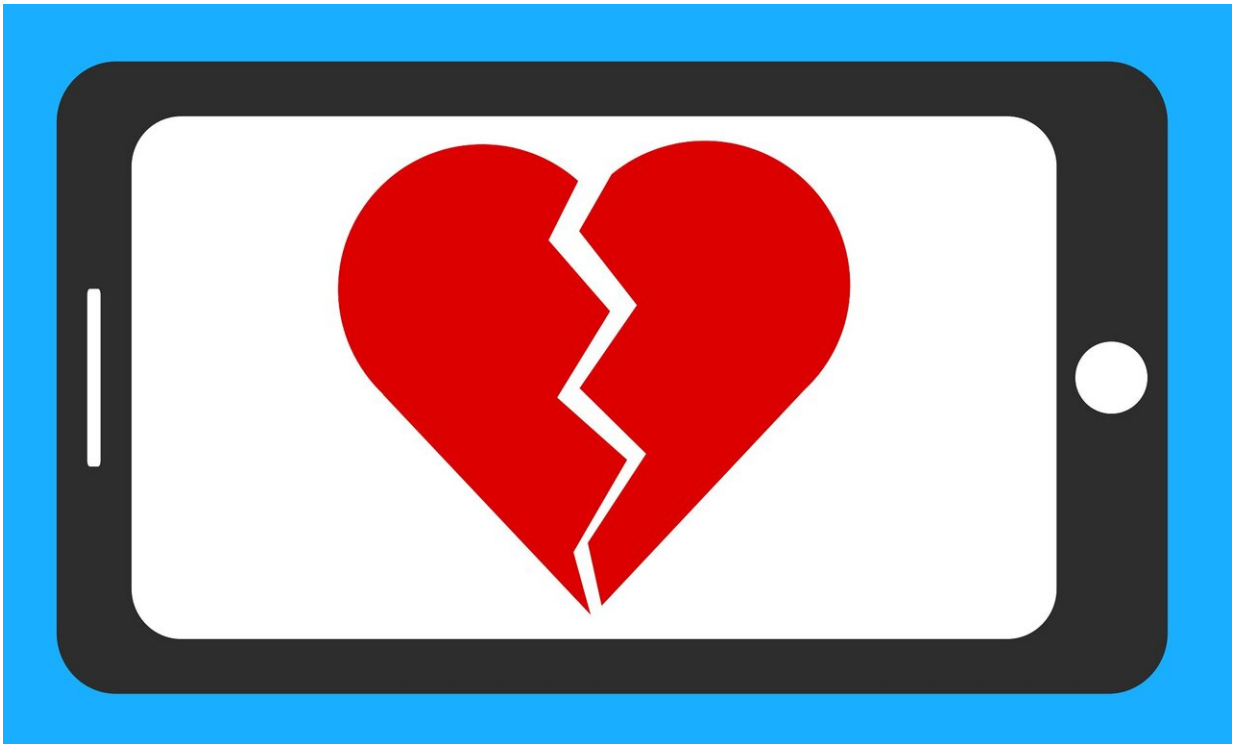


How social media makes breakups that much worse

February 14 2020, by Lisa Marshall



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Imagine flipping through your Facebook News Feed on Valentine's Day and spotting a notification that your ex is now "in a relationship."

Or maybe the Memories feature shows a photo from that beach vacation you took together last year.

Or your ex-lover's new lover's mom shows up under People You May Know.

Scenarios like these are real and not uncommon, according to a new CU Boulder study exploring how breaking up is even harder to do in the digital age.

"Before social media, breakups still sucked, but it was much easier to get distance from the person," said Anthony Pinter, a doctoral student in the information science department and lead author of the study published in the journal *Proceedings of the ACM* (Association for Computing Machinery). "It can make it almost impossible to move on if you are constantly being bombarded with reminders in different places online."

The study, recently presented at the annual ACM Conference on Human Computer Interaction, emerged from a class project in Assistant Professor Jed Brubaker's class on digital identity. Brubaker asked his students to pick an upsetting thing that happens on social media and study it. Breakups were a no-brainer for the group—each member had experienced their fair share.

The team recruited participants who had experienced an upsetting encounter online involving a breakup within the past 18 months and interviewed them for over an hour.

Among 19 who underwent in-depth interviews, a disturbing trend emerged: Even when people took every measure they saw possible to remove their exes from their online lives, social media returned them—often multiple times a day.

"A lot of people make the assumption that they can just unfriend their ex or unfollow them and they are not going to have to deal with this anymore," said Pinter. "Our work shows this is not the case."

News Feed, the primary interface that opens when one launches Facebook, was a major source of distress, delivering news of ex-lovers announcing they were in a new relationship and making it "Facebook official." In one case, a participant noticed his roommate had already "liked" his ex's post. He was the last of his friends to know.

Memories, which revives posts from years' past, was equally heart-rending, with one participant recalling how a sweet years-old message from his ex-wife popped up out of nowhere delivering an "emotional wallop."

Many shared stories of encountering exes via their comments in shared spaces, such as groups or event pages or mutual friends' pictures.

"In real life, you get to decide who gets the cat and who gets the couch, but online it's a lot harder to determine who gets this picture or who gets this group," said Pinter.

Take a Break works—for some

In 2015, Facebook launched the Take A Break feature, which detects when a user switches from "in a relationship" to "single" and asks if they want the platform to hide that person's activities online. But people like Pinter, who don't use the Relationship Status tool, never get such an offer.

"Facebook doesn't know we broke up because Facebook never knew we were in a relationship," he said, noting that people can still seek out Take A Break on their own—but many don't know it exists.

Even when someone unfriends their ex, if a mutual friend posts a picture without tagging them in it, that picture may still flow through their feed.

And even when they blocked their exes entirely—putting up a wall around themselves so their former partner couldn't see their posts either—some reported that the ex's friends and family would still show up on Facebook as suggestions under People You May Know.

"Am I never going to be free of all this crap online?" asked one exasperated participant, lending the paper part of its title.

The research stems from a larger National Science Foundation grant award called Humanizing Algorithms, aimed at identifying and offering solutions for "algorithmic insensitivity."

"Algorithms are really good at seeing patterns in clicks, likes and when things are posted, but there is a whole lot of nuance in how we interact with people socially that they haven't been designed to pick up," said Brubaker, who has also studied [the ways in which the dead can resurface](#) in people's online lives and [how algorithms can misunderstand gender and race](#).

The authors suggest that such day-ruining encounters with exes could be minimized if platform designers paid more attention to the "social periphery"—all those people, groups, photos and events that spring up around a connection between two users—and offered more tools to hide posts resulting from those connections.

For those wanting to rid their online lives from reminders of love lost, the researchers recommend unfriending, untagging, using Take a Break and blocking while understanding they may not be foolproof.

Your best bet, said Pinter: "Take a break from [social media](#) for a while until you are in a better place."

More information: Anthony T. Pinter et al. "Am I Never Going to Be

Free of All This Crap?", *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* (2019). [DOI: 10.1145/3359172](https://doi.org/10.1145/3359172)

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