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The experiences of individuals in maintaining a long-distance relationship through social media

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the dynamics of long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) in the digital age. Long-distance relationships (LDRs) have emerged as a testament to the enduring strength of human affection in the face of spatial constraints. However, the dynamics of LDRs in the digital era present a diverse array of emotions, obstacles, and coping mechanisms. The purpose of this study is to understand the distinctive experiences of how social media has had a positive influence on the communication and relationship satisfaction between partners who have experienced long distance. The research, conducted through qualitative methods, involved 8 college students, predominantly females, offering insights into their experiences in current LDRs. Through semi-structured interviews with eight participants aged 18 to 24 in LDRRs, themes emerged regarding social media usage, coping strategies for emotional challenges, insecurities and communication, and the influence of family environments. The theme underscores how digital tools serve as essential resources for maintaining emotional intimacy and strengthening the relationship despite the challenges of distance. It also highlights the importance of familial support, privacy management, and individual resilience in sustaining intimate connections across geographical distances. The findings reveal that social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram are integral to communication in LDRRs, with participants emphasising the importance of voice and video calls for maintaining intimacy. Coping with emotional challenges, including insecurities and feelings of disconnection, involves active communication, transparency, reassurance, and planning activities together. Family environments play a significant role in shaping communication dynamics, with participants navigating constraints on privacy and openness based on familial support or constraints. Overall, this study underscores the vital role of social media in sustaining emotional intimacy and connection in LDRRs. Understanding how individuals utilise social media and cope with challenges can inform interventions to support healthy, fulfilling relationships in the digital age.

Keywords: Long-distance relationships (LDRs); Social media; Communication; Coping strategies

1. Introduction

In an age characterised by widespread digital connectivity influencing all aspects of human interaction, the dynamics of romantic relationships have experienced significant changes (3). Traditional methods of bridging physical distance with loved ones have evolved over the years. Instead, platforms like social media, messaging apps, and video conferencing have bridged geographical gaps, allowing individuals to establish and maintain meaningful connections regardless of physical distance. Long-distance relationships (LDRs) have emerged as a testament to the enduring strength of human affection in the face of spatial constraints. The experiences of individuals involved in sustaining LDRs through social media present a diverse array of emotions, obstacles, and coping mechanisms.

Traditionally, long-distance relationships were fraught with logistical challenges and communication limitations (11). Correspondence via letters, telegraphs, and sporadic phone calls were the main methods of staying connected, often

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resulting in prolonged periods of separation-induced distress and uncertainty. However, the internet and social media platforms brought about a fundamental shift in this landscape. Suddenly, couples could communicate instantly, share moments through photos and videos, and maintain a sense of intimacy despite being physically apart. Despite the numerous advantages offered by social media, navigating a long-distance relationship in the digital age presents its own set of challenges (10). The pervasive nature of social media can inadvertently magnify these negative emotions, as partners may feel compelled to compare their relationship to the curated portrayals of romantic bliss showcased by others online. In this paper, various domains related to long distance relationship have been studied:

1.1. Themes

Relationship Satisfaction: Relationship satisfaction serves as a crucial indicator of the health and longevity of romantic partnerships. It encompasses the degree to which individuals feel fulfilled, content, and valued within their relationships. While numerous factors contribute to relationship satisfaction, the role of social media in shaping these perceptions has garnered considerable attention in contemporary research. Understanding how social media usage influences relationship satisfaction can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of modern romantic partnerships.

Social Media Usage: The widespread adoption of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of interpersonal communication and interaction. From Facebook and Instagram to Twitter and Snapchat, individuals have unprecedented access to connect with others, share experiences, and engage in virtual social networks. However, the manner in which individuals utilise social media within the context of their romantic relationships can vary significantly. Some may use it as a tool for bonding, while others may encounter challenges related to jealousy, surveillance, or excessive comparison with others.

Strategies Used: In navigating the complexities of maintaining a relationship through social media, individuals employ a range of strategies aimed at fostering intimacy, trust, and connection. These strategies may include regular communication, sharing meaningful content, expressing affection publicly, and using social media as a platform for relationship maintenance activities. Conversely, individuals may also engage in behaviours that inadvertently undermine the quality of their relationships, such as excessive monitoring, privacy invasion, or engaging in online flirtation.

Relationship Maintenance Behaviour: Relationship maintenance behaviours encompass the actions individuals undertake to sustain and strengthen their romantic partnerships over time. In the context of social media, these behaviours may manifest through activities such as sending supportive messages, posting affectionate content, tagging each other in shared experiences, and engaging in virtual activities together. Understanding the role of social media in facilitating or hindering these maintenance behaviours is essential for comprehending its overall impact on relationship satisfaction.

Relationship Hindrance Behaviour: Conversely, relationship hindrance behaviours represent actions that impede or disrupt the quality of romantic relationships. In the digital age, social media can serve as a breeding ground for such behaviours, including jealousy-inducing activities, secretive online interactions, and excessive monitoring of partners' online activities. Identifying these hindrance behaviours and their relationship to social media usage is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate their detrimental effects on relationship satisfaction and overall well-being.

Through analysing these domains and examining the intricate interplay between social media usage, relationship satisfaction, maintenance behaviours, and hindrances provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of modern romantic relationships. By understanding how individuals navigate and negotiate these digital landscapes, researchers and practitioners can develop interventions and strategies to promote healthy, fulfilling relationships in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

Kuske conducted a study to understand the role of social media in the maintenance of Long-Distance Relationships in College (9). They found that the fact that couples could choose between public and private communication on that platform led them to select that platform and also if it was easier to use and bridged the gap regardless of distance. They also found that intimate information was also important since it allowed them to compensate for lack of face-to-face contact. Another finding was that it was important for couples to have the option of sharing content to start and maintain conversation, send private content, pictures, videos, and post each other online because they all satisfied their wants and needs.

According to research done by House et al, they found out that social media plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between partners in long-distance relationships (8). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat offer channels for instant messaging, video calls, and sharing photos, enabling couples to maintain regular contact despite physical separation. They found that increased communication frequency through social media is positively associated with relationship satisfaction and perceived closeness. The use of social media in long-distance relationships also posed challenges to trust and intimacy due to the nature of online personas and the prevalence of social comparison which can lead to feelings of jealousy and insecurity among partners. Moreover, the lack of nonverbal cues in digital communication also appeared to have hindered the development of intimacy and emotional connection. Couples in long-distance relationships appeared to have often struggled with balancing the desire for transparency and privacy in their online interactions. While platforms provided opportunities for constant connection and virtual presence, they also introduced complexities such as miscommunication, surveillance, and the temptation of alternative social networks.

Gutzmann explored the perspectives of individuals, who have experienced long distance relationships, and utilise the instant access of communication through technology to strengthen and maintain their connection despite their geographical distances (5). The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study was to understand the distinctive experiences of how social media has had a positive influence on the communication and relationship satisfaction between partners who have experienced long distance. Participants emphasised the importance of Facebook in building a strong foundation for their relationship and communication patterns. All of the participants expressed that they found tagging one another in posts and sharing articles via Facebook with one another was a vital factor in assisting in their connectedness with one another. Another important finding was the theme of sacrifice which aligns with social exchange theory. All participants mentioned that not having physical touch and the opportunity to spend time with one another in person was a major sacrifice. An interesting pattern that was found in all of the interviews was the concept of how Skype was a useful tool but often was not used due to less ease in coordinating a time to speak due to busy schedules and connectivity difficulties. Nearly all of the eight participants mentioned using WhatsApp was most beneficial. Participants stated that communicating with their partner via text can be frustrating and lead to misunderstandings due to the absence of both verbal and non-verbal cues. Many participants mentioned that disagreements take more effort to work through and may take more time.

Suwinyattichaiporn et al. in their research delved into the issues of idealisation, uncertainty, and jealousy experienced by college students in LDRRs, and investigated the communicative strategies employed to overcome these challenges (13). The research, conducted through qualitative methods, involved 125 college students, predominantly females, offering insights into their experiences in current or past LDRRs. The research highlighted themes of idealisation, uncertainty, and jealousy as major relational issues in LDRRs among college students. The lack of face-to-face communication and shared activities in LDRRs often lead to idealisation, where partners tend to perceive greater satisfaction in their relationships. Additionally, relational uncertainty, encompassing self-uncertainty, partner-uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty, is heightened due to the physical distance and restricted face-to-face interaction in LDRRs. They also showed the impact of jealousy in LDRRs, triggered by social media interactions, alcohol use, and time apart from partners. The participants stressed the importance of constant reassurance, open and honest communication, maintaining a positive outlook, constructive resolution of conflicts, building trust, and setting shared future goals as vital components in navigating LDRRs.

Goldsmith et al., conducted a study on what relationship maintenance behaviours and sexual maintenance behaviours (4). They used Social Exchange Theory by Thibaut & Kelley to explain how individuals maintain their romantic relationships. It says that individuals seek reciprocity in their relationship with their romantic partner. They defined relationship maintenance behaviour as positive, relationship-focused behaviours that individuals perform to increase the positive affective climate in their relationship and ensure that it succeeds. The researchers also added a sexual aspect to it as principles of communal orientation extend to sexual behaviours also. Another study found that individuals in LDRs engage in idealisation more frequently (11). They included participants between the age group of 18 to 30 who were in a long-distance relationship and in geographically close relationship. The findings suggests that maintaining the romantic aspects of LDRs may be easily accelerated through an increase in introspective behaviours, for example, staying in touch while separated. But maintaining the sexual relationship may require both introspective sexual behaviours and in-person dyadic sexual behaviours.

Holtzman et al. conducted a study-to-study long-distance texting and if text messaging is linked with higher relationship satisfaction in long-distance relationships. Perceived partner responsiveness, in general, refers to a response style that conveys warmth, understanding, and validation—a quality that has long been seen as essential to closeness and fulfilment in relationships (7). According to this viewpoint, regular distant contact alone won't build a solid relationship if partners aren't seen to be receptive throughout such exchanges. When communicating through mediated channels,

romantic couples often anticipate a higher level of engagement from their partners than from other intimate connections (such as close friends or family). Given how essential distant communication is to the upkeep of long-term relationships (LDRs), there may be even more expectations for partner response in this situation (3). The idea that responsive and regular communication may significantly improve romantic couples' relationship happiness is backed by a wealth of studies (1). Relationship maintenance activities that take place via remote contact during times of separation, specifically for LDRs, have been demonstrated to have strong correlations with relationship satisfaction (10). Voice calls have been found to be the most consistently associated with positive relationship outcomes, such as feelings of love, connection, and relationship certainty, among the different forms of remote communication available to romantic couples (3).

3. Material and methods

3.1. Aim of research

The purpose of the study is to investigate the following research questions:

- How do individuals in Long-Distance Relationships (LDR) maintain their relationship and behaviour?
- How does social media usage affect their relationship?

The purpose of this research is to study relationship maintenance behaviours that people in long distance romantic relationships engage in. We also want to find out how social media usage affects relationship satisfaction. This study utilised a qualitative research method in an interpretivist paradigm. Individuals have their own realities and meanings of the world. This qualitative study attempts to capture those individual interpretations hence it is an interpretivist approach. This type of research values participants' subjective experiences and seeks to understand them in a specific context. A qualitative method allowed this study to capture each participant's individual experience using social media in their LDRR.

3.2. Participants

The study includes participants between the age of 18 to 24, who are currently in a romantic relationship and are maintaining a long-distance relationship. The participants would consist of both males and females and the participants would have a basic understanding of English as the medium of communication as the interviews will be conducted in English.

Table 1 Participant demographic details

Participant	Age	Gender	Relationship duration
1	22	Female	6 years
2	21	Male	2 years
3	22	Female	7 months
4	24	Female	9 months
5	24	Male	3 years
6	22	Male	9 years
7	22	Female	7 years
8	19	Female	2 years

3.3. Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used for the study is Purposive Sampling which is a selective and subjective method of sampling and is completely dependent on the study taken. This method is based on the characteristics of participants which includes individuals who are presently in a long-distance relationship.

3.4. Control Variables

3.4.1. Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals who are in a long-distance relationship presently will be included
- Individuals who are apart for six months or more will be included
- Individuals who fall in the category of the age range between 18-24 will be included
- Individuals who have a distance of 500 kilometres or more between each other will be included
- Individuals who are frequent social media users will be included

3.4.2. Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals who are married and are staying apart will be excluded
- Individuals unable to communicate in English will be excluded
- Individuals meeting each other frequently will be excluded

3.5. Data collection

The data collection took place in March 2024. There were 8 participants who were interviewed using both online and offline mediums by the researchers and all the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews lasted between 15 to 30 minutes. This research used semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. The questions ranged on the themes of relationship maintenance behaviours, challenges faced by couples, relationship satisfaction and social media usage. Follow-up questions were also asked.

Questions for the semi-structured interview were made based on the themes which this paper aims to know more about. The questions were given for validation to one of the psychologists who is an associate professor in college. Changes were made according to the recommendations that were given. The questions were again reviewed by another associate professor. Participants were interviewed face to face and through video calls and the answers were recorded with the interviewee's consent.

3.6. Data analysis

After the process of transcription, the data underwent coding, analysis, interpretation, and verification. Through repeated listening to and reading of the transcribed interviews, the researchers were able to have an enhanced understanding of that subject matter through the transcription process. After all of the data had been thoroughly transcribed, coding started. According to Saratakos (1998), codes are keywords that are used to classify or arrange material and are regarded as a crucial component of qualitative research [11]. Following the coding procedure, the data was analysed, classified, and arranged into themes. Themes that surfaced were given special codes in accordance with them. The analysis was conducted with the help of N-Vivo software.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The supervisor of the researchers approved the study proposal. The supervisor gave her approval for the research before commencement. It is believed that gathering data without participants' understanding, stated agreement, or knowledge of the practice is unethical. As a result, the researchers explicitly informed each participant that their participation in the study was absolutely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any moment. The researchers obtained informed consent from each participant before conducting the study. They were also given the right to refuse to respond to certain questions in case it made them uncomfortable. Prior to the interview, participants were briefed about the general overview of the topic to be covered, the kind of data that would be needed, the purpose of the research, and an explanation of how the data they provided would be implemented.

4. Results

This study had various domains which were under study like, relationship satisfaction, social media usage, strategies used, relationship maintenance behaviours and relationship hindrance behaviour. There were 8 interviews which were conducted which consisted of 6 themes in total. The themes which will be discussed further include Social Media Usage, Coping with Emotional Challenges, Dealing with Physical Distance, Insecurities and Communication, Strategies for Maintaining Intimacy and Influences of Family Environment.

4.1. Theme 1: Social Media Usage

In the first theme that analyses social media usage, it was seen that out of the 8 participants that were interviewed, 7 participants reported that they use both WhatsApp and Instagram to communicate with their partners whereas only 3 reported that they use Instagram as a medium to talk to their partners. An interesting observation that was made is that, the majority of the participants said that they use WhatsApp as a medium to both text and call each other whereas, they use Instagram to text as well as send reels to each other as a form of staying connected with each other. Another notable aspect which was noticed is that almost everyone highlighted the importance of voice calls and video calls.

"I use Video calls a lot and if he isn't available then I just text him on WhatsApp and he does the same so yeah that's our go to. We do video calls whenever it is possible to do so and that is the most preferable mode for us" (Participant 3)

Another participant mentioned how WhatsApp calls were not accessible in the country where her partner resides or else she would have opted for more of WhatsApp calls but she compensates for it using Instagram. It was seen that the most preferable social media platform happens to be either WhatsApp or Instagram.

4.2. Theme 2: Coping Strategies for Challenges

The theme of coping with emotional challenges in a long-distance relationship through digital communication is analysed. Despite facing difficulties such as missing their partner and feeling frustrated by the distance of other partner, the participant navigates these emotions such as "mood swings due to distance" by actively engaging in communication methods like texting, voice calls, and video calls. These platforms serve as essential tools for sharing updates, expressing feelings, and finding solace in each other's presence, handling time/schedule differences. Notably, the couple demonstrates a commitment to understanding each other's moods and empathizing during tough times, fostering productive conversations and problem-solving approaches. Social media platforms like WhatsApp play a significant role in providing paths for emotional expression, whether it's through sharing reels, messaging, or engaging in video calls. Moreover, they leverage social media to discuss problems, highlight positive aspects, and resolve conflicts, emphasizing the importance of effective communication in overcoming emotional hurdles. Overall, the theme underscores how digital tools serve as essential resources for maintaining emotional intimacy and strengthening the relationship despite the challenges of distance.

4.3. Theme 3: Insecurities and Communication

One of the major themes that came out was how people feel insecure and how they cope with it. Out of eight respondents two people said that they were not insecure about his relationship and trusted their partner. It is because they have been in a long-distance relationship for a long time. People are insecure about feeling disconnected, occasional misunderstandings or jealousy. Others mention insecurities about the future, physical separation, opposite gender presence. One of the interviewees expressed insecurities about not doing fun things together, so she said that to cope with it she plans fun activities when together with her partner. Majority of the respondents expressed that open and effective communication is the key factor to address those insecurities. Two of the interviewees said that they engage in constantly updating and texting their partners. One of the respondents said that reassurance of commitment is used to address these insecurities. One of the respondents said that they video call whenever they feel insecure. Transparency is also a strategy which people use to address these insecurities.

4.4. Theme 4: Influence of Family Environment

Family environments shape the dynamics of long-distance relationships mediated through social media, highlighting the importance of familial support, privacy management, and individual resilience in sustaining intimate connections across geographical distances. Participant 1 and 6 who live away from their families express a sense of liberation in their communication with their partners. They can engage more freely without concerns about family members overhearing or judging their interactions.

"I live in a different city from my parents allows me more freedom to communicate with my partner without constraints. However, my partner who lives with his parents faces more challenges in maintaining the relationship due to familial constraints." (Participant 1)

Conversely participants (participant 2,5 and 7) residing with their families often navigate constraints on their communication due to privacy issues or discomfort discussing personal matters in the presence of family members.

"I live with my family which sometimes impacts privacy. However, efforts are made to make time for the relationship despite living with the family." (Participant 5)

For participant 3, "I do not live with my family but the fear of hiding the relationship from my family impacts the behaviour and openness in relationship." This fear can lead to hesitancy in sharing thoughts and feelings with the partner, potentially impacting the depth of the relationship. Participant 4, "I live with a conservative and strict family." Although it is not directly addressed by the participant, family dynamics can indirectly affect the long-distance relationship. Participants 7 and 8 illustrate contrasting experiences within family settings, with Participant 7 citing hindrances in communication due to familial constraints, while Participant 8 reports a supportive family environment that helped the relationship indicating that family support can help promote emotional connection and resilience. Despite facing various challenges related to family dynamics, participants demonstrate adaptability and resilience in navigating the complexities of maintaining a long-distance relationship through social media. This resilience is evident in their ability to adjust communication strategies, carve out privacy within family settings, and seek support from understanding family members.

5. Results and discussion

The presented results shed light on many essential subjects about long-distance relationships and social media's contribution to overcoming challenges. They provide valuable information on how individuals maintain nearness, cope with fears, and maintain the connections between families. The chart demonstrates that participants contact each other via social networks, predominantly WhatsApp, and Instagram. Although WhatsApp is the most utilized network for both messaging and calling, the role of Instagram is limited to texting and sharing reels, which enables people to stay connected via sight. Furthermore, the attention to voice and video calls indicates the significance of immediate proximity in surmounting the consequences of boundaries caused by geography. Such results correlate with previous studies that focused on the role of social media in eradicating the effects of long distances and preserving emotional intimacy. Moreover, to cope with emotional challenges that long-distance relationships result in, people offer numerous strategies. Therefore, overall engagement in digital forms of communication, including texting, calls, or video conferences, enable obtaining each other's news and feelings and taking pleasure from the simulated physical company of a person. Finally, some obstacles, while difficult, may create emotional connections. Participants identify the importance of effective communication, empathy and problem-solving, in maintaining emotional connection and overcoming hurdles. Social media, thus, proves to be an important platform for enabling expression and resolution of difficulties despite physical distance. The issue of insecurity points to the complicated emotional nature of long-distance relationships. Adaptation, as evidenced by participants' alteration of communication strategies and appeal to other members of the family who are understanding, underscores the need for adaptability in managing family engagement. Taken together, the results illustrate how social media use is utilized to overcome difficulties and facilitate close and maintain long-distance relationships. Good communication, compassion, and adaptation are shown to be important sources of human connection over long distances. These findings deepen my understanding of the intricate dimensions of long-distance relationships and also offer a practical application by educating people about how to establish the maze of digital closeness.

Limitations and Suggestions

This qualitative research poses some limitations. Firstly, due to the time constraints the sample size was small, which inherently restricts the diversity of experiences represented within the broader population of individuals in LDRs. Each long-distance relationship is unique, influenced by factors such as distance, duration, cultural backgrounds, and communication methods, and with only 8 participants, it's challenging to capture this diversity comprehensively. This undermines the generalizability of findings. The potential for researcher's own biases and perspectives can inadvertently shape participant selection, data interpretation, and the resulting conclusions. Furthermore, achieving saturation—where no new information or themes emerge from the data—may be challenging with such a limited sample size, potentially leaving gaps in understanding.

To address these limitations, researchers could consider employing mixed-method approaches. An increased sample size, conducting follow-up studies, or triangulating findings with other data sources would also enhance the research outcomes. This study did not designate between couples who had been in geographically close distance relationships (GCDR) prior to their LDRR, future research could study how relational maintenance strategies on social media change before and after the geographical separation occurs.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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