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Perceptions of Long Distance Relationships

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Title of Study: Perceptions of Long-Distance Romantic Relationships

Abstract

In an era of technological innovation, individuals are more likely than ever to participate in long-distance romantic relationships. Previous research indicates that technology plays an important role in the maintenance of LDRRs, yet young adults seem to have a negative predisposition toward the prospect of being in an LDRR themselves despite their prevalence. A mixed-method online survey distributed to 311 undergraduate students revealed that strong indicators of attitude toward LDRRs are based on observations, opinions of others, past experiences, and TV shows/movies. Ultimately, these responses indicate that a predisposition toward LDRRs does exist, yet most young adults continue to engage in them regardless. The study also suggests a series of recommendations for future research: specifically focusing on the relationship dynamic of LDRRs during COVID-19 and in the LGBTQ+ communities.

Introduction

Defining a long-distance romantic relationship (LDRR) is rather complex as individuals have their definitions of what constitutes a long-distance relationship (Suwinyattichaiporn et al., 2017). Whether an LDRR is defined by the number of miles in between individuals or the amount of face-to-face interaction, LDRRs are often independently maintained by the couple. There can be several reasons why a couple may be forced to take their relationship long-distance. Glotzer (2007) states that one's profession is a strong motivator and that some people commute because they believe it will bring long-term benefits or improve their quality of life. Because of this, more communicative behaviors may be necessary to maintain the relationship. Compared to geographically close relationships, LDRRs are consistently engaging in video calling, voice calling, and texting (Holtzman et al., 2021). One study found that while geographically close people communicate online more often than those that live further away, self-disclosure is

typically higher between couples in an LDRR (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). However, another study suggests that LDRRs engage in more frequent technology usage (Holtzman et al., 2021). This gap presents a need for research to explore the discrepancy between how technology is used to mediate LDRRs. Despite the prevalence of technology, LDRRs seem to have recently prompted partner idealization, relational uncertainty, and jealousy (Suwinyattichaiorn et al., 2017). The existence of technology, therefore, is not properly mitigating the negative effects of LDRRs. According to a study of female college students in LDRRs, results showed that it takes ‘certain individuals’ to make long-distance work (Firmin et al., 2013), suggesting a negative stigma associated with LDRRs. This research aims to examine this stigma further to determine whether it exists and, if so, where it originates from. In addition, this research will explore how different technology impacts relationship maintenance, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Long-distance romantic relationships (LDRR)

For this study, LDRRs are best described using Ellis & Ledbetter (2015)’s two defining characteristics: “separation by greater distance than for traditional local romantic relationships and communicative behaviors that maintain the relationship across distance” (p. 569). Distance is subjective and can be based on a variety of factors such as age, travel restrictions, or even expectations based on previous experience. Either way, a different dynamic is required to maintain the success of these relationships.

LDRRs report higher levels of relationship adjustment and level of dedication (Kelmer et al., 2013). When individuals are geographically far from each other, it often requires a higher

level of commitment and adjustments on the part of both individuals. Because of these adjustments, relational turbulence may occur (Ellis & Ledbetter, 2015). This may include loneliness, jealousy, anxiety, decreased satisfaction, etc. A study focusing on the lives of 16 sophomore women revealed that loneliness dynamics in particular play a role in LDRRs. For example, the women tended to feel lonelier after seeing their boyfriend, around holidays, when friends go on dates, during “bad” days, seeing other happy couples on campus, or during “lull” times (Firmin et al., 2014). These women eventually reflected that loneliness tended to decrease when they were busy or hanging out with friends, but coping strategies were necessary in either case (Firmin et al., 2014). Such coping strategies included correctly interpreting a partner’s tone through text, working harder to communicate, and committing to an extra level of work (Firmin et al., 2013).

While a multitude of research has been done on the effect LDRRs can have on relationship satisfaction as well as how communication methods can be used to maintain them, it seems that research still has not been able to explain why individuals are increasingly becoming more hesitant to explore a long-distance connection. Ultimately, a stigma that is deterring individuals from pursuing a long-distance relationship appears to exist. We attempt to explore this topic further with the following research question:

RQ₁: What factors into young adults’ perceptions and attitudes toward long-distance relationships?

Use of technology to maintain LDRRs

Emergent technologies are changing how interpersonal relationship initiation functions (LeFebvre, 2018). Dating apps are revolutionizing the way young adults navigate the dating scene and their other relationships. As a result, media is important when it comes to relationship maintenance, no matter the distance (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). While a study by Dainton & Aylor (2002) found that those with more face-to-face interaction used more maintenance and experienced greater satisfaction than those with no face-to-face interaction, a recent study conducted on college students revealed that technology-mediated communication is negatively associated with relational closeness and relational satisfaction (Wang et al., 2019). Overall, there are some discrepancies between sources on whether technology plays a positive or negative role in the maintenance of long-distance relationships, further emphasizing that future research is necessary to suggest more specificity.

Without access to face-to-face communication, LDRRs must participate in certain communication constructs to handle the distance (Ellis & Ledbetter, 2015). Some couples enhance their nonverbal communication, by using digital stickers, emojis, and gifs, and interpreting facial expressions during a video chat (Wijayanti, 2021). One study demonstrated that individuals in an LDRR did not share tasks and assurance as much, leading to higher levels of distrust (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). The COVID-19 pandemic also changed the dynamics for many couples, especially those that may not have been long-distance before. Couples also had to navigate each other's schedules so as not to disturb their partner (Wijayanti, 2021).

Ultimately, previous research has examined the effects of technology and how it is used to maintain relationships across a distance. Whether these effects are positive or negative, however, has been skewed. For the most part, LDRRs are finding ways to navigate these differences through nonverbal communication and the novelties technology affords. Yet, there is still a level

of distrust and dissatisfaction that stigmatizes long-distance relationships. Therefore, another research question was posed:

RQ₂: How is technology involved in predispositions of long-distance relationships?

Methods

Participants

The sample was composed of 311 undergraduate students enrolled in a large Midwestern university. Sixty-three percent ($n = 198$) of the participants were female, 34% were male, and 3% self-identified as nonbinary or third gender. A majority (73%, $n = 227$) identified as Caucasian, followed by African American (13%, $n = 42$), and Asian (7%, $n = 23$). Approximately 89% of participants were between 18 and 22 years old ($n = 263$) while the remaining 11% were 23 years old or above. The median age was 20 years. The largest percentage of participants classified as freshmen (31%, $n = 98$), followed by juniors (29%, $n = 92$), sophomores (21%, $n = 67$), and seniors (18%, $n = 55$). Most participants identified as straight (73%, $n = 227$), followed by bisexual (13%, $n = 42$), and homosexual (4%, $n = 13$).

Upon approval from the university's institutional review board, approximately 30 individuals were recruited for a pilot study conducted to test the survey questions and readability of the study. This survey was online for a month before being edited, re-submitted to the IRB, and published as a full study. After providing consent, all participants were asked to complete a mixed-methods online survey that included a combination of multiple-choice, Likert, scale, sliding, rating, and open-ended questions aimed at revealing the existence and/or source of certain perceptions and stigmas associated with long-distance relationships. The questions asked

participants to describe the nature of their current relationship as it compares to their ideal relationship as well as the use and effect of technology and COVID-19 on their relationship (if it had any effect at all).

Data were collected through an online survey on Qualtrics, a data collection site on the School of Communication's SONA research platform. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be college students and 18 years or older. This survey yielded SONA credit that could be applied to work/assignments for class.

The study was open over the course of approximately 10 months and yielded data from 326 participants. Several respondents were removed due to age restrictions, or they did not consent to participate, bringing the number of valid participants down to 311. The results report was a total of 165 single-spaced pages, which were scanned by the researchers to determine the best course of analysis. While the current study was mixed methods, the researchers decided to focus on qualitative responses due to time constraints surrounding the defense of the project as a thesis. One of the co-investigators, an undergraduate student, went through each open-ended question and open-coded the data for overarching themes. The current study implemented intercoder reliability, so the principal and other co-investigator looked over the raw qualitative data as well. Overall, the most important themes reinforced the quantitative results in the sense that there were three major indicators of attitudes toward LDRRs: desire for physical intimacy, observations and past experiences, and TV shows/movies.

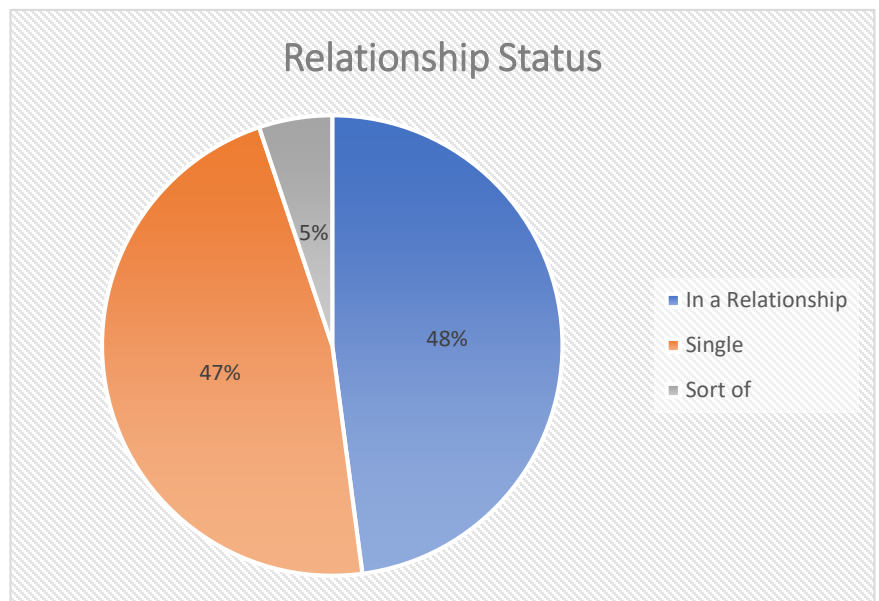
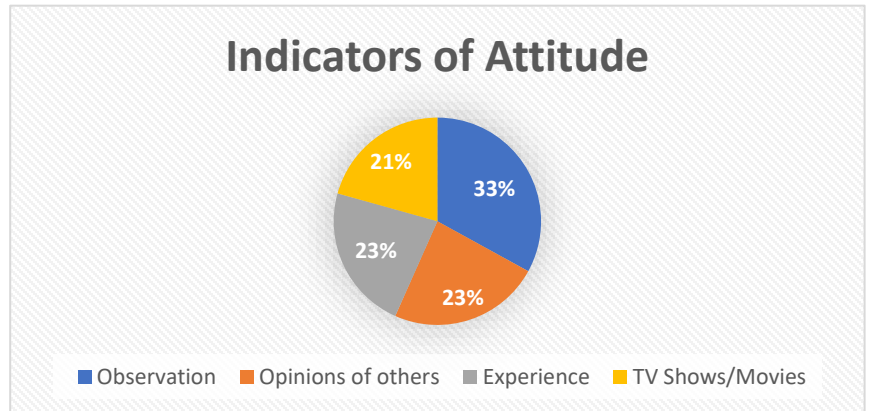
Results

Quantitative

The strongest indicator of attitudes toward LDRRs was based on observation, followed by opinions of others, experience, and TV shows/movies. Forty-eight percent of participants

stated that they were in a relationship, while 47% were not, and 5% answered “sort of,” and explained in more depth. Most often, participants who chose “sort of” were in a friends-with-benefits situation in which labels had not yet been placed on the relationship. Out of those that identified as being in a relationship, 25% of them were currently in a long-distance relationship (50 miles apart or more), and 18% were partially long-distance. When asked to

compare current relationship status to an ideal, 0 participants saw long-distance relationships as ideal, while 90% saw geographically close relationships as ideal. On a similar note, 96% saw monogamy as ideal in a romantic relationship. In relationship maintenance, texting was the most used app, followed by Snapchat, FaceTime, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.



Qualitative

When asked to explain why they have a certain opinion about long-distance relationships, participants had responses that fell along the lines of 3 major themes: (1) physical intimacy, (2) personal experience, and (3) TV and movies.

Physical Intimacy

Many individuals expressed the importance of physical touch in a romantic relationship, stating that the lack thereof made it difficult to feel connected with their partner. For example, one participant shared that they “don't feel very loved without [physical touch] ... romantic relationships without intimacy confuse me. Just be friends, what's even the point of dating?” Another respondent suggested that being apart strains intimacy since it seems to require more work.

In [these] times away from each other, y'all will have to contend with conflicting schedules and a severe lack of physical intimacy that you could easily gain in your new place.... It's draining to try to consistently make the time to see and connect with each other when you're in completely opposite places.

Some individuals showed self-reflexivity in the sense that they recognized their breaking points in a romantic relationship. For example, this response reads: “Personally, I don't feel like I am the type of person who would thrive in a long-distance relationship. I naturally put a heavy value on quality time and feel that actions mean more than words ever could.” Ultimately, young adults find intimacy to be incredibly important in the maintenance of any romantic relationship, so much so that it places significant strain on LDRRs.

Observations/Personal Experience

The strongest indicator of attitudes toward LDRRs came from observations and personal experience. Typically, respondents who indicated that their opinions of LDRRs were based on personal experience or observation either reflected on the experience positively or negatively. For example, one participant reflected: "I used to be skeptical of long-distance relationships, but my best friend has been in one for 2 years now, and they seem more committed and stable than a lot of other non-long-distance relationships I've witnessed." This comment suggests that while LDRRs are notoriously difficult, witnessing one that is successful and maintained well can have an impact on perceptions. The same, however, can be said for the opposite side of the spectrum. One participant shared this negative observation:

I've known a lot of people to try to be in long-distance relationships and they 9 times out of 10 fail. I think "distance makes the heart grow fonder" is BS. How can you grow with someone you don't even see on a regular basis? Just like in the movies, one of the partners cheats or falls for someone else they spend a lot of time with. Or, they just lose feelings because they are not seeing their partner often enough to even remember why they're together.

Witnessing a low track record of success can also impact young adults' opinions of LDRRs and, consequently, the chances of them ever trying one out or recommending the prospect to another. Another response hinted at culture and technology's role in their perceptions.

I just don't think I trust people enough to stay faithful should they be hours away. The contemporary dating scene is abysmal: with technology and hookup culture, people have seemingly unlimited options to choose from. I think I worry that if I can't even snag a partner in my area, how am I gonna keep a partner that lives far away?

References to the “abysmal” dating scene and “hookup culture” are both phrases this young adult used to make sense of LDRRs, which exemplifies another potential source of stigma.

TV Shows/Movies

The last participant mentioned the movies in their response, which was not uncommon among other respondents. For the current study, movies, and TV are lumped into the category of media, specifically how young adults have been conditioned to perceive certain relationships. One respondent summed up their situation well by drawing from previous experience and the media.

TV and movies make it seem like long-distance is either completely impossible or very easy to do. There usually aren't any realistic representations. I was in a relationship before college that ended because my boyfriend at the time felt he would be too busy to communicate with me if we were long-distance. I have a couple of friends who are in/have been in long-distance relationships, each with different outcomes... I have watched both of the same friends go through their relationships, and seen the different levels of effort and communication from each of their partners. The ones who put effort in and communicated are still in a healthy, committed relationship. The ones who did not put the same effort are no longer together.

The media, like observations, often frame LDRRs as a duality between ease and complexity. In other words, LDRRs either look simple or catastrophic on the big screen, without necessarily placing much consideration on what kind of behaviors make a long-distance relationship work.

One respondent went in-depth on how their experience with the media led to an attempt at an LDRR.

With any TV shows or movies, viewers are conditioned to believe everything that happens is reality, even if it isn't. Though I may have wanted a long-term relationship because of a cute long-distance couple on a TV show or movie, I ended up realizing that it is much harder than it seemed. With my many past experiences, I have found it hard to make a relationship from long-distance actually last.

This participant's expectations for a relationship did not necessarily match the reality, which was largely a result of media influence.

Discussion

The current study aimed to identify the existence of a stigma associated with LDRRs as well as the role of technology in the maintenance of these relationships. Results showed that none of the participants considered an LDRR to be an ideal relationship, yet 43% of the 46% who identified as being in a relationship were fully long-distance (50 miles or farther) or partially long-distance. This indicates that young adults view LDRRs negatively, yet still engage in them. Qualitative data suggest that the source of negative perceptions is largely from observations of other couples and personal experience with a failed LDRR, but also from TV shows, movies, and a lack of physical intimacy. All these sources reinforced the idea that there is an opposition between those that feel LDRRs are successful and those who believe they are doomed to fail, and that this stigma is a common consideration for young adults before engaging in an LDRR.

In addition, most participants saw a geographically close relationship as ideal. While this perception is common, it raises some additional questions about why individuals partake in an LDRR in the first place if it is not their preferred situation. Future research should investigate

reasons why young adults are in relationships that they seem to view as less desirable than geographically close relationships.

Overall, there were several limitations to this study. The sample should have required participants to be college students between 18 and 35 years old to get a more accurate reading of the population. In addition, the survey was published on Western Michigan University's SONA research platform, which meant that most participants were from WMU's School of Communication. While this did include a variety of different students from the introductory COM 1000 course, many students still identified as Communication students. Most participants identified as Caucasian and heterosexual, making this study largely homogenous. Future research should focus on LGBTQ+ relationships and how their perceptions of LDRRs and the maintenance of these relationships may differ from the heteronormative standard. The survey format contained certain open-ended questions placed back-to-back may have prompted respondent fatigue. For example, the open-ended question "Whether you are in a relationship or not, what is your opinion of long-distance relationships?" was followed up with another question asking, "Why did you answer the previous question the way you did?" which did result in very interesting results from most, but also prompted some unhelpful responses as well. Lastly, the study was broad and covered all sorts of topics that were not necessarily specific to the topic or research questions. Future research should focus on the importance of sexual intimacy in LDRRs, specifically on how sex is maintained across a distance and how significantly it affects perceptions of LDRRs. The idea of love language and physical intimacy was brought up as an indicator of attitude toward LDRRs, suggesting that it has an impact on perceptions. Another topic worthy of future inquiry is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on LDRRs. Due to

timeliness and the new technology innovations that occurred because of COVID, this would be a topic worth digging into.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the source of negative perceptions is largely from observations, but also from TV shows, movies, and a lack of physical intimacy. All these sources reinforce the duality between those that feel LDRRs are successful and those who believe they are doomed to fail by default. This stigma is a common consideration for young adults before engaging in an LDRR, especially in an era of technology. However, technology may not be improving the ease of maintaining LDRRs as much as we think. Either way, many young adults are still choosing what is not ideal, which goes to show the true complexity of what has become LDRRs.

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