

'How' often is more important than 'why' when describing breakups

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Maybe rocker Greg Kihn was being prophetic in his 1981 hit, "The Breakup Song," with its chorus, "They don't write 'em like that anymore." An Indiana University professor's new paper looks at how people write to break up today, including through texts, emails and social media.

According to a new [research article](#) by Ilana Gershon, associate professor of communication and culture in IU's College of Arts and Sciences, part of what makes the breakup stories she collected into American stories is that the medium seems so important to the message when breaking off relationships.

"It wasn't until after I had collected many breakup stories that I realized my students had told me something quite revealing that would come up time and time again. ... American undergraduates focus on the 'how' of a breakup when describing their breakups, not the 'why' or the 'who,'" Gershon said.

Her paper, "Everytime We Type Goodbye: Heartbreak American Style," published in the journal *Anthropology Now*, discusses how the narratives of breakups in the United States differ from those in other countries.

Gershon also is the author of the 2010 book, "The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media" (Cornell University Press), which argued that Facebook and other forms of [social networking](#) have radically changed the playing field of dating today.

She interviewed 72 people at length for her paper, including 66 undergraduate college students who communicate frequently with new technologies. She found that when American college students tell their breakup stories, they consist of a string of conversations, and people always describe when anyone switched media to continue the conversations.

"The medium used for the conversation mattered enough to be almost always mentioned," Gershon said. "People would invariably mark when a different medium was used, explaining when communication shifted from [voicemail](#) to texting to Facebook and then to phone."

Her results differ from other [ethnographic research](#) done elsewhere, such as in Japan and Britain, where the story often focuses on justifying why the relationship had to end. Character was the emphasis overseas, not the method.

"The American undergraduates I interviewed were not discussing their breakups in terms of the right balance of dependence, or even the kind of people who might break up," Gershon added.

"The closest an interviewee came to describing herself as a particular type of person was a woman who decided not to show anyone else the text breakup message her ex had sent her. Even this example shows that U.S. [undergraduates](#) were using the 'how' of the breakup as the narrative frame to explore what an end of the relationship might mean for them."

In many cases, the young people Gershon interviewed were looking for validation that it had been a bad breakup and the medium was crucial evidence.

In the paper, Gershon cited one example of a breakup done through a text message. "Rebecca" wanted to talk on the phone with her former

boyfriend to have what she considered a "proper ending to the relationship."

"As in most of the narratives I collected, the 'how' of the breakup was the central focus of Rebecca's story," Gershon said. "This 'how' stood in for other questions that haunted Rebecca as well—namely why her ex-boyfriend decided to break off the relationship.

"Rebecca and others did not focus on the 'why' of the breakup or the 'who' of the breakup, although this course would come up in the [narratives](#) as secondary themes," she said. "By focusing on the 'how,' she was able to avoid these often unanswerable questions—unanswerable questions like why the breakup had happened in the first place and who really was to blame."

Provided by Indiana University

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