Breakups on Social Media: Social Behaviors and Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore "apart" behaviors, which are conducted to disconnect with ex-partners using various technological affordances on social media, to extend CSCW/HCI knowledge of how social media supports disconnections in post-breakups. 174 posts and comments from Reddit, Quora, and Facebook, along with sixteen online articles, were qualitatively analyzed. Our findings show how users conduct apart behaviors using technological affordances and their expectations of features to facilitate apart behaviors. We also present two social dilemmas in experiencing apart behaviors on social media.

INTRODUCTION

As social media is increasingly playing an important role in every aspect of our social and intimate lives, a body of CSCW literature has studied how social media mediates and supports the emergence,

development, and fade of romantic relationships, such as how to maintain romantic relationships via social media [6, 14] and post-breakup behaviors on social media [7, 9]. Individuals who ruminate when accessing ex-partners social media may hold negative emotion [13]. These studies have shed light on how social media impacts users in romantic relationships: 1) breakup individuals who have higher social media use may experience more stress in post-breakup [7], and 2) communication on social media during breakdown mainly causes negative emotions (e.g., distress, anger) [9]. Although previous research presented social media as having a negative influence on breakup individuals in post-breakup, more research is needed regarding technology-mediated "apart" behaviors and experiences - e.g., how people use various social media features (e.g., unfriend/unfollow and block) to disconnect with their romantic partners and their experiences of such behaviors. Drawing on 190 social media posts and online articles regarding breakups on social media, this paper presents a preliminary empirical investigation of the interplay of technological affordances of social media platforms and people's practices and experiences of disconnecting with their ex-partners. In particular, we focus on the following research question: *How do people conduct and experience apart behaviors on social media?*

ROMANTIC BREAKUPS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The social and psychological impact of breaking up a romantic relationship has been extensively studied in social sciences [1, 10, 12]. Research has shown that romantic breakups change how individuals define and perceive themselves and often cause emotional distress [11]. The prevalence of digital technologies in our daily lives further complicate how people conduct and experience romantic breakups. For example, a body of prior work in CSCW has focused on breakups through social media [2, 7]. Among them, Haimson et al. investigated how people disclosed breakups on Facebook and highlighted how to design future social media technologies to facilitate such disclosures [5]. Lukacs et al. explored the influence of Facebook use on breakup distress and developed a new scale to measure such distress [7]. In addition, Medeiros et al. studied variables that affected people's decisions on whether they should remove their ex-partners or not [8]. Collectively, these studies have shed light on how using social media affect people's experiences after a breakup, such as surveillance and decision making on remaining friend with ex-partners. Yet, little has been done to explore how people actually use various social media features to break up with their partners and their experiences of such apart behaviors. Therefore, in this study, we present our first endeavor to address this limitation.

METHODOLOGY

We utilized a keywords search (e.g., "break up social media"; "disconnect ex social media") on various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Reddit, and Quora, to collect posts and comments regarding people's self-reported stories of disconnecting with their ex-partners on social media. We also used the same keywords search on Google to collect online articles regarding apart behaviors on social

media. Data collection was completed when the emergence of new themes became infrequent [4]. In total, 174 posts and comments were collected from Reddit, Quora, and Facebook, and 16 online articles were collected. We then used thematic analysis to analyze the data based on the grounded theory [3].

FINDINGS

Conducting Apart Behaviors on Social Media When people decided to break up a romantic relationship, they tended to take advantage of various existing social media features to disconnect with their ex-partners (Table 1).

In particular, features of unfriend, unfollow, and block were used most often to implement apart behaviors. For example, people mentioned: *"When my girlfriend dumped me, I blocked her on Facebook, and blocked her on Snapchat." (Quora)*, and *"I did block his new Facebook." (Reddit)*. Hiding aspects of an ex from a timeline was also used to remove traces of ex-partners: *"I didn't unfriend my ex but I hid all of her posts and activities from my timeline on Facebook." (Reddit)*. Some people would even leave social media altogether or deactivate their social media accounts to completely cut off their connections with ex-partners. For example, a few posts showed: *"I did leave social media for a time, and it did help by giving me a chance to clear my mental headspace in private." (Quora)*, and *"My ex straight up deleted his Facebook seconds after our breakup." (Reddit)*. In addition to these existing social media features, some people tended to remove traces of ex-partners on social media manually, as a Reddit post shared: *"I removed pics by hand. I scrubbed my profile of pics of us, and deleted her and her friends."*

However, people also expressed that the current design of most social media platforms did not support apart behaviors, making it challenging to disconnect with their ex-partners. For example, many expected to have a "one-click" feature on social media to immediately remove all traces of their ex-partners: *"Facebook should add a feature called 'breakup' so it can immediately remove all traces or even slight connections to your ex-partner." (Reddit)*. Others expressed the demand for removing posts and photos related to ex-partners from the public view but storing them in a private virtual box. Many mentioned: *"My wife and I had very special moments I wouldn't just want immediately erased over sudden emotional outbursts." (Reddit)*, and *"I don't think the general issue is having that material, but just it being in your face and/or public." (Reddit)*. With this feature, people who broke up with their ex-partners indicated that they did not need to keep displaying those shared memories in public, so as to avoid potential distress and embarrassment. Yet, rather than permanently deleting these memories, they still seek to store such memories in a private mode and re-visit when needed.

Experiencing Apart Behaviors on Social Media. Another highlight in our data is that people often experience apart behaviors on social media as social dilemmas. Specifically, one dilemma is that mutual connections on social media, such as friends and ex's families, are often barriers for completely removing ex from one's online social network (Figure 1). For example, one Reddit post stated: *"I'm not*

Table 1: Features to Disconnect with Ex-partners on Social Media

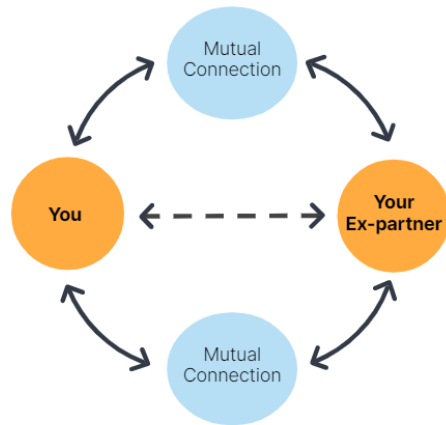|	
Existing features	1. Unfriend/unfollow 2. Block 3. Leave/ Deactivate social media accounts
Expected features	1. "One-click" to remove all traces 2. Private mode of posts/photos related to ex-partners

Figure 1: Mutual Connections Between Breakup Couples

Figure 2: An Online Article About Experience in Apart Behaviors

friends with my ex or her best friend on Facebook anymore, but every now and then she leaves a comment on a mutual friend's photo or something, I can see her name somewhere or her face tagged in a picture in my News Feed." (Reddit). Another post also added, *"I noticed that stuff from my ex was occasionally popping up on my News Feed because we had mutual friends and they were commenting and liking it."* (Reddit). This adds increased complexity to the situation if someone seeks to block traces of an ex but maintain relationships with that ex's mutual friends.

Another dilemma lies in the concerns about the digital memories owned by ex-partners. Very often, digital materials online can not be completely removed by just one party. For instance, a post on Quora asked: *"How do I tell my ex to remove all of our couple pictures from every social media site?"* (Quora). In most situations, ex-partners also have the right to keep those digital materials online, as two comments to the above post stated: *"You can't. The law is on her side, as long as she doesn't profit from pictures of anyone other than herself." (Quora)*, and *"You can ask nicely, but you can't make her do it." (Quora)*. Therefore, the two parties involved in apart behaviors may experience such behaviors very differently: while one party may demand that shared photos on their social media remain as valuable memories, the other party may expect to completely remove traces of their ex online as a fresh start. This divergence may further lead to more experiences in conflicts and frustration post-breakup.

Social dilemmas in apart behaviors sometimes discourage the use of social media. For instance, as shown in Figure 2, an online article stated: *"I have a fear of introducing anyone in my life to my internet fam on Instagram. One big reason is that I'm afraid of breaking up on social media." (Article 1 in Appendix)*. Another Reddit post added: *"The hard part is the social media connections that linger even if you cut off all ties yourself. I find I use Facebook way less in general since my divorce." (Reddit)*. Leaving social media or minimally using it in romantic relationships are considered as a means to avoid possible negative effect of social media on daily lives in future/current post-breakup, as one online article stated: *"If you don't involve social media in your break-up, you're more likely to avoid at least a messy break-up in public." (Article 2 in Appendix)*.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Based on our findings, breakup individuals utilize various technological affordances for disconnecting on social media to conduct apart behaviors. Compared to other types of relationships, romantic relationship increases the difficulty of apart behaviors due to couples' shared memories and mutual connections. Therefore, it is necessary to design affordances that facilitate apart behaviors on social media (if needed). For future work, interviews or surveys will be conducted to further understand how people perceive apart behaviors and the relation between the use of social media and apart behaviors in post-breakup. In addition, we may extend this study to explore disconnect behaviors in other kinds of relationships.

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ONLINE ARTICLES

(1) Article 1: Should You Delete Photos of Your Ex From Instagram Once You're in a New Relationship? (*https://www.elitedaily.com/p/should-you-delete-photos-of-your-ex-from-instagram-once-youre-in-a-new-relationship-9593865*)

(2) Article 2: How to Break Up With Someone in the Digital Age. (*https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/how-to-break-up-with-someone-digital-age/*)