



# Attachment style and conflict resolution skills predicting technology use in relationship dissolution



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## ABSTRACT

Differences in attachment styles and conflict resolution skills may exist for those who choose to initiate or who receive relationship dissolution mediated by technology. 304 college students ( $F = 178$ ,  $M = 126$ ) completed an online questionnaire about their demographics, relationship status, attachment styles, and conflict resolution skills. Text messaging was the most common form of technology to initiate or receive a breakup. Greater attachment anxiety predicted being the recipient of a technology-mediated dissolution. Positive attitudes towards conflict resolution predicted having initiated a breakup via technology. There were no significant differences in attachment styles or conflict resolution skills for those using text messaging to receive or initiate conflict resolution.

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, for many individuals, romantic relationships are innervated by technology. Individuals may initiate relationships using technology ranging from posting a message on an electronic bulletin board (e.g., Craigslist.org) seeking a “casual encounter” to accessing a dating website to text messaging a recently-met, potential partner to begin communication. Various forms of technology provide means for seeking romantic partners. Similarly, once relationships are formed, romantic partners use various forms of technology to maintain their relationships. Research indicates that romantic partners maintain their relationships by using email (e.g., Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008), chat/instant messaging (IM; Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Ramirez & Bronneck, 2009), text messaging (Pettigrew, 2009), and social networking sites (SNS; Tokunaga, 2011). The kinds of communication that are mediated by technology may differ in acceptability of using technology to communicate. For example, Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) found that unmarried, emerging adult romantic partners readily used technology to express affection mostly, followed by discussing serious issues, and apologizing but not for confrontational subjects or to hurt their partners. Communication of relational assurance and messages of positivity are more prevalent in electronic communication between romantic partners than with other family members (Ramirez & Bronneck, 2009). Although relationships are often initiated and maintained

via various forms of technology, little research has emerged on relationship dissolution via technology.

In general, romantic relationship dissolution is emotionally difficult for individuals. In non-marital relationships, dissolution is associated with lower levels of well-being (Simon & Barrett, 2010), lower levels of life satisfaction (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011), and lingering anger and sadness (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). In marital relationships, dissolution (i.e., divorce) may have long-term psychological and health consequences (Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011). Breaking up is a complex process that may consist of verbal and non-verbal communication and behavioral acts that indicate dissolution is imminent. Although most individuals use direct communication with the partner to indicate the breakup, strategies may include dropping subtle hints, avoiding the partner, ceasing to do favors for the partner, and keeping conversations brief (Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010). The strategy of breaking up via technology may vary by indicative of what Sprecher et al. (2010) term avoidance via distant communication, where individuals avert the emotional intensity of a break up by placing themselves distally. Breaking up via technology may not be a preferred strategy for relationship dissolution; however, research indicates that it is recognized by individuals as a potential means of breaking up (Gershon, 2010b; Sprecher et al., 2010).

Deciding to breaking up via technology may vary by individuals based on such characteristics as communication skills, tolerance of partner's emotional response, or experience with relationships. Starks (2007) noted that the emerging adults in her sample all indicated that using the Internet to dissolve a relationship was “extremely inappropriate” (p. 16). Many individuals may recognize that using technology to break up is less than ideal, but nonetheless,

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engage technology to do so or have experienced a break up via technology (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2011; Gershon, 2010a, 2010b). With the growth of mobile technologies, it is likely that dissolution via technology may be becoming more common than in the past. Additionally, given that many youth have grown up in environments where technology has been used to interact with others regularly, youth, in particular, may be more predisposed to viewing a form of technology as an acceptable means of communicating the dissolution, among other types of relationship communication.

### 1.1. Attachment style and communication

Attachment theory has emerged as a leading theory for understanding close relationships (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). The tenets of attachment theory assert that the interactions between a caregiver and his/her infant form a pattern of relating, which shapes the attachment that the infant forms as secure or insecure. The secure attachment is when the infant feels a sense of comfort, support, and responsiveness to needs from the environment, and the insecure attachment is when the infant does not feel psychological safety and security. This pattern of relating forms an “internal working model,” which is an internalized representation of intimate relationships contemporaneously and into the future (Berman & Sperling, 1994). Hazan and Shaver (1987) asserted that romantic love is an attachment process in that individuals form a psychological bond to a romantic partner paralleling the process in which an infant attaches to his/her caregiver. Some evidence indicates that the infant attachment pattern remains stable into adulthood (Fraley, 2002). Subsequently, adult romantic attachment theory has been used to understand psychological dynamics and behaviors in close relationships.

Adult attachment styles have been conceptualized as two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment anxiety is how much worry and preoccupation individuals may have about the availability and responsiveness of their romantic partner. Attachment avoidance is how much an individual is willing to be dependent upon another person and engage intimately in the relationship. Those high on this dimension eschew close relationships whereas those low on this dimension are comfortable with close, interdependent bonds between partners. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance have been linked to a variety of relationship behaviors. For example, when in disagreement with a romantic partner, attachment anxiety has been associated with greater distress and poor discussion and resolution tactics (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). In addition, attachment avoidance has been associated with greater interest in extra-couple relationships and keeping track of other relational opportunities (Miller, 2008).

A few studies have investigated how adult attachment styles may relate to behaviors and communication mediated by technology. College students who used social networking sites to communicate with parents had greater attachment anxiety than those who do not (Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman, and Nadorff, 2011). Similarly, college students who indicated using their cell phones as a key form of staying connected to their parents had a high degree of attachment anxiety with parents (Lee, Meszaros, & Colvin, 2009). Jin and Peña (2010) found that those college students in romantic relationships who were high on avoidant attachment made fewer cell phone calls to their romantic partners than those with less attachment avoidance. In addition, Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) found that those high in anxiety were more likely to feel pressured to engage in “sexting” with their romantic partners. Moreover, one study found that attachment anxiety was associated with having been the recipient of a breakup via technology (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2012). That study also indicated that less

traditional general role attitudes and greater attachment avoidance predicted greater acceptance of using technology to dissolve a relationship. Adult attachment styles may, therefore, relate to attitudes and behaviors for romantic partners communicating via technology, including relationship dissolution.

### 1.2. Conflict resolution skills

Adult attachment may relate to overall approaches to romantic relationships, but within a couple, individuals' ability to resolve conflict may be indicative of their overall success in initiating and maintaining their relationships. Conflict resolution skills may be a key indicator of successful romantic relationships (Neff & Karney, 2007). Individuals who have strong skills in resolving intra-couple conflict may increase the longevity of the relationship. However, with the innervation of technology in couples' communication, less is known about how couples use technology in resolving conflict. Research has indicated that conflict tactics may influence stability of romantic relationships in the future (Crockett & Randall, 2006). In addition, Frisby and Westerman (2010) found that use of technology or face-to-face communication for relational conflict resolution differed by the individuals' style of conflict resolution. Moreover, some research indicates that technology-mediated communication may be preferred when face-to-face communication becomes too emotionally tense (Perry & Werner-Wilson, 2011). Technology may serve as a buffer in the relationship dissolution process. Sprecher et al. (2010) noted that using technology to dissolve a relationship is a strategy of avoidance via distant communication. Individuals who use technology may be trying to avert direct, face-to-face communication and the emotional response that a breakup may entail. Because of poor abilities to resolve conflict, one romantic partner may choose to dissolve the relationship at a distance using technology. Therefore, individuals' pattern of conflict resolution may relate to the use of technology to initiate or in the receipt of dissolution. It is likely that communication via technology may be preferred for those who would like to avoid conflict in the relationship and who have poorer abilities to resolve conflict.

### 1.3. The present study

The present study was designed to investigate relationship dissolution using technology as related to attachment style and conflict resolution skills. First, we wanted to investigate what kind of technology is used to deliver or receive a breakup. A relatively small sample in a previous study indicated that level of attachment anxiety may relate to being the recipient of a technology-mediated dissolution, we hypothesized that we would find the same but that attachment anxiety would not relate to initiating a breakup with technology. Furthermore, given that avoidant attachment indicates a lack of investment and commitment to relationships, we hypothesize that level of avoidant attachment would relate to initiating a breakup via technology but not being the recipient of a breakup via technology. When it comes to conflict resolution skills, we hypothesize that conflict avoidance will associate with both receiving and initiating a breakup via technology.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedure

Participants enrolled in human development, child development, and family studies courses from two public state universities were directed to a link to an online survey via a message on the course's learning management software. Participants received

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