

# In Digital Age, Breaking Up May Be Even Harder to Do

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Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on May 13, 2013

Today's digital environment allows quick deletion of digital photos and emails, but the proliferation of digital possessions makes erasing a relationship a difficult proposition.

A new research study investigates how an individual can manage the digital records of an ex, across multiple devices, applications, web-services, and platforms

"People are keeping huge collections of digital possessions," said Dr. Steve Whittaker, a psychology professor at the University of California – Santa Cruz who specializes in human-computer interaction.

"There has been little exploration of the negative role of digital possessions when people want to forget aspects of their lives."

In a new paper, Whittaker and co-author Corina Sas, Ph.D., of Lancaster University, examine the challenges of digital possessions and their disposal after a romantic breakup.

Digital possessions can include photos, messages, music, and video stored across multiple devices such as computers, tablets, phones, and cameras. This digital ubiquity "creates problems during a breakup, as people 'inhabit' their digital space where photos and music constantly remind them about their prior relationship," Whittaker said.

Researchers interviewed 24 young people between the ages of 19 and 34, and found that digital possessions after a breakup are often evocative and upsetting, leading to distinct disposal strategies.

Twelve of the subjects were deleters; eight were keepers, and four others were selective disposers.

Some of the heartbroken may want to forget but are "extremely resistant to actual deletion," Whittaker and Sas found, most often the "dumpees." Others later regret disposing of everything.

Disposal is made more difficult today because "digital possessions are in vast collections spread across multiple devices, applications, web-services, and platforms," they write.

"When the relationship is good, this promotes a rich digital life. But when it sours, people have to systematically cull collections across multiple digital spaces."

Facebook photos can be untagged but not deleted if posted by someone else. "It's time-consuming and emotionally taxing because people tend to re-engage with possessions, especially photos," they noted.

Some of the initial tactics encountered: changing one's relationship status to "single," immediately unfriending or blocking an ex-partner's access to ones' profile.



Whittaker and Sas propose that software solutions might help scrub cyberspace of painful memories, for instance automatic “harvesting” using facial recognition, machine learning or entity extraction.

Or just a holding pattern until a cooler head prevails.

“A lack of disposal tools meant most participants either kept, or disposed of everything,” they said. “Keepers took longer to heal, disposers often regretted their impulsiveness.”

The authors propose a “Pandora’s Box” that could automatically scoop up all the digital artifacts of a relationship, put them in a single place for later strategic deleting or retention. Or a trusted friend could be put in the position as a gatekeeper.

Or there could be new tools for active selection from collections of digital possessions to create a “treasure chest” of valuable items that may be retained for later happy memories.

Researchers say the new digital age brings a new set of relationship-ending challenges. Comments from study participants included:

- “Deleting everything was a kind of symbolic gesture of starting fresh as well as not having to look at it again.”
- “I kept everything, including pictures, videos and messages about her. I do not look at them very often; sometimes I feel sorrow but sometimes I feel happy when I see that beautiful time.”
- “Having photos on my phone and computer did cause me to feel sad, but I immediately removed them after the breakup, in order to move on. I got rid of all the things that were common between the two of us.”
- [What hindered moving on?] Occasionally finding things that I had missed throwing out or deleting: the odd email stored in Outlook on the computer I didn’t often use or messages I missed on a social networking site I didn’t use much.”

Source: [UC Santa Cruz](#)

[Abstract of a cell phone photo by shutterstock.](#)

### **APA Reference**

Nauert PhD, R. (2013). In Digital Age, Breaking Up May Be Even Harder to Do. *Psych Central*. Retrieved on May 13, 2013, from <http://psychcentral.com/news/2013/05/13/in-digital-age-breaking-up-may-be-even-harder-to-do/54783.html>