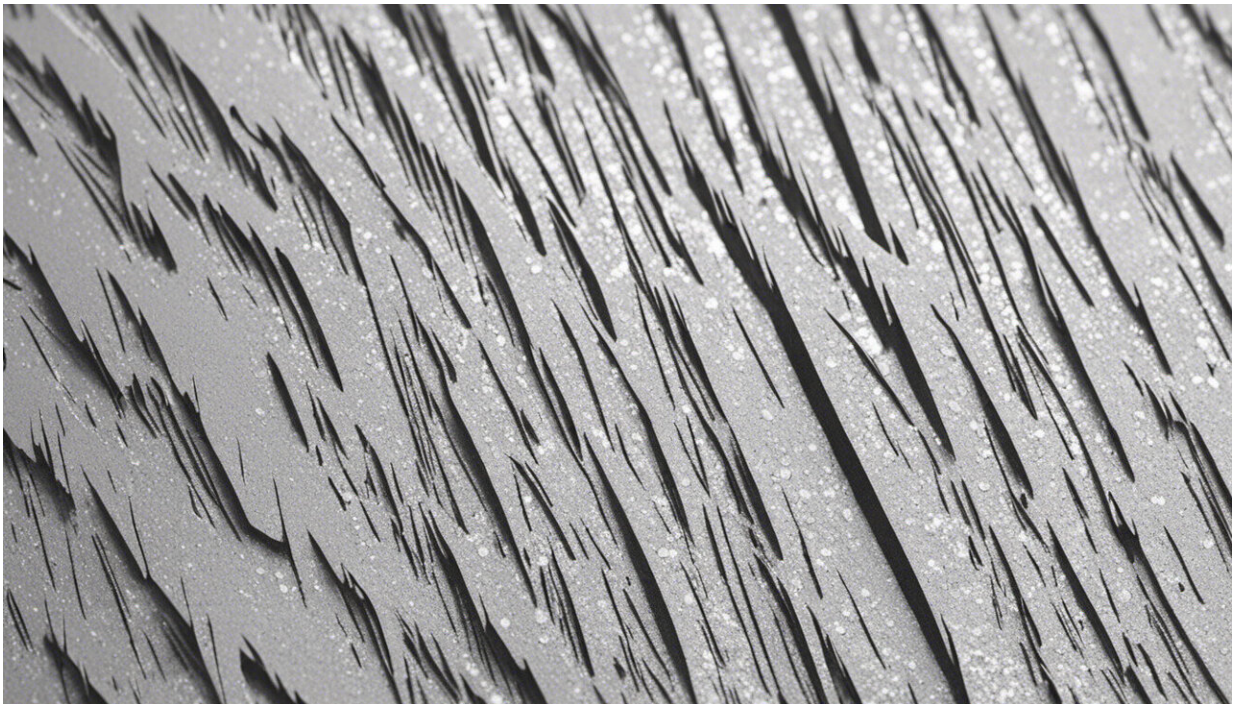


# 'Back-burner relationships' are more common than you'd think

February 9 2018, by Jayson Dibble And Michelle Drouin

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Valentine's Day tends to make people think about their romantic relationships.

Single? Maybe there's someone you've been texting regularly whom you realize you want to ask out on a date.

In a [relationship](#)? You might start thinking that your current flame is your one and only.

But no matter what your [relationship status](#) is, if you're like the average young adult, chances are you've also been chatting with other potential partners, or back burners. These aren't [people](#) you're cheating on your partner with. Instead, they're prospects you keep in touch with just in case your number one option falls through.

Shocked? You shouldn't be. Researchers [have long known](#) that people commonly keep tabs on the availability and suitability of other potential partners. But what once required a furtive phone call or some face-to-face catching up is now doable with the swipe or a click of a digital device.

Smartphones have made it possible for both singles and those in [committed relationships](#) to keep up with relationship alternatives – so easy, in fact, that [more than 70 percent of our sample](#) said that they had at least one back burner.

## **Research inspired by 'me-search'**

In our study of [college students](#), singles averaged about six back burners, while those in committed relationships averaged almost five. What's more, people [seem to be able to distinguish back burners](#) from other options – for example, crushes we're quietly attracted to, but don't act on.

In other words, these prospects we regularly stay in touch with are in their own separate category.

It's certainly not a new phenomenon. What we call back burners were once the people listed in one's proverbial "[little black book](#)."

But researchers have only recently begun to study their prevalence and how they operate within the context of other relationships.

In our case, the experiences of Jayson inspired the study. As a graduate student, he was single and happy to mingle.

It happened at a typical campus hot spot – he met a woman, they hit it off, and they traded phone numbers. And every couple of weeks or so, a text message from one to the other would be exchanged: "Hey, stranger, how are you?"

The idea wasn't to dive into a full-blown romance, but to fan an ember, to keep a faint glow, because – as comedian Chris Rock [famously said](#) – "You never know."

So the study of back burners was born. And it came at a time when scholars were already taking note of new ways people were navigating romantic and sexual relationships. (Consider, for example, the way that "hookups" and "friends with benefits" have become part of the mainstream vernacular.)

## **Keeping your options open**

Our research suggests that many people keep back burners even when they're already committed to someone else.

But does having lots of back burners mean we feel less committed to our romantic partners? [One relationship theory](#) suggests that commitment is determined, in part, by the quality of one's romantic alternatives.

With this in mind, we predicted before gathering the data that the more back burners someone has, the less committed they should be to their partner.

Surprisingly, the number of back burners people reported did *not* predict how committed they were to their partners. We can't infer how committed people are just by knowing how many back burners they may or may not have.

What might this mean? Of course, this is only one study, so more research is needed to determine how reliable this finding is.

But we have some theories. For example, back-burner relationships today are easier to hide and sustain. Facebook friends lists can be hidden, phone contacts can be given different names, and direct messages can be deleted. Contrast this to older forms of communication, like the family landline telephone.

Similarly, we wonder if smartphones create a situation where people are able to separate their online communication from their offline lives.

[Some evidence](#) already suggests that the contours of face-to-face interactions/relationships don't always apply to online communication. Maybe texting with back burners over a mobile phone creates a layer of distance that allows the admirer to still maintain a strong, devoted relationship with his or her partner.

## **Do they mean a doomed relationship?**

One obvious question we haven't addressed yet is whether back burners are harmful to relationships. You might think that if someone's excited about or thinking about other [potential partners](#), the relationship he or she is in isn't great to begin with.

We don't have a firm answer to this question yet. We know that the practice of keeping an eye on alternatives [is common](#) (and probably [a part of human evolution](#)). So it's hard to condemn the behavior at that

level.

But people don't always communicate with their alternatives. For a person to be a back burner, communication is necessary. So maybe this ups the ante. Our research showed that people in general [don't tell](#) their partners about their back burners, which suggests that they may feel some uneasiness about getting caught.

At the same time, we found that the number of back burners people communicate with electronically says nothing about how committed they are to their current [partner](#).

We also need to keep in mind our sample: college students. We don't know how this plays out in, say, older married couples. Anecdotally, we've heard married individuals talk about a person or two whom they would probably end up with if their spouse died. But this hasn't been tested in a scientific setting.

So maybe it's still too early to sound the alarm until research can tell us more. Still, it would be interesting to know the point at which those with back burners decide to turn up the heat, how they use digital devices to do it, and what it means for our current relationships.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 'Back-burner relationships' are more common than you'd think (2018, February 9) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-02-back-burner-relationships-common-you.html>

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