

# *Its ovr b/n u n me: Technology Use, Attachment Styles, and Gender Roles in Relationship Dissolution*

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## Abstract

Relationship dissolution now occurs through technologies like text messaging, e-mail, and social networking sites (SNS). Individuals who experience relationship dissolution via technology may differ in their attachment pattern and gender role attitudes from those who have not had that experience. One hundred five college students (males = 21 and females = 84) completed an online questionnaire about technology-mediated breakups, attachment style, and gender role attitudes. More than a quarter of the sample had experienced relationship dissolution via technology. Attachment anxiety predicted those subject to technology-mediated breakups. Attachment avoidance and less traditional gender roles were associated with increased likelihood of technology use in relationship dissolution. Implications are discussed in regards to future research and practice.

## Introduction

**N**OWADAYS, TECHNOLOGY HAS become a vital part of the communication between romantic partners. Romantic couples use e-mail,<sup>1</sup> chat/instant messaging<sup>2,3</sup> (IM), text messaging,<sup>4</sup> and social networking sites<sup>5</sup> (SNS) to maintain their relationship. Although relationship maintenance communication may occur via technology, scant research has been conducted on relationship dissolution (i.e., breaking up) via multimedia.

### *Relationship dissolution*

Relationship dissolution can be challenging, especially for those in nonmarital relationships since they may have many short duration relationships with frequent dissolutions. Dissolution in nonmarital relationships has been associated with lower levels of well-being,<sup>6</sup> lower levels of life satisfaction and increases in psychological distress,<sup>7</sup> and lingering anger and sadness.<sup>8</sup> Most individuals use direct and positive dissolution strategies when there is closeness in a relationship, despite its impending demise.<sup>9</sup> However, a subcategory of withdrawal-avoidance strategies has emerged with new technologies that allow for dissolution through distant communication like e-mail, text messaging, and SNS. Individuals now consider these avoidant distant communication strategies as potential methods along with traditional breakup strategies like dropping hints, openly expressing a desire, or picking an argument as an excuse.<sup>9</sup> Given the novelty of these potential strategies, greater understanding of might prompt

use of avoidant distant communication strategies for dissolution merits study.

### *Attachment theory and technology*

Attachment theory, a leading theory for understanding close relationships, asserts that the interactions between caregivers and their infant form a pattern of relating, which shapes the relationship.<sup>10</sup> The attachment can be secure, where the infant feels a sense of comfort and support from the environment, or insecure, where the infant does not have a feeling of psychological safety and security. This pattern of relating may be internalized to form an "internal working model," representing intimate relationships contemporaneously and into the future.<sup>11</sup> Romantic love has been postulated as an attachment process where an individual bonds to a romantic partner in a similar fashion as an infant attaches to his/her caregiver.<sup>12</sup> Evidence indicates that the infant attachment pattern remains stable into adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

Adult attachment has been conceptualized as comprising two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance.<sup>14</sup> Attachment anxiety is the worry and preoccupation individuals have about the responsiveness of their romantic partner. Attachment avoidance is how much individuals are willing to be intimate with and dependent upon another person. Attachment anxiety has been associated with distress and poorer conflict resolution tactics with a dating partner.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, attachment avoidance has been associated with low levels of eye contact, pleasantness, and interest in being attentive to romantic partners.<sup>16</sup>

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Studies have also investigated how adult attachment styles relate to technology-mediated communication. For example, college students who identified using their cell phones as a primary means of staying connected to their parents indicated a high degree of attachment anxiety.<sup>17</sup> Individuals fearful in attachment (high on anxiety and low on avoidance) self-disclose more to online friends than those with other attachment styles.<sup>18</sup> Among college students in romantic relationships, those high on avoidant attachment made fewer cell phone calls to their partners than those with less avoidance.<sup>19</sup> In addition, those high in anxiety were likely to feel pressured to engage in "sexting" with their romantic partners.<sup>20</sup> Adult attachment styles may, therefore, relate to how romantic partners communicate via technology, including relationship dissolution.

### Gender role attitudes

Gender role attitudes can be understood as the level of egalitarianism one has toward the social roles of each gender, especially women's roles. Individuals who maintain "traditional" gender role attitudes may believe that women should stay home and care for children. These role attitudes toward women (ATW) also shape romantic relationship quality. For example, romantic partners (married and unmarried) who were similar in gender role attitudes had better dyadic adjustment 15 months later than those who differed significantly.<sup>21</sup> Women have more egalitarian perspectives on gender roles than men.<sup>22,23</sup> Moreover, women who hold traditional gender role attitudes may view romantic relationships idealistically<sup>24,25</sup> or may initiate breakups.<sup>26</sup> These traditional perspectives may relate to relationship satisfaction.<sup>27</sup> Because no studies were found on gender role attitudes and relationship dissolution, we wanted to explore the relationship between these concepts and hypothesized that those individuals who hold traditional attitudes would be less likely to use technology as a means of dissolution since they are likely to view women stereotypically.

### The present study

We first explored whether individuals had experienced relationship dissolution via technology and through which media their dissolution occurred. Also, we assessed participants' attitudes toward technology-mediated dissolution by asking which technologies they might use and how acceptable it is to break up via different technologies. Second, we assessed how attachment patterns relate to attitudes toward technology-mediated dissolution and experience with breaking up via technology. More specifically, we hypothesize that anxious attachment will predict having been the recipient of a breakup via technology and that avoidant attachment will predict positive intention to use technology to break up. We also hypothesize that the attitudes toward using technology to enact a breakup will be associated with less traditional gender role attitudes.

## Methods

### Procedures

Undergraduate students from human development and family studies classes from two public, state universities participated in an online questionnaire. Participants could complete the questionnaire in sections over the duration of

administration (8–10 weeks), and in its entirety, the survey took about 20 minutes to complete. Ninety-two percent ( $N=114$ ) of those who began the survey completed it. For participation, participants received extra credit in their class. The Institutional Review Boards of both campuses approved this protocol.

### Sample

One hundred five participants (males = 21 and females = 84) participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years ( $M=21.69$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ), and the ethnic composition was 4 percent African American, 11 percent Asian American, 29 percent Euroamerican, 53 percent Latino, and 4 percent other. Forty-five percent of the individuals were single, whereas 55 percent indicated being in a romantic relationship.

### Measures

**Demographics.** Participants indicated their age, gender, race/ethnicity, and relationship status (i.e., in a relationship or single).

**Technology use to break up.** Participants indicated, for each of the media, if anyone had ever broken up with them via chat/IM, e-mail, posting on SNS, text message, voicemail, or none.

**Likelihood of technology for dissolution.** Participants indicated their likelihood of using chat/IM, e-mail, posting on SNS, text message, voicemail, or none to break up with a romantic partner. Participants could select more than one medium.

**Acceptability of technology for dissolution.** Participants rated the acceptability of breaking up via chat/IM, e-mail, posting on Facebook/MySpace, text message, and voicemail, using a scale of 1 = not at all to 5 = definitely. Chronbach's alpha was 0.79.

**Adult attachment.** Participants rated the 36 items of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised measure,<sup>28</sup> using a scale of 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. The measure produces dimensional subscale scores on attachment anxiety and avoidance. Examples of items are "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love" and "I am nervous when partners get too close to me." Chronbach's alpha for attachment anxiety was 0.92 and for avoidance was 0.93.

**Gender roles.** We measured gender roles with the 15-item ATW scale.<sup>29</sup> Participants rated each item using a

TABLE 1. HAVING BEEN THE RECIPIENT OF RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION VIA TECHNOLOGY AND LIKELIHOOD OF USE TO BREAK UP

Technology	Recipient count (N=105)	Likelihood of use count (N=105)
Chat/IM	8	4
E-mail	4	4
Posting on SNS	4	0
Text message	19	11
Voice message	6	6

Note: IM, instant messaging; SNS, social networking sites.

TABLE 2. ACCEPTABILITY OF USING TECHNOLOGY TO BREAK UP WITH ROMANTIC PARTNERS

Technology	M (SD) <sup>a</sup>
Chat/IM	1.30 (0.68)
E-mail	1.30 (0.63)
Posting on SNS	1.08 (0.43)
Text message	1.51 (0.89)
Voice message	1.59 (1.00)

<sup>a</sup>1 = not at all to 5 = definitely.

scale ranging from 1 = agree strongly to 4 = disagree strongly. A sample item is "A woman should be free as a man to propose marriage." Chronbach's alpha was 0.78.

**Results**

*Frequency and means of relationship dissolution*

First, we explored whether technology mediated experiences with relationship dissolution and found that 28 percent ( $n=29$ ) of the participants indicated that they had experienced technology-mediated relationship dissolution. Text messaging was the most frequent method for the breakup (18 percent). Second, we investigated whether participants considered technology as a means for future relationship dissolution. Fifteen percent ( $n=16$ ) said they would be likely to use technology to break up with a romantic partner (Table 1). Third, we investigated the acceptability of using certain media for relationship dissolution. Participants indicated that voicemail was most acceptable for breaking up, followed by text messaging (Table 2).

*Comparisons of using technology to break up*

To investigate the differences between individuals, we categorized participants into having been broken up with via technology or not, calling the variable BROKENUP. By doing so, we then could use logistic regression to predict what may determine membership in each group. Similarly, to investigate what may associate with willingness to use technology for dissolution, we created the variable WOULDUSE, comprised of participants willing and unwilling to use technology to break up. Also, to assess the relationship of acceptability in using technology to break up and other variables, we summed the mean acceptability scores across the individual technologies and created an overall acceptability score.

First, we assessed demographic differences among the variables of interest (e.g., BREAKUP, WOULDUSE, or acceptability of using technology for dissolution). There were no significant differences or associations by age, ethnicity, and gender for any

TABLE 3. CORRELATIONS OF THE MAIN VARIABLES

	Anx	Avoid	ATW	Accept
Attachment anxiety	—	0.52*	-0.05	0.20**
Attachment avoidance		—	0.06	0.22**
Attitudes toward women			—	-0.29***
Acceptability				—

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .  
ATW, attitudes toward women.

TABLE 4. LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BEING BROKEN UP WITH VIA TECHNOLOGY AND ATTACHMENT ANXIETY, ATTACHMENT AVOIDANCE, AND GENDER ROLE ATTITUDES

	$\beta$ (SE)	95 percent CI for odds ratio		
		Lower	Odds ratio	Upper
Constant	-3.04 (0.69)			
Attachment anxiety	0.71 (0.21)*	1.33	2.03	3.08

$R^2=0.10$  (Hosmer and Lemeshow), 0.11 (Cox and Snell), 0.17 (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(1)=12.40$ ,  $p=0.001$ . \* $p < 0.001$ .  
CI, confidence interval.

of the variables of interest. As expected, women ( $M=49.85$ ,  $SD=6.29$ ) had significantly higher scores on ATW than men ( $M=46.38$ ,  $SD=5.55$ ,  $F(1, 102)=5.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

*Attachment style relationships*

There was a significant correlation between anxious and avoidant attachment,  $r=0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , which is not unusual for this measure.<sup>30</sup> Also, those who were single scored higher on attachment anxiety ( $M=3.08$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ) and attachment avoidance ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ) than those in a relationship ( $M=2.28$ ,  $SD=1.04$ , and  $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=0.92$ , respectively),  $F(1, 104)=14.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and  $F(1, 104)=49.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , respectively. Acceptability of using technology to break up was associated with anxious attachment,  $r=0.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , and with avoidant attachment,  $r=0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Acceptability was inversely associated with the ATW scale,  $r=-0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$  (Table 3).

To assess whether attachment style and gender role attitudes predicted having been broken up with via technology (BROKENUP), we conducted a stepwise logistic regression with attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and ATW score as predictors and BROKENUP as the outcome variable. Only attachment anxiety remained in the equation predicting BROKENUP,  $\beta$  (SE)=0.71 (0.21),  $\chi^2(1)=12.40$ ,  $p=0.001$  (Table 4). On the second logistic regression predicting WOULDUSE, attachment anxiety remained in the equation,  $\beta$  (SE)=0.57 (0.24),  $\chi^2(1)=5.96$ ,  $p=0.05$  (Table 5). To predict attitudes of acceptability, we used a stepwise multiple regression with attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and ATW score as predictors. The final model indicated that acceptability was best predicted by negative score on ATW and greater attachment avoidance,  $\beta$ s = -0.31 and 0.24, respectively (Table 6). This finding means that holding a traditional view of women's gender roles and greater attachment avoidance predict the attitudes of acceptability toward using technology to break up with someone.

TABLE 5. LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BEING WILLING TO USE TECHNOLOGY TO BREAK UP WITH SOMEONE AND ATTACHMENT ANXIETY, ATTACHMENT AVOIDANCE, AND GENDER ROLE ATTITUDES

	$\beta$ (SE)	95 percent CI for odds ratio		
		Lower	Odds ratio	Upper
Constant	-3.34 (0.80)			
Attachment anxiety	0.57 (0.24)*	1.11	1.77	2.82

$R^2=0.07$  (Hosmer and Lemeshow), 0.06 (Cox and Snell), 0.10 (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(1)=5.96$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

TABLE 6. MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION OF ACCEPTABILITY OF USING TECHNOLOGY TO BREAK UP AND ATTACHMENT ANXIETY, ATTACHMENT AVOIDANCE, AND GENDER ROLES

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Model 1			
Constant	2.61	0.42	
ATW	-0.03	0.01	-0.29*
Model 2			
Constant	2.37	0.42	
ATW	-0.03	0.01	-0.31*
Attachment avoidance	0.11	-0.04	0.24**

$R^2=0.08$  for Step 1,  $\Delta R^2=$  for Step 2 ( $p<0.05$ ). \* $p<0.01$ , \*\* $p<0.05$ .

## Discussion

Little research has explored relationship dissolution using technological mediums, despite the prevalence of technology in romantic couples' communication. In this study, we sought to determine how attachment relates to experiencing relationship dissolution via technology and disposition toward using technology for dissolution. Indeed, attachment anxiety predicted both having been broken up with via technology and being willing to use technology for dissolution. These findings are consistent with the difficulties that those with anxious attachments may have in relationships (e.g., being unaware of their partner's feelings). Those individuals with anxious/ambivalent attachments may be upset and surprised by a breakup.<sup>31</sup> A romantic partner may recognize the anxious attachment behaviors and avoid an emotionally-tense scenario likely from those with anxious attachment and employ technology to buffer the dissolution.

Avoidant attachment and less traditional gender roles predicted acceptability of using technology to dissolve a relationship. Avoidant attachment has been associated with withdrawing from romantic partners in anxiety-provoking situations<sup>32</sup> and being less attentive to a partner.<sup>16</sup> Dissolving a relationship mediated by technology may be consistent with avoidant attachment behaviors in relationships. The combination of being avoidant and thinking that women should be treated equally may permit the use of an impersonal means of dissolution via technology.

## Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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