

What happens to a couple's digital life after break up?

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Credit: Thinkstock

During a romantic relationship, a couple is likely to create, accumulate and share many digital possessions such as videos, photos, chat histories, and shared accounts like Netflix. These digital possessions can cue

precious memories, but if the relationship ends these possessions don't just disappear, they need to be dealt with in some way.

Daniel Herron is the first joint PhD student between Scotland's University of Dundee and UTS. He is investigating how these memory cues are dealt with by people after they experience a break up, separation or divorce.

"Creating digital possessions as part of a relationship is entirely commonplace compared to 10 years ago. People often find it very difficult to work out what to do with these digital possessions that they have generated after a breakup, due to the many opportunities for reminiscence created by exploring these digital possessions," said Herron.

Herron aims to generate improved methods of interaction that support individuals in dealing with their digital possessions after a break up.

"Much meaning can be carried by these digital possessions and by designing effective ways of dealing with them, we can aid people in finding closure after a break up by providing them with opportunities to confront and curate these possessions in some way.

"I am coming to understand the importance of digital possessions in relation to memories of past partners, as well as the importance of forgetting as well as remembering in the context of a relationship ending."

Herron said that while people's attitudes towards digital possessions can change over time, they are not always simply positive or negative. Some digital possessions are considered "tainted", where their mere association with an ex-partner can stain otherwise positive memories.

"One participant spoke to us about a set of very meaningful photographs taken on a trip he went on with his ex-partner. The participant felt that he could not share those photographs with his current partner, despite how meaningful they were to him, telling us that 'the history [of the past relationship] is manifest in the fact that she's present in the pictures... that whole section of my life is something I have not shared with my current partner for that reason.'"

Herron works in the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design within the University of Dundee. He is jointly supervised by Dr Wendy Moncur from the University of Dundee and UTS professor Elise van den Hoven.

Moncur worked closely with van den Hoven as part of the Key Technology Partnership Visiting Fellow program in 2014. They continue to collaborate on research and publications.

Moncur is a Visiting Scholar at UTS, and is involved in van den Hoven's research program, [Materialising Memories](#). Materialising Memories follows a people-centred design process studying how dedicated physical devices with embedded technology can support a wide variety of remembering activities. For example, how personal memory media, such as digital photos, are used in everyday situations to remember, how to improve reliving of personal memories, but also how to support people who experience memory challenges, such as people living with dementia.

Van den Hoven is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the University of Dundee, where she is involved in Moncur's Living Digital group which undertakes interdisciplinary research that focuses on designing socio-digital technologies to support being human in a digital age.

"Participation in the KTP program has been an excellent springboard to successful collaboration between Elise and I," said Moncur. "Along with

the joint PhD, it represents concrete outcomes that are part of a bigger picture of strategic engagement between our universities, involving excellent researchers at UTS and Dundee with an appetite for international partnership."

"It is definitely building up long-lasting international collaborations," said van den Hoven. "Our latest news is that we have just been awarded a highly competitive Microsoft Research PhD scholarship, which will support another UTS/Dundee joint PhD student, and will directly involve Microsoft Research UK in a supervisory role too."

Herron has so far visited UTS twice through his studentship, giving him the opportunity to connect with other higher degree research and joint PhD students, especially through the Materialising Memories team that includes students undertaking research as part of the joint PhD program between UTS and Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands.

"The best advice I could give to anyone looking to undertake a joint PhD is to take advantage of the opportunity as much as possible; having access to the support and resources of two institutions has been invaluable," he said.

"It has also given me the opportunity to travel and connect with other research communities beyond those I would be able to connect with in the UK or Australia alone. My experience of the international research community has been nothing but positive, and I have already made connections with academics and other students that have enriched my studies enormously."

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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