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John A Banas
Jayson L Dibble
Elena Bessarabova
Michelle Drouin

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Simmering on the Back Burner or Playing with Fire? Examining the Consequences of Back-Burner Digital Communication Among Ex-Partners

John A. Banas, PhD,1,i Jayson L. Dibble, PhD,2 Elena Bessarabova, PhD,1 and Michelle Drouin, PhD3,ii

Abstract

Back burners are people with whom one communicates to potentially establish a future romantic or sexual relationship, and these relationships are common among college students. Using a sample of noncollege adults currently in committed relationships (N = 246) obtained via Amazon’s MTurk, this study examines how a prior relationship role with a desired back burner (i.e., whether a back burner was an ex-partner or not) affects digital communication and sexual activity with back burners, and participants’ negative affect. Sequential mediation analysis revealed that when the most-desired back burner was also an ex-partner (vs. not), participants digitally communicated more, increased communication was positively related to sexual activity with that back burner, and sexual activity was associated with negative affect in the participant. Even in the absence of sexual activity, both increased digital communication and simply having an ex-partner as one’s most-desired back burner were associated with negative affect. Limitations and implications for staying in touch with ex-partners are discussed.

Keywords: back burners, relationship communication, interpersonal communication, relationship alternatives

Despite traditional linear trajectories of romantic relationships, which imply that breakups are the end of a relationship,2 many people continue to communicate with ex-partners.4 Such communication can facilitate a variety of new relationship configurations, including friendships3 and postdissolution romantic relationships.4 Exes also may become back burners: potential romantic and/or sexual partners who are kept metaphorically “simmering on a back burner” while one maintains a primary relationship or remains single.5,6 Advances in communication technology, especially the prevalence of smartphones and social networking applications, facilitate back-burner interaction in an unprecedented manner. In a recent study, 73 percent of a college sample reporting at least one back-burner relationship.7 Digital communication affords easy access to one’s back burners. Because college students commonly use computer-mediated communication (CMC) channels, it is not surprising that they report regular digital communication with back burners.7 Noncollege-aged adults may not be as digitally savvy as younger people, but they too spend a great deal of time online, including social media. More than 81 percent of American adults reported going online on a daily basis, with nearly one in three claiming to be online almost constantly,5 and at least 69 percent of U.S. adults reported using Facebook.5,9 Thus, even older (noncollege) adults are likely to use digital channels to communicate with back burners.

The consequences of back-burner communication are largely understudied. There is a dearth of research on how past relational experience with a back burner is associated with frequency of communication and subsequent outcomes, especially potential negative outcomes. Prior research found back burners do not affect commitment to one’s current relationship,5 but perhaps having ex-partners as back burners may be a larger threat than other back burners, as they have a sexual and/or romantic precedent. Furthermore, back-burner research has focused on the effects of back burners in general, whereas specific kinds of back-burner relationships (i.e., an ex-partner back burner) may affect relationships differently. Our study investigates how a prior relationship role with one’s most-desired back burner relates to digital communication among ex-partners.
communication, sexual activity, and negative affect for noncollege adults who are currently in committed romantic relationships.

Communicating with Ex-Partner Back Burners

Many people (40–67 percent) report maintaining communication with their ex-partner. Notably, a main motivation for doing so is unresolved romantic desires. As mentioned, two defining features of back burners are romantic/sexual attraction and communication. For people who keep in touch with an ex-partner for reasons of continued attraction, it is reasonable that these people would consider their ex to be a back burner.

Although people tend to experience more jealousy toward new rivals than toward ex-partners, exes may pose a greater threat to a current relationship. The prior existence of a relationship establishes an implicit precedent between ex-partners, which can make either partner appear available for future sexual contact. In addition, the relationship model of sexual desire predicts that after a breakup, ex-partners often feel intense sexual desire despite no longer being in a relationship. This is known as a “fiery limbo.” Feelings of sexual desire for ex-partners can be stronger after the breakup than when the relationship was ongoing. Moreover, people who communicated with their ex-partners (vs. those who did not) reported more romantic feelings for their ex and, if they had entered a new committed relationship, reported lower commitment to their current partner.

These patterns indicate that prior romantic/sexual contact creates a platform for desiring and expecting future romance/sex with an ex-partner, and communicating with an ex coincides with attraction to the ex. However, communicating with an ex-partner may be deleterious to a current relationship as even in the absence of sex, the interaction may be perceived as a betrayal of the current romantic partner, consequently generating negative feelings on behalf of the admirer.

Back-Burner Communication with an Ex is Likely to End Poorly

Back-burner communication with an ex may ultimately lead to negative affect on the part of the admirer. One reason is that CMC may lead to sexual activity. Communicating with ex-partner back burners may communicatively create fiery limbo, tempting admirers to move beyond mere communication and engage in sexual activity with their back burner. The connection between CMC and sex is not surprising: social media helps facilitate sexual flirtation (as well as other behaviors related to infidelity). Infidelity should result in negative affect.

Aside from sexual activity, merely communicating digitally with a back burner while in a committed relationship could be problematic. Discovery by one’s current partner could lead to conflict or relationship dissolution. Admirers who engage in CMC may have guilt associated with concealing their back-burner communications from the current partner. How communicating with relationship alternatives affects the perpetrator is an understudied topic. We attempt to extend this line of research by examining the effects of back-burner communication on the feelings of the admirer.

Hypotheses

Because of sexual precedence and fiery limbo, there should be increased interest to communicate with back burners who are exes compared with back burners who are not. As a result, we predict more digital communication with back burners who are ex-partners than with back burners who are not ex-partners (H1). By definition, back burners involve an admirer who desires the alternative romantically and/or sexually, and who communicates with that alternative. Although the messaging may take a platonic form, the act of communicating is driven by the admirer’s romantic/sexual desires to keep the “embers” glowing. Being fueled by romantic/sexual desire, increased communication with a most-desired back burner should correspond with greater physical sexual activity. As a result, we predict that the more one communicates with their most-desired back burner, the more likely they are to engage in physical sexual activity with that back burner (H2). Digital communication with relationship alternatives while already in a committed relationship might be perceived, at least by the committed partner, as a form of online infidelity. Online infidelity can erode trust, increase conflict, and even lead to relationship dissolution. Because partners would disapprove of this communication, and the admirer is aware of this, we would expect admirers to feel negatively even if they are simply communicating with back burners and not having sex with them. Thus, we hypothesize a positive relationship between frequency of CMC with one’s most-desired back burner and negative affect (H3). Similar negative affect should result if people go beyond communication and engage in sexual behaviors outside of their primary relationship. Physical sexual activity with an extrarelational partner is infidelity, and infidelity is related to psychological distress.

We propose a positive relationship between frequency of sexual activity with one’s most-desired back burner and negative affect (H4).

Taken together, our exploratory study hypotheses suggest sequential mediation between back-burner role relationships and negative affect, in which two possible sequences are proposed: (a) role relationship (ex-partner vs. not) → frequency of CMC with the desired back burner → negative affect and (b) role relationship (ex-partner vs. not) → frequency of CMC with the desired back burner → sexual activity with the desired back burner → negative affect. To explore these mediational relationships, we ask: Which variables mediate the relationship between the role relationships and negative affect (RQ)?

Method

Participants

After removing surveys with incoherent answers to open-ended questions, an initial sample of 397 adults, who reported being in a committed romantic relationship (relationship length: $M = 7.02$, $SD = 8.28$ years), was obtained through Amazon’s MTurk. Most participants (62.0 percent) reported having at least one back burner ($Md = 2.00$, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 10.13$). The three categories that represented ex-partners comprised 50.0 percent ($n = 123$) of all participants with at least one back burner. Half of the participants’ most desirable back burners were ex-partners. Predictions
were tested with those who reported being in a relationship with at least one back burner. In the final sample (N = 246; 65.9 percent male; age: M = 35.27, SD = 10.71, range: 21–69), 52.8 percent of participants were white, 30.9 percent African American, 9.8 percent Hispanic, 4.5 percent Asian, 69.7 percent mixed race, and one participant did not fit into provided categories. Most reported being married (85.4 percent), and 93.1 percent considered their relationship/marriage exclusive.

Procedure and measures
Participants completed a 30-minute online IRB-approved survey hosted on Qualtrics and received U.S. $1 for participation.

Most-desired back burner. Participants viewed the following definition used by prior research:

Back burners are people we are romantically and/or sexually interested in, who we’re not currently committed to, and with whom we keep in contact in the possibility that we might someday connect romantically and/or sexually. People can have back burners whether or not they’re already in a committed romantic relationship with someone else. Back burners can also take different forms. For example, back burners could be former romantic/sexual partners or current sexual partners, provided we’re not committed to them, we still desire them romantically and/or sexually, and that this desire is one of the reasons we keep in touch with them. Finally, we may end up getting together with some of our back burners, while we may never get together with others.

After reading the definition, participants indicated how many people they currently considered to be back burners and identified one back burner as most desirable. All dependent measures were completed with regard to the most desirable back burner. Unless noted otherwise, Likert-type scales (in which higher numbers indicated greater magnitude) were used throughout.

Role relationship with most-desired back burner. Participants selected the one label that best described their most desirable back burner: ex-committed relationship partner with whom I also had a sexual relationship, ex-committed partner with whom I never had a sexual relationship, ex-sexual relationship partner, friend with benefits, current crush, best friend, friend, minor acquaintance, or someone I’ve met a few times, someone I know only online, and mainly a stranger. These categories were then collapsed to create two main groups: Exes as back burners (i.e., ex-committed relationship partner with whom I also had a sexual relationship, ex-committed partner with whom I never had a sexual relationship, ex-sexual relationship partner, friend with benefits, current crush, best friend, friend, minor acquaintance, someone I’ve met a few times, someone I know only online, and mainly a stranger). These categories were then collapsed to create two main groups: Exes as back burners (i.e., ex-committed relationship partner with whom I also had a sexual relationship, ex-committed partner with whom I never had a sexual relationship, ex-sexual relationship partner, friend with benefits, current crush, best friend, friend, minor acquaintance, someone I’ve met a few times, someone I know only online, and mainly a stranger). These categories were then collapsed to create two main groups: Exes as back burners (i.e., ex-committed relationship partner with whom I also had a sexual relationship, ex-committed partner with whom I never had a sexual relationship, ex-sexual relationship partner, friend with benefits, current crush, best friend, friend, minor acquaintance, someone I’ve met a few times, someone I know only online, and mainly a stranger) and nonexes as back burners (all the remaining categories, Table 1).

Frequency of CMC with most-desired back burner. Participants reported the frequency (0 = never, 5 = multiple times per day) with which they communicated with their most-desired current back burner using the following channels: Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Signal, a dating app (e.g., Tinder), Facebook/Messenger, Twitter, LinkedIn, e-mail (other than that associated with the above sites), or videoconferencing (e.g., Zoom). These 10 items were combined to form a single index of CMC with back burner.

Current sexual activity with most-desired back burner. Participants were asked: “Including sexual/romantic activity in all its forms (e.g., kissing, groping, making out,
oral sex, sexual intercourse), how often do you engage in sexual activity with your most desirable back burner (0 = never, 6 = more than once a day)?"

Negative affect. Negative affect was captured using the 11-item negative affect subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (e.g., afraid, distressed, nervous), asking participants to indicate the “extent you feel this way after communicating with your most desired back burner.”

Sociosexual orientation. To control for sexually permissive attitudes toward and desires for casual sex, while staying mindful of survey length, we measured sociosexual orientation using the six items from the attitude and desire sections of the Revised Sociosexual Orientation Scale (e.g., “Sex without love is okay,” “I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying ‘casual’ sex with different partners”). Removing the scale’s reverse-scored item yielded a five-item measure with improved reliability.

Results

Table 2 lists means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and zero-order correlations for the study variables. Hypotheses were tested using PROCESS 3.00 (model 6). Communication with back burners, as well as extrarelational sex, likely relates to a person’s general permissiveness toward casual sex. The hypothesized relationships could likewise be affected by factors such as age (back burners may be more common among younger individuals) and the longevity of the current relationship (longer relationships signal increased investment and dampen the attractiveness of relationship alternatives). Therefore, sociosexual orientation, participant’s age, and current relationship duration were used as covariates. Role relationship with back burner was entered as the independent variable, frequency of CMC, and sexual activity with the desired back burner as sequential mediators, and negative affect as the dependent variable. The direct effect between role relationship and negative affect was significant, $0.17, SE = 0.08, 95\% CI (0.02–0.32)$, and so were two indirect effects: role relationship $\rightarrow$ frequency of CMC with the desired back burner $\rightarrow$ negative affect, $0.12, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI (0.01–0.24)$, and role relationship $\rightarrow$ frequency of CMC with the desired back burner $\rightarrow$ sexual activity with the desired back burner $\rightarrow$ negative affect, $0.02, SE = 0.02, 95\% CI (0.02–0.06)$. The results (Table 3 and Fig. 1) indicated that when the back burner was an ex-partner, participants reported significantly more frequent CMC, supporting H1; in turn, an increase in communication was significantly associated with greater sexual activity, supporting H2; and finally, both mediators were significantly related to increased negative affect, supporting H3–4. The RQ was answered by two significant indirect effects reported above, which we discuss further below.

Discussion

The study results extend previous research on back burners by examining how one’s prior relationship to the most desired back burner affects digital communication, sexual

| Table 3. Unstandardized Coefficients for the Mediation Model |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Antecedent                                    | Coef. | SE  | p     | Coef. | SE  | p     | Coef. | SE  | p     | Coef. | SE  | p     |
| X (BB role relationship: non-ex-partner vs. ex-partner) | 0.25  | 0.12 | 0.20 | 0.04  | 0.08 | 0.08  | 0.02  | 0.01 | 0.44  | 0.04  | 0.04 | 0.01  |
| M (frequency of CMC with desired BB)           |       |     |      |       |     |      |       |     |      |       |     |      |
|      | 0.20 | 0.06 | <0.001 | 0.08 | 0.01 | 0.16  | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.36  | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01  |
| M (sexual activity with desired BB)            |       |     |      |       |     |      |       |     |      |       |     |      |
|      | 0.16 | 0.10 | 0.17  | 0.09 | 0.01 | 0.19  | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.35  | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.01  |
| Y (negative affect)                            |       |     |      |       |     |      |       |     |      |       |     |      |
|      | 1.32 | 0.20 | <0.001 | 0.64 | 0.12 | 0.35  | 0.13 | 0.13 | 0.35  | 0.13 | 0.13 | 0.35  |
behaviors, and negative affect among noncollege adults currently in romantic relationships. Our results corroborate that back burners are commonplace in the modern romantic landscape, and back-burner communication in a noncollege sample was as prevalent as among college students. Most participants reported digital communication with at least one back burner even though they were already in committed relationships.

The present study examined how prior role relationship with one’s most desired back burner affects the communication process, focusing on two previously unexplored outcomes: sexual activity with a back burner and negative affect of the admirer. We suspected that having an ex-partner as one’s most desired back burner would pose a greater risk for potential harm. Our data bore this out, both in terms of threatening an existing relationship in the form of extrarelational sexual activity and also in terms of self-harm to the admirer in the form of negative affect. Furthermore, digital communication played a key mediating role in all relationships between variables, highlighting the importance of CMC for modern relationships.

When one’s most desirable back burner was an ex-partner, there was a higher frequency of CMC with that back burner, and the higher frequency of communication corresponded with greater sexual activity. Both paths suggest ex-partners represent a kind of back burner for whom the fiery limbo smolders, and these relationships are consistent with the relationship model of sexual desire. These associations held even after controlling for attitudes toward casual sex, age, and relationship longevity, which indicates that the nature of an ex-partner and the act of communicating themselves may contribute to maintaining sexual feelings toward that back burner.

The relationship between frequency of digital communication and sexual activity with one’s back burner highlights the importance of CMC in contemporary modern relationships, both as a means to stay in contact with others and as a potential relationship threat. The participants in this study reported using a wide range of social networking and digital communication technologies to stay connected with their most desired back burner. As CMC increased, so did sexual activity, and this finding extends earlier work on back-burner relationships, which largely presumed little to no sexual activity with back burners.

The results of our study also illuminate the negative affective consequences of digital back-burner communication. Even in the absence of sexual activity, participants reported that the greater the negative affect the more they communicated digitally with their back burner. Back-burner communication, by definition, has romantic/sexual desire as a motive. We examined how admirers feel after engaging in back-burner communication, and our data indicate that for those who are already in a committed relationship, communicating with back burners incurs intrapersonal costs producing negative affect. For ex-partner back burners, digital communication may also bring past problems into the present. Compared with non-ex-partner back burners, having a back burner as an ex may invite rumination about the former relationship, activating negative memories. For example, exes may remind participants of the reasons the relationship ended in the first place (e.g., “I had forgotten how Bob doesn’t support my goals”).

Whether digital back-burner communication constitutes infidelity might not always be obvious, but actual sexual activity is less ambiguous. As such, it is not surprising that sexual activity was associated with negative affect. Extrarelational sex is infidelity and so, perpetrators would likely feel guilt or shame. Sexual activity outside the relationship likely necessitates concealment, and the secrecy itself may likewise contribute to negative intrapersonal well-being.

Interestingly, although we did not advance a prediction, the direct path between role relationship and negative affect was significant. This may suggest that merely the selection of one’s ex as the most desired back burner is recognized as a potential problem for the primary relationship, perhaps signaling a lack of closure. Having an ex as a back burner is sufficient to cause negative feelings, even without factoring in communication or sexual activity.

Limitations and Conclusion

The cross-sectional nature of the data is a limitation. Back-burner communication is complex and takes place over time through various verbal and nonverbal messages and channels. We provided a snapshot of a complicated process. Time ordering, necessary for causal inferences, is not possible. Also, we utilized an older noncollege sample of people in committed relationships. Furthermore, they were recruited through MTurk, so they were experienced survey takers. Hence, the results may be specific to the population sampled.

The current research extends both what is known about keeping in touch with ex-partners and back-burner relationships. Having back burners in general is common, and back burners do not have to be former romantic partners, but the current data suggest many nonetheless are. If having ex-partner back burners cascades into increased...
communication, increased sexual activity, and bad feelings for the admirer, then those in committed relationships might wish to exercise greater caution before forming a back-burner relationship with an ex-partner. Those who would keep in touch with ex-partners, particularly those who long for exes out of fear of being single may end up merely replacing those fears with other negative feelings.

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Address correspondence to:
Dr. John A. Banas
Department of Communication
University of Oklahoma
610 Elm Avenue
Norman, OK 73019
USA
E-mail: jbanas@ou.edu