Bridging the Distance: Effective Communication and Honesty Among College Students in Romantic Long-Distance Relationships

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how college students in long-distance romantic relationships maintain honesty and effective communication. Stress is a prevalent aspect for students in such relationships, and this research aimed to provide a deeper understanding of their experiences. Data from 7 participants were collected through structured interviews, analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing key themes of visits, communication, honesty, and conflicts. Visitation depended on mutual convenience, while communication in long-distance relationships had both advantages and disadvantages. Honesty emerged as a trust-building factor, enhancing communication. Future research could delve into the impact of academic stress on long-distance relationships and include a larger sample for a comprehensive study.

Keywords: Long distance relationship, Honesty, Communication, Conflicts, Visits.

Long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs), characterized by significant geographical separation between partners, have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. These relationships pose unique challenges, especially for college students who may find it difficult to regularly meet their significant others due to different geographic locations. Despite the hurdles, LDRRs are widespread, encompassing individuals at various relationship stages, from newly established couples to married ones. Research indicates that 25 to 50% of college students are currently involved in LDRs, while approximately 75% have experienced such relationships in the past (Stafford and Reske, 1990; Stafford, 2006). The motivations for engaging in LDRRs range from educational pursuits to job requirements and family crises. The importance of romantic relationships in the lives of college students, coupled with the pursuit of education, often leads individuals to opt for long-distance relationships (Roscoe, 1987). However, LDRRs are not without their challenges. Couples face obstacles such as limited time spent together, a lack of physical closeness, and an inability to fully engage in each other's daily activities (Mietzner and Lin, 2005). The drawbacks, including high financial costs and the absence of physical intimacy, contribute to heightened stress, jealousy, and potential dishonesty within LDRRs.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) provides a framework for understanding the tensions inherent in relationships, emphasizing the continuous negotiation of conflicting needs and desires (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Communication, as a meaning-making process, plays a central role in managing these conflicts. Additionally, conflict management styles, as outlined by Kilmann and Thomas (1977), offer insights into how individuals address conflicting interests. Styles range from competing and compromising

to avoiding, accommodating, and collaborating, each reflecting different degrees of concern for self and others.

Idealization, the tendency to perceive a partner or relationship in overly positive terms, is another aspect explored in LDRRs (Stafford and Merolla, 2007). The concept suggests that increased contact over time should diminish idealization, while "blocked" communication may help maintain it (Schulman, 1974). However, the challenges and constraints faced by long-distance couples, whether internal (psychological) or external (structural), may impact their ability to communicate effectively. Deception is a common challenge in romantic relationships, and LDRRs are no exception. Buller and Burgoon (1996) identify three methods of deception—falsification, concealment, and equivocation—used in interpersonal relationships. In LDRs, partner separation can intensify feelings of doubt and mistrust, potentially leading to jealousy and false perceptions (Mietzner & Lin, 2005).

This study aims to delve into the communication patterns of college students in LDRRs, exploring the duration, frequency, and medium of their interactions while examining the prevalence of honesty in their relationships. Despite the advent of constant communication, the research acknowledges that individuals may still engage in various forms of deception. Additionally, the study seeks to understand how academic commitments impact LDRRs, considering the documented negative effects on academic achievement and perceived academic difficulties associated with such relationships (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; English et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the exploration of long-distance romantic relationships among college students unveils a complex interplay of communication dynamics, conflict management, idealization, and deception. Understanding the challenges faced by individuals in LDRRs is crucial for developing strategies to enhance the quality of these relationships and mitigate potential negative impacts, particularly on academic performance. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on LDRRs, shedding light on the intricacies of these relationships and informing interventions to support individuals navigating the challenges of love across distances.

Review Of Literature

Jin and Peña (2010) conducted a survey on 197 college students to explore the relationships between mobile phone use, attachment types, love, commitment, and relational ambiguity. The study found that increased mobile voice call usage with a romantic partner was associated with less relational uncertainty, more love, and commitment. However, participants with higher avoidance tendencies used phone calls less frequently. Text messaging did not yield significant results. Overall, the research suggested that stronger relationships were correlated with increased cell phone calls in romantic partnerships. Bui (2020) focused on 133 students, comparing computer-mediated communication tools' usage between romantic long-distance (LDR) and geographically close (GCR) partners. LDR partners utilized these tools more frequently. Social media-based relationship maintenance was linked to relationship uncertainty.

Pistole et al. (2010) investigated long-distance (LDR) and geographically close (GCR) romantic relationships, examining attachment, maintenance behaviors, and stress in 473 participants. LDR partners used relational continuity constructional units to address attachment issues. Relationship maintenance behaviors (RMBs) predicted relationship satisfaction, which, in turn, mediated the relationship between RMBs and individual well-being. In a study done by Hart et al. (2014), attitudes toward benevolent deception in romantic relationships were explored, finding that individuals were more tolerant of telling benevolent lies than receiving them. Men were more receptive to benevolent deception than women.

Dainton & Aylor (2001) investigated uncertainty, jealousy, maintenance, and trust in long-distance and geographically close relationships, revealing complex relationships between these factors.

Horan and Booth-Butterfield (2013) studied deceptive displays of affection in romantic relationships, identifying that individuals used nonverbal indicators to convey misleading affection. Henderson et al. (2021) examined deception in long-distance relationships, finding no significant influence of communication frequency or relationship duration on deception frequency. Cole (2001) explored deception in romantic relationships, finding associations with information sharing, avoiding punishment, and attachment beliefs. Deception was linked to lower commitment and happiness, with people relying more on deceit to regain autonomy in less committed relationships. Farrell (2009) investigated communication constraints in long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs), identifying internal and external constraints managed individually or collaboratively. Copeland (2021) explored dialectical tensions in long-distance relationships, emphasizing their dual impact on well-being. Yang (2016) investigated conflict navigation in long-distance intercultural couples, highlighting the challenges of physical distance over cultural differences.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to investigate effective communication and honesty maintenance in college students engaged in romantic long-distance relationships (LDRs). The objectives included understanding barriers and challenges in LDRs, exploring perceptions of honesty in such relationships, and gaining insights into conflict resolution strategies. Thematic analysis was employed as the research design, allowing flexibility in identifying patterns within the data. Purposive sampling was used to select seven participants aged 18-25, involved in LDRs for more than 10 months with partners in different cities. Inclusion criteria specified the duration of the relationship, while exclusion criteria focused on relationship duration and both partners being out of education. Data collection involved initial screenings, detailed explanations, and structured interviews conducted via Zoom and in-person meetings. Ethical considerations prioritized participant consent, convenience, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase technique, providing a systematic framework for understanding recurring patterns and emerging concepts within the dataset. Overall, the study aimed to contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of communication, honesty, and conflict resolution in romantic LDRs among college students.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 Global, organizing, and basic themes

Global Themes	Organizing themes	Basic Themes/Codes
1. Visits	1.1. Availability 1.2 Convenience	1.1.1. Holidays 1.2.1. Distance
2. Communication	2.1 Advantages 2.2 Challenges	2.1.1. Reduces misunderstandings 2.1.2. Honesty 2.2.1. Time 2.2.2. Gauge reactions 2.2.3. Forgetfulness

Global Themes	Organizing themes	Basic Themes/Codes
1. Visits	1.1. Availability 1.2 Convenience	1.1.1. Holidays 1.2.1. Distance
3. Honesty	3.1. Importance	3.1.1. Builds foundation 3.1.2. Trust 3.1.3. Communication
4. Conflicts	4.1 Causes 1.2 Resolution	4.1.1. Distance 4.1.2. Lack of communication 4.1.3. Texting 4.2.1. Immediate 4.2.2. Taking time

Analysis of themes

1. Visits

An essential part of maintaining long distance romantic relationships is visiting one another. Participants believe that spending quality time together during visits helps in rekindling the emotional connection, reducing feelings of loneliness, and creating memorable experiences. They describe missing a partner as painful and stressful, particularly in situations where they have no other support system. Almost all participants state that visitations depend on availability and convenience of both individuals.

1.1. Availability. As this study is focused on college students in LDRRs, visits were majorly dependent on the availability of the one pursuing their education. The couples were able to meet based on academic schedules and major school breaks as there is less flexibility to break from school as compared to work. In Farrell's (2009) study that was conducted on 27 participants, it was found that school had a significant impact on whether or not visits took place. Some participants could only see each other during academic breaks because it was more challenging to take time off from school as can be done with work.

"We get to meet each other in about two or three months, which is everytime I get a break from college that is long enough to go back to my hometown."

1.2. Convenience. The second sub theme that emerged from the global theme of visits was convenience, where participants' meeting each other was contingent on practicality and functionality. The participants stated that they based their meetings depending on whom it was more convenient for to travel. The participants stated that when deciding on where to meet, they especially looked into whom it was more convenient for to travel.

"At first it was easier for him to travel, since he has his own car, so he would come over. But now it's more convenient for me to go to him since he has his own place and car. There is more privacy and comfort for us at his place."

2. Communication

Effective communication can go a long way, even more so in long distance romantic relationships. It has long been believed that relationship satisfaction and communication are positively linked. When going through the initial codes gathered during data analysis, the major sub themes that emerged were advantages

and challenges of communication in LDRRs. Couples that participated in Zebua & Kartikawati (2023)'s study on LDR communication patterns in maintaining commitments through social media, claimed that when communication is not as smooth as it should be, conflicts arise. Couples who don't communicate well are more likely to have arguments. In LDRRs, effective interpersonal communication is essential for the survival of the relationship and the resolution of any conflicts or issues that may surface.

2.1. Advantages. Effective communication in LDRRs leads to a reduced possibility of misunderstandings and miscommunications. Participants observed that when communication in the relationship is efficacious, it is easier to trust and believe their partner. They also stated that proper communication results in increased honesty between partners about day to day activities. According to Naz (2020), participants of the study stated that conflict resolution and relationship maintenance require open communication. They emphasized that having conversations regarding the ordinary and "sweet nothings" is acceptable because communication in itself is what counts.

"When you're staying far away from your partner, communication is all you have and I feel like the more you communicate, the more you are honest with them, which leads to less fights. You both know where the other person stands in the relationship."

2.2. Challenges. When asked about difficulties the participants faced with regard to communication in LDRRs, four sub themes came into view. One of the most common challenges participants faced with communication was the unexpected changes in the schedule of the partner. Almost all participants reported difficulty in finding mutual timings to get on phone calls or video chats. Due to differences in schedules and time differences, in case of couples living in countries, they often found it difficult to properly communicate with their partners. While participants of Hillard's (2017) study valued having an easy-to-use communication tool that enabled them to talk honestly, and communicate with their partner all day long, they also stated that challenges with certain communication modalities were brought on by a lack of verbal and nonverbal indicators and interactions, technological issues, and finding time to communicate between hectic schedules and different time zones.

"One major thing that is difficult is our timings and schedules. Sometimes I'm not free when she's free or she's not free when I am."

Participants stated that the ability to understand their partner's reaction gets hindered when communication is limited to phone calls or text messages. In case of important news or conflicts, the participants mentioned that they preferred getting on video calls to communicate. Video calls are essential as they help comprehend their partner's affect and reaction more accurately by getting a view of their nonverbal cues, expressions and tone of voice. The participants chose video calling since it gave them the ability to observe their partners more accurately (Naz, 2020). For couples in LDRRs, reliance on video calls is heavy as it is the closest they get to seeing each other and when this option is unavailable, it causes a lot of strain on the relationship.

"If it's something important, I try to get on video call with him so I can see his reaction or at least see his face while I'm talking. Since we can't meet and talk, I like to at least get on a video call. If we can't get on call at that moment or if I have to wait to talk, I feel really restless and impatient until we do."

"So if there is a conflict we try to solve it.. Solve it over video call rather than text because with text you dont understand the tone and what they mean or where they are coming from. But if it's urgent we have to do it over a phone call."

Oftentimes, because LDR couples spend most of their time apart and have to wait for long periods of time to finally speak to each other, they have a tendency to forget several things that they wanted to share.

When they finally do get a chance to speak, they may end up missing out on a lot of things they meant to share with their partner. Participants reported being honest with their partners 98% of the time except when they forgot to mention certain events that happened. Individuals said they felt pressured to tell their partner everything they planned over the phone. Unfortunately, if phone conversations do not happen frequently, they might not be able to recall anything (Farrell, 2009).

3. Honesty

Honesty is another important aspect of long distance romantic relationships. It has been found to be interconnected with other themes like communication and conflicts. Participants mentioned that honesty facilitated love and understanding in a relationship. Along with communication, honesty forms the very basis of a romantic relationship.

3.1. Importance. When talking about honesty in a relationship, participants mentioned that it was a necessary element on which the foundation of a relationship is built and accelerates its growth. LDRs already come with very limited means of communication, so when you take honesty out of the equation, maintaining the relationship becomes extremely strenuous. Participants mentioned that due to the lack of physical proximity, words of their partners were all they could rely on. This is where honesty and trust come into play. Without honesty it becomes difficult to trust and rely on one another.

"Honesty is the most important thing in a relationship but honesty is also about blind faith. It's all about taking a leap of faith for that person, you trust them no matter what and be there for them."

4. Conflicts

As said by Knapp & Vangelisti (2005), "conflict is neither good nor bad" but the way people choose to participate with each other in conflict will determine whether the outcome is positive or negative for the relationship and the individual. From the analysis that was conducted, two major sub themes emerged within this theme and they were causes of conflicts in the relationship and how the participants chose to resolve them.

4.1. Causes. After coding all the data, it was observed that there were three main causes of conflicts in long distance romantic relationships. The participants stated that the distance itself was often a cause for conflicts in their relationships. As the participants have to spend long periods of time apart, being unable to meet and see each other, it can lead to a lot of frustration. This frustration of not being able to see each other whenever they want, like couples in geographically close romantic relationships, ends up being a cause of conflict. More than the frustration being directed at their partners, it was seen to be directed at the circumstances that kept them apart. In a study conducted by Farrell (2009), it was found that the participants saw the distance in their relationship as intrinsically debilitating and that they had a tendency to either ignore the distance altogether or view the conflicts as stemming from the distance and therefore impenetrable.

"And I feel like most of our conflicts are also aggravated because of the distance and not being able to meet each other for so long."

From Naz's (2020) study done on 10 Filipino couples in LDRRs, it was found that one of the causes of conflict repeated among the participants was failure to communicate with each other. In this study as well, a lack of communication has been identified as another factor that contributes to the origination of conflicts. Communication is seen as a way to verify things as well as resolve any kind of

misunderstandings that may have come up. Therefore when there is a deficit of the same, it will inevitably lead to needless conflicts. As said by one of the participants:

"It's much easier to communicate rather than leave it for the other person to guess and think and overthink, and then just lead to unnecessary fights."

Texting, a common cause of conflict in long-distance relationships (LDRs), serves as a practical but potentially superficial form of communication for couples to stay connected throughout the day. The limited verbal and nonverbal cues exchanged in text conversations may hinder discussions about relationship states or other significant issues, leading to idealization and skewed perceptions of the relationship (Hillard, 2017). While technology, including texting, facilitates communication, Dansie (2012) notes that it can result in misunderstandings and reduced intimacy compared to phone calls or video chats. Difficulty discerning tones in text messages often leads to misinterpretations, and individuals may modify message content to avoid arguments, contributing to less effective expression of thoughts and feelings (Dansie, 2012). Mediated communication, primarily through text messages in LDRs, obscures true meanings, adding strain to the relationship (Farrell, 2009).

"And even the emotions are not well heard or said on text because you don't really understand the tone or actual meaning of what they are trying to say. The same thing if I talk about when I'm with him, it is so different. And then I always wonder why has he changed with me after I've come back or why is he so different when we are apart. Because that is a constant comparison."

4.2. Resolution. When it comes to how the participants choose to resolve their conflicts, two major sub themes emerged. A majority of the participants stated that they preferred to resolve conflicts only after taking time and space to think about it. Having tried and tested other methods of problem solving, these participants found that taking a minute to think and then react had proven to be a more functional way of resolving conflicts as compared to others.

"Initially when we would have fights, we wouldn't talk about it properly and end up fighting even more. But now we take a minute, talk about it, understand and only then react. So if there's a conflict we usually talk about it and then sort it out."

The other half of the participants preferred to resolve conflicts in their relationship as soon as they came up. They believe it is better to talk things out immediately rather than simmer in your thoughts and frustrations as that makes it difficult to be genuine and authentic with each other. In a study conducted by Yang (2016), most interviewees preferred to cut right to the chase, even if they were aware that their partner would not be pleased to hear what they had to say. Respondents who chose this mode of communication, expressed the belief that being dishonest would wear them out and that being truthful was more essential. Rather than brushing the issues off, they are determined to find a solution.

"Whenever we have a fight or argument, we talk things out then and there because if we leave it alone it feels very fake. How can we talk normally with each other when the issue hasn't been resolved yet. It feels very forced and fake."

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate effective communication and honesty maintenance among college students in romantic long-distance relationships (LDRs). Thematic analysis was conducted on in-depth interviews, revealing key themes such as communication, honesty, visits, and conflicts within these relationships. Participants highlighted the centrality of communication, emphasizing the importance of regular, transparent, and meaningful interactions, with video calls being preferred for better understanding.

Honesty emerged as a foundational pillar, fostering trust and reducing misunderstandings. Visits were seen as essential for rekindling emotional connections, reducing loneliness, and creating memorable experiences, albeit dependent on participants' availability. Conflicts were acknowledged as inherent in LDRs, often revolving around distance and communication issues. Effective resolution strategies included immediate conflict resolution or taking time and space for thoughtful consideration. The findings provide valuable insights into the experiences of college students in long-distance relationships, emphasizing the inevitability of conflicts and the crucial role of communication, trust, and honesty in fostering successful and enduring connections across distances. These results encourage individuals in similar relationships to prioritize these elements and guide professionals in offering tailored support to couples navigating the challenges of long-distance relationships.

Limitations

- As the number of participants in the study were less and did not fulfill all the characteristics of the population, the results cannot be generalized.
- As the questions used for data collection are not standardized, the validity of the findings can be questioned.

Implications

- Investigating the theme of conflicts revealed the different conflict resolution strategies that college students in long-distance relationships employ. This study shows us that the two main ways college students prefer to resolve conflicts is immediately or taking time and then resolving the problem. This information can also help individuals in similar situations learn from the experiences of others.
- Exploring communication in romantic LDRs uncover the role of technology and its effects on relationships. It also identifies the struggles people in romantic LDRs face with regard to communication. While the use of phone and video calls and text messaging help sustain LDRs, they come with their set of limitations that may end up doing more harm than good.
- The findings from this study can have practical implications for college students in long-distance relationships. Insights into effective communication strategies and maintaining honesty can provide guidance for those navigating similar situations.

Suggestions for Further Research

For researchers who may conduct future research on the topic of college students in romantic long distance relationships, it would be advisable to focus more on the influence academics have in the relationship. Delving deeper into the academic aspect will help researchers get a broader understanding of the different factors that may determine maintenance of LDRs. Future researchers should also consider taking an equal number of male and female participants to understand if gender differences exist and identify them.

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