

## Deleting Relationships in the Digital World

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### ***Abstract***

*As women become financially independent and capable of supporting themselves and their children, they are finding it easier to correct their poor choices in mate-selection, i.e., poor interpersonal relationships and marriages. Nearly half of the marriages in the U.S. terminate either in permanent separation or divorce. The divorce rates among the Baby Boomers and members of Generations X and Y are equally high. For the older generations, the socially accepted way to end a relationship was through a face-to-face conversation but not necessarily so for the younger generation. The use of online dating, connecting through the internet, and cultivating relationships through social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr) are routine practices among the millennials. Do social media also come to their aid in terminating a relationship? The present study explores the issue of relationship dissolution in the digital age. Based on a survey using a self-reporting paper-and-pencil instrument, the paper reports on the use of social media in terminating interpersonal relationships. The researchers asked if the respondents have used social media to end a relationship, or if their partner had used such media to end a relationship with them. The survey also asked the participants to describe how they felt after ending a relationship online, or when they were 'dumped' by their partner. Recent studies have shown that the younger generation is using social media to initiate, cultivate, and maintain relationships. Our data reveal that social media are also being used to conclude relationships. Just as social media can accelerate the formation of an interpersonal relationship, the impersonal nature of social media also makes it easier to walk away from a relationship. The paper also reports on the differences in emotional responses to digital breakups based on gender and age.*

**Keywords:** Interpersonal relationships, social media, emotions, gender communication

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## Introduction

In the past, people met in bars, in church, at school, through family members or mutual friends. Cellphones and social media have impacted people's dating and mating behaviors. Through their successful advertising campaigns, popular dating sites such as eHarmony and Match.com have made online dating a socially accepted behavior. More than 15% of the adults say they have used either mobile dating apps or online dating site at least once. Online dating services are now the second most popular way to meet a partner (Anderson, 2016). It is possible to initiate, form, maintain, and terminate relationships through texting, and on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr.

From accessing the news and reading books, from listening to music and watching movies, the digital revolution has touched our lives on both personal and interpersonal levels. Digital media have affected our ways of accessing the news, information, and entertainment for personal use. How we seek, find, and meet new people, and how we form, maintain, and terminate our interpersonal relationships are being guided by digital technology. In this paper, we explore the role of social media in terminating interpersonal relationships and describe the interplay of human emotions and impersonal social media.

During the agricultural stages of our societies, the ruling classes and the church controlled and maintained the social structure. At that time, only two trades were essential: farming and fighting. Neither required any formal education. With the shift toward industrialization, new trades emerged. With it, the need for training the workers for the new trades. The universities, which thus far, had only concentrated on cultivating the minds of the young men of the elite class, began providing training for the new professions. While the church retained its place, the universities gained a new role: The training of the tradespersons.

Traditionally, the church and the educational institutions have also been instrumental in sustaining the socio-economic systems. The church, at the pleasure of the rulers, helped lay the moral standards regarding social behavior through dictating the rules for marriage and family, and the schools taught the value of discipline and obedience. The children of the working classes were taught the virtue of hard work, and sons of the ruling classes were taught to manage/ rule the workforce.

Both, church and educational institutions played an important role in bringing together people of similar faiths and socioeconomic backgrounds. These institutions created the opportunities for the young men and women of like-backgrounds to become acquainted and marry within their faith and social station – a practice that enabled the ruling class and the church to retain their power and stability (Gilkey, 1914; Horsfield, 2017). The two World Wars and the post-modern liberalism diffused the boundaries between those that have and those that have not; between men and women. No longer are there any careers specifically reserved for women or men. No longer do the church and the ruling classes have the magnitude of the control they wielded a century ago. Within the last one hundred years, we have seen the demise of totalitarian

political systems and the weakening of the church's hold on its people. To paraphrase the words of a recent Nobel Laureate, Bob Dylan, the times most certainly have changed.

The media outlets no longer dictate what the important issues are, or, how the audiences should think about the issue promoted by the news media. The church no longer dictates what is proper or improper; the governments no longer tell us what professions are open to us, or whom we may socialize with.

The progressive thinkers may argue that these changes are for the better; some people believe in change for change's sake. The traditionalists may resent the changes and long nostalgically for the times and days gone by. We do not wish to pass judgment on these changes. Only time will tell. Regarding the role of social media in interpersonal relationships, relying on data, we will interpret what was, what is, and what the implications might be.

Choice plays a role even in arranged marriages: the spouses' families and social networks select an appropriate partner, and in many cases, the betrothed retain at least some control over whether the choice is acceptable (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). Excluding the cultures of arranged marriages, for most people, the relationships that culminate into marriages are based on factors such as physical appearance, similarity, proximity, and the opportunity for interaction (Floyd, 2009). Every day people meet and interact with people in all types of environments. It could be over a coffee shop, in a classroom, at a bookstore, or a get-together at a home, the factors such as physical appearance, opportunity, and proximity, etc. are the elements that plant the seed for a relationship. Until recently, people believed that long-distance relationships are doomed to fail. However, due to digital communication devices and social media, long-distance romantic relationships are more satisfying and stable than those in close geographic proximity (Stafford, 2010).

Interpersonal relationships proceed through three stages: Formation, maintenance, termination (Rehman, 2020). Exploration and self-disclosure occur during the formation stage, sharing of deeper and more personal information and redefining of identities take place during the maintenance stage, and the decline in interest, stagnation, and avoidance in the termination stage (Knapp, 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000). An integral part of maintaining intimacy is through creating a climate of security and trust which allows the partners to share and disclose without fearing rejection or repercussion. Predictability, trustworthiness, and honesty are the building blocks of mutual respect (McCornack, 2016). With any one of these elements removed, a relationship is likely to fail.

No two people enter into a marriage believing that they will remain married for only five years; most couples anticipate "forever" (Barker & Emery, 1993). However, despite such optimism, 40 % of the marriages dissolve in the first five years. Several factors are accountable for the deterioration of relationships and marriages. For the people under the age of 25, rushing through the formation stage leads to failed relationships. People over-involved with their careers fail to make the investment in relational maintenance which causes many marriages to end in separation or divorce. Divorce rates are higher among two-career couples than among one-career families. At a time when marriages are becoming less common for younger adults, the "gray

divorce” is on the rise: Among U.S. adults ages 50 and older, the divorce rate has roughly doubled since the 1990s (Stepler, 2017). The average age of couples going through their first divorce is 30 years. Women initiate about 66 % of the divorces. The stigma attached to ‘being divorced’ has faded over the years and it has become much easier to obtain a divorce than in the past. It used to be. There is a divorce every 13 seconds in the United States.

Infidelity is one of the main reasons for divorce. Marriages are twice more likely to end because of infidelity than abuse. Shackelford & Buss (1997) reported that more than 60 percent of American men and women would consider divorce if a spouse had a serious (sexual) affair.

Formal education has been the great equalizer in humans (Whitehead, 1967). Education, for women, has altered the dynamics of courtship, marriage, and divorce. Since higher education leads to higher income, it offers them greater flexibility to be selective in their mate selection. The divorce rates for college-educated women are lower than non-college-educated women. The non-college educated women marry younger and are financially worse off than the college-educated peers. Age at the time of marriage and earning potential bear a strong relationship to divorce rates.

Since a lot more women have entered the workforce in the past 50 years, the workplace has also become a place where people meet and form relationships. At work, one meets the same people regularly (frequency of interaction), one works with people that have similar interests (similarity), works in teams (proximity and opportunity), i.e., all the factors necessary for the formation of a relationship. According to one survey, 40 to 80 percent of respondents have dated a coworker (Schaefer & Tudor, 2001). Adler & Proctor (2014) noted that office-romances have become more frequent and common than they were ten years ago. Traditionally, employers discouraged workplace romances. However, romantically involved workers are usually perceived by people in their organization as friendly and approachable (Hovick, Meyes, & Timmerman, 2003), and workplace romance is viewed positively.

People experience varied emotions as a consequence of a break-up, separation, or divorce. For some, a termination may bring a sense of relief. For others, it may be a heartbreaking event leading to depression. For yet others, a breakup may cause confusion, anger, or feel a blow to one’s self-esteem. Research suggests that although men and women may experience and express emotions differently when they experience the same emotion, there is no difference in the intensity of the emotion experienced (Fischer et al., 2004). Terminating a relationship, for most people, would be a consequential step and may arouse a sense of loss, lowering of self-worth, sadness, and anger. The intensity of felt emotions may depend on several factors such as the duration a relationship had lasted (emotional and time investment), and whether it is the first time a person is ending a relationship or if such has occurred in the past (experience), and an individual’s level of maturity (age). How people express their emotions are primarily dictated by the display rules that vary from culture to culture (McCornack, 2016).

## **The Study and the Sample**

The study reports on the use of social media in terminating interpersonal relationships. The respondents were enrolled in introductory communication courses at a state-supported

university in a mid-size urban city in Texas bordering Mexico. Since the university primarily caters to the Hispanic-American population, it is safe to assume that there was cultural homogeneity in the sample.

The data was collected through an anonymous, self-administered paper-and-pencil test where the participation was voluntary and the respondents were not required to disclose any personal identification. The instrument was composed of both closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. Four items were closed-ended. These asked about gender, age, whether the respondent ever used social media to end a relationship, and if someone else ended a relationship with them on social media. Two open-ended items asked the respondents to describe their feeling or emotions because of relationship termination.

Initially, the sample consisted of 139 (52.1%) men and 128 (47.9%) women with ages ranging from 16 years to 46 years. The sample was divided into three age groups. The first age group consisted of respondents that were 19 years old or younger. 136 people (51.9%) were in this group. The second age group was made up of people between the ages of 20 years to 29 years. 97 respondents (33.3%) were in this group. The remaining 34 participants (12.7%) were over 30 years of age. Out of 267 respondents, 113 (42.32%) said that they used social media to end a relationship. Ninety-seven participants (36.33%) admitted that their partners had ended the relationships on social media. Most of our analysis is based on those 113 participants who terminated and 97 that were dumped.

We grouped the described emotions/feelings into three categories: Emotions of Low Intensity, emotions of Medium Intensity, and emotions of High Intensity. The low-intensity emotions/feelings were such as *I felt relieved. I felt happy. It was less stressful. I didn't care. I felt nothing.* Medium intensity emotions were: *I felt stupid. I felt like less of a person. I was confused. I felt bad. I felt awkward.* The high-intensity emotions were: *I felt guilty. I regretted it. I felt anger. I was devastated. I was heartbroken.* A complete list of emotions is presented in Appendix I.

We created 8 null hypotheses, to test the data on two variables: Gender and Age. We hypothesized:

1. There is no difference between men and women in using social media to end a relationship.
2. There is no difference between men and women in being dumped through social media.
3. There is no difference due to age in using social media for ending a relationship.
4. There is no difference in age in experiencing being dumped through social media.
5. There is no difference between the emotional responses of men and women after ending a relationship using social media.
6. There is no difference between men and women in the emotional responses after being dropped through social media.
7. There is no difference based on age on how people feel after ending a relationship on social media.
8. There is no difference based on age on how people feel after they are dumped on social media.

## Findings

We hypothesized that there would be no difference between men and women in using social media to end relationships. As stated above, 113 respondents said that they used social media to end a relationship. Table 1 presents a breakdown based on gender. Since there is no significant difference we may retain the null hypothesis that there is no difference between men and women in using social media to terminate relationships. One would have suspected that men were more likely to end a relationship through social media. However, our findings do not support that notion for our sample of the college-going Hispanic-American men and women.

*Have you used social media to terminate a relationship?*

**Table 1. Used Social Media to Terminate a Relationship**

	Yes	No	Row Totals
Men	54	85	139
Women	59	69	128
Column Totals	113	154	267 (Grand Total)

The chi-square statistic is 1.433. The  $p$ -value is .2313. This result is statistically *not* significant.

Our data do not allow us to reject null hypothesis #1. Hence, we conclude that there are no differences between men and women in their use of social media to terminate a relationship.

A smaller portion of the population (36.33%) said that someone had ended a relationship with them through social media. Table 2 presents the data. Once again, there is no significant difference between men and women having been subjected to a relation's termination through social media.

**Table 2. Have Been Dropped Through the Social Media**

	Yes	No	Row Totals
Men	45	94	139
Women	52	76	128
Column Totals	97	170	267 (Grand Total)

The chi-square statistic is 1.961. The  $p$ -value is .1614. This result is statistically *not* significant.

There is no statistically significant difference. We, therefore, retain the null hypothesis #2. Nevertheless, we have noted that a higher percentage of women (40.6%) admits having been dumped, while only 32.4% of the men admit to being dumped. This might mean that women are more willing to admit to such an experience while men may find it difficult to admit that they have been dumped. One possible explanation for the difference may be culturally rooted. Our sample

was predominately Hispanic-Americans – a culture where the male pride, *machismo*, may hinder men from admitting that they were dropped by their woman.<sup>3</sup>

With the sample divided into three age-groups, the responses to using social media to end a relationship are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Using Social Media to Terminate a Relationship**

	Yes	No	Row Totals
19 and under	64 (47%)	72	136
20-29	44 (45%)	53	97
30 and older	5 (15%)	29	34
Column Totals	113	154	267 (Grand Total)

The chi-square statistics is 12.24. The  $p$ -value is .0022. This result is significant at  $p < .01$ .

Our data clearly shows that the younger age groups use social media more often to close their relationships than the members of the older age-group. Among the youngest group, i.e., 19 years or younger, 47% said they used social media to end a relationship, 44% of the 20-29 years group had done it. Only 15 % of the 30+ used social media to abort a relationship. These differences among the millennials and Generation Y are statistically significant. Thus, unable to retain null hypothesis #3, we assume that there is a significant difference in the use of social media based on age to terminate relationships. The younger participants use it more often than the older groups.

Table 4 presents the data for Age and Being Dumped by another on social media. Due to a small sample of the 30-plus agree group, the differences are not significant. We, therefore, retain our null hypothesis #4. However, we noted that as the age increase, the percentage of being dumped decreased.

**Table 4. Been Dumped Through the Social Media**

	Yes	No	Row Totals
19 and under	55 (37%)	81	136
20-29	33 (34%)	64	97
30 and older	9 (26%)	25	34
Column Totals	97	170	267 (Grand Total)

<sup>3</sup> The situation is somewhat similar to many other male-dominated cultures where men may experience a greater degree to embarrassment in admitting that they were dumped or divorced by partners – a consideration beyond the scope of the present study.

The chi-square statistic is 2.646. The *p*-value is .266. This result is statistically *not* significant.

### Emotional Responses to Relational Termination

The participants described their emotional experiences after ending an interpersonal relationship through impersonal means such as texting and social media. The emotions expressed were grouped into three categories; light intensity emotion such as relief, avoidance, or an easy out. Medium intensity emotions included feeling bad, inadequate, or confused. The high-intensity emotion included feeling broken-hearted, angry, or guilty.

*How I felt after ending a relationship using social media.*

### Gender

Among the participants that ended a relationship using social media (113), 59 (52%) women and 54 (48%) were men. The data are presented in Table 5. Chi-square analysis does not reveal any differences between men and women about their post-termination emotional experience. We, therefore, retain the null hypothesis #5.

**Table 5. My Emotions after Terminating a Relationship**

	Light Intensity Emotions	Medium Intensity Emotions	High-Intensity Emotions	Row Totals
Men	19 (35%)	21 (39%)	14 (26%)	54
Women	17 (29%)	28 (47%)	14 (24%)	59
Column Totals	36	49	28	113

The chi-square statistic is 0.892. The *p*-value is .64. This result is statistically *not* significant.

An almost equal percentage of men and women can walk away from online termination of relationships, especially when they are the initiators. When the other party drops them, the emotional responses do differ slightly. Table 6 presents the data.



**Table 6. My Emotions After Being Dumped**

	Light Intensity Emotions	Medium Intensity Emotions	High-Intensity Emotions	Row Totals
Men	11 (24%)	16 (36%)	17 (38%)	45
Women	6 (12%)	15 (29%)	31 (59%)	52
Column Totals	18	54	35	97

The chi-square statistic is 5.64. The  $p$ -value is .0596. This result is statistically *not* significant.

The differences are not significant; hence, we retain null hypothesis #6. More scrutiny of the percentages points to differences that may have been significant with a larger sample. We refer to two trends in particular. Firstly, we notice that a larger percentage of men (24%) claim to be able to shrug off being dumped than women (12 %). Secondly, a larger percentage of women (59%) admit to having high-intensity emotions as a consequence of being dumped than men (38 %). Both observations suggest that, for men and women, it is emotionally more taxing when they are dumped than when they do the terminating.

When analyzed for Age and Emotional Responses, our sample does not display any significant differences either in the case of when the respondents ended the relationship or when it was ended by the other partner. Due to a small number of participants, i.e., fewer than 5 in each cell, in the 30 years and older group, chi-square analysis was not possible. However, Pearson's R revealed a slight inverse relationship between age and emotional responses. The calculated Pearson's R at -0.034 suggests that fewer of the older participants claim to have high-intensity emotions after ending a relationship than the younger sample members. In other words, a larger number of younger participants claimed to experience medium and high-intensity emotions. This is significant at  $p < .05$ . Hence, we may reject null hypothesis #7.

The data for the emotional responses in case of a relationship ended by the other partner allows neither chi-square analysis nor Pearson's R to render any significant differences. In the case of null hypothesis #8, our data are inconclusive.

## Discussion

Our analysis is focused on two variables: Gender and Age. Our data reveal that there is no significant difference between college-age men and women in using social media to end a relationship. It is equally common among men and women. The percentages are slightly higher for women than for men. This tendency parallels the trend of greater numbers of women initiating divorces. Nor do we find any differences in men and women being dropped from a relationship by a partner. A lower percentage of men admit to having been dropped than do women. This may be

*machismo*, in the case of our sample, or it may be in denial based on male pride in general. A larger sample and a more sophisticated battery of questions may be needed to uncover the truth.

We notice that the tendency to use social media for relationship termination is higher among people under 30 years of age than those that are in the older group. The obvious explanation is that the younger generation, having been raised on the internet and cell phones, is more comfortable with carrying out more tasks such as e-shopping, banking, taking online courses, and maintaining interpersonal relationships than the older generations.

Despite our null hypotheses, our data showed that men and women differed in their emotional responses to breakups. A larger number of women reported experiencing high-intensity emotions after breakups than did men. This was especially pronounced in the case when a relationship was ended by the other partner.

### **Limitations of the Study & Recommendations for Further Research**

Although we began with a large sample (N=267), once we filtered the sample through the items asking if they had terminated a relationship on social media, only 113 respondents said yes, i.e., analysis of emotional responses was reduced to N=113. Similarly, when asked if someone else had ended a relationship with them on social media, only 97 of the participants said yes. In hindsight, to draw any conclusions we needed a much larger sample that said yes on these two items. A similar analysis for Age and Emotional Responses also rendered insufficient cases in each cell to make any substantial assertions.

Our sample is limited to the college-age population. We believe that a wider age-range may shed more light on the use of social media in the relational context. Our study is also limited to Hispanic-American students pursuing careers in journalism and mass media. Similar studies in different cultures and with people following different career paths may render a deeper understanding of the role of culture and professions in the use of social media. Nor did the instrument ask about the duration of the relationship that was terminated. We suspect that long-term relationships with emotional investments from both partners would leave deeper emotional scars than short-term relationships. Our instrument does not allow us to differentiate if the people broke up with a member of the other sex or the same sex. As such, we have no way of knowing about the nature of the relationships – heterosexual or otherwise. We realize that ours is a pilot effort with its limitations. It has, however, provided us with directions for future studies. Thus, it was not an exercise in vain.

In conclusion, we would like to say that ever since the rise of professional and educational opportunities for women, a larger percentage of college-educated women have married, and a higher percentage of women have the financial stability to initiate divorces. This is not to suggest any inverse correlation between professional opportunities and divorce rates. We contend that greater educational and professional opportunities for women may have given them greater independence and an ability to correct their mistakes in mate selection. Nor do we prophesy that the institutions of family and marriage are outdated. We can only say that the two are undergoing a

change, and social media are playing a significant role in speeding up the change – at least for the millennials.

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