Relational Idealization in Long-Distance Relationships:

The Relationship to Social Media

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Abstract

As the prevalence of long-distance relationships (LDRs) increases, extensive research has been

conducted on their survival. This literature review aims to analyze existing scholarly literature on

LDRs, specifically relating to levels of idealization and the role of social media in idealization.

Future research questions are provided in light of the provided findings.

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"But we by a love so much refined,

That ourselves know not what it is,

Inter-assured of the mind,

Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,

Though I must go, endure not yet

A breach, but an expansion,

Like gold to airy thinness beat" (Donne, 1633).

This love poem describes the situation in which many people find themselves: long-distance relationships (LDRs). With greater mobility and cheaper modes of travel, LDRs are becoming increasingly more prevalent, as young adults move away to college, take jobs in different cities, travel, and study abroad. College students, in particular, find themselves suddenly in a LDR after moving away from home or meeting someone on campus from a different state. As almost 30% of college students report being in an LDR (Guldner, 1996), conducting research about LDRs is of increasing importance. Some individuals may not be prepared for what LDRs entail, and others may find themselves needing the help of a counselor or friend. Thus, the more research is available to couples and professionals alike, the better prepared people will be to effectively maintain LDRs. The purpose of this literature review is to analyze existing literature regarding the definition, the challenges and benefits, maintenance, idealization, and the role of social media in LDRs.

Defining LDRs

Not all LDRs are the same (Holt and Stone, 1988). Thus, the way in which a LDR is

defined varies significantly among studies. Many researchers use a forced-response question option, in which participants must select an option which best describes the relationship. These types of questions can take multiple forms. Some researchers define LDR status as a measure of frequency of visits. Dainton and Aylor (2001) define a LDR in terms of whether or not partners can see each other on a daily basis, should they choose to do so. Those that can are considered geographically close relationships (GCR), while those that cannot, are considered LDR.

Other researchers have defined LDR status as a measure of the physical number of miles between partners. Holt and Stone (1988) used this approach to separate participants into three categories: (1) 0-1 miles apart, (2) 2-249 miles apart, and (3) 250 or more miles apart. This approach can be useful in determining differences among LDR types.

Some researchers choose to define LDRs more simply. Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace (1993) define a LDR as one in which partners do not live in the same town. This seems to be a broad definition, however, and in many ways, competes with other definitions of a LDR. For example, this definition could be ambiguous if towns are close enough that partners can still see each other frequently or if towns are considered to be within close enough proximity that partners would experience little or no separation.

For this reason, other researches have chosen an open-response method in defining LDR status. Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing (1994) suggest that allowing participants to define their relationship as LDR and GCR based on their perception of distance is the most accurate way to define a relationship's physical characteristics. They argue that in many cases, individuals who may be considered LDR by mile separation, may not perceive their relationship to be "long-distance" if they are still able to see each other frequently. Thus, it seems that there is no absolute strategy in defining LDR status (Dainton and Aylor, 2001); researchers either provide a specific distance or allow participants to self-define their relationship.

Challenges and Benefits of LDRs

LDRs inherently are faced with certain challenges, which may or may not always be present in GCRs. Firmin, Firmin, and Lorenzen (2014) concluded, through a qualitative study of college-aged females, that loneliness is a common symptom of separation in LDRs. Five specific aspects of intense loneliness were revealed in participants' responses. First, loneliness was most common immediately following reunion with a partner and during the period of readjustment to separation. Second, intense levels of loneliness were commonly felt around holidays, particularly birthdays, Christmas, and Valentine's Day, when partners were unable to reunite for celebration. Third, loneliness was prevalent on what participants termed "bad days" (i.e. stressful or tiring days). Fourth, individuals often felt lonelier when observing other dating couples around campus or out in public. Fifth, loneliness was associated with lulls in schoolwork load. These increased levels of loneliness often caused excessive phone calling and a heightened value of time spent together in the relationship.

Furthermore, Guldner (1996) tested levels of depression and relational distress in LDRs and found that LDR partners reported higher levels of depression than their GCR counterparts. Previous research suggests that depression in separated relationships is a result of a specific aspect of a relationship, such as marriage. However, the results of this study suggest that depressive symptoms are likely a direct reaction to separation of an affectionate bond, rather than a secondary result of some other relationship factor, such as marriage. Additionally, the study demonstrated that women in LDR and GCR relationships experience greater relational distress than men in either relationship, with LDR women reporting the greatest distress. This could simply be because women are more emotional than men and tend to over think situations that could cause distress. Men may not perceive the same situations to be distressing or cause for concern.

Sahlstein (2004), however, noted that there appears to be a contradiction in LDR couples' perceptions of challenges in the relationship: being apart both constrains and benefits the relationship. Four overall characteristics of this contradiction were found. First, being together enabled being apart. Couples felt rejuvenated after being together and were better prepared emotionally to manage the time apart. Second, being together constrained being apart. Couples further explained that when they are together the benefits of the distance, such as autonomy, are lost; when they are together they cannot be apart to exercise their autonomy. Third, being apart enabled being together. The time couples spend apart made the time spent together more meaningful, important, and exciting. Fourth, being apart constrained being together. The physical distance forces the couple apart, so that they cannot interact face-to-face as often. Couples clearly see benefits and costs in a LDR. Thus, Sahlstein (2004) concluded that rather than a paradox, being apart and being together influence and enable each other; they are not mutually exclusive. While being apart is, indeed, lonely and can cause depression, it also allows each partner to live his or her own life without interference or pressure to be with the other person. On the other hand, being together is rewarding and rejuvenating, which makes separation slightly easier, but also removes the autonomy that distance provides. Therefore, it is possible that people may choose to stay in a LDR because they perceive the costs to be equal, or less than, the benefits. This perceived equality might also lead to increased levels of idealization in the relationship, as individuals may choose to ignore disappointing behavior to justify staying in the relationship for its benefits, or they might not see negative behavior at all, due to the element of autonomy.

Stafford, Merolla, and Castle (2006) found that 85% of participants in their study reported feeling a loss of at least one of the following desirable aspects of a LDR: "closeness via distance, quality time, anticipation/novelty, autonomy, or time-management ease" (p. 911).

Closeness via distance means that many couples felt that distance facilitated feelings of closeness and/or strengthened the relationship. Quality time refers to couples valuing their face-to-face interaction more than when they are together. Anticipation/novelty is the feeling of excitement couples experience when they plan visits. Autonomy is the ability for each individual to live his/her life independently of the other. Time-management ease refers to the difficulty partners face in balancing their schedules when they are together; distance allows for their schedules to occur simultaneously and still allow time for each other. From these results, two major themes emerged. The first theme is that the transition from distance to proximity is neither completely positive nor negative. The second is that upon becoming proximal, couples may discover or rediscover knowledge regarding a partner's behavior, habits, or life style that they dislike. These findings have major implications for the level of idealization which LDR couples feel. In an LDR, individuals feel independent and autonomous, which can increase their level of idealization of the relationship as whole. Additionally, reunions reminded many individuals of the aspects of their partner that they dislike, which can be ignored or completely hidden while distant.

Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) additionally point to trust as an area that can cause relational distress. This is based on the notion that as a relationship progresses, trust becomes less based on direct behavioral coding and more on notions about a partner's motivation for his or her actions. It is clear that faith-based trust (i.e. attributing beliefs that a partner will react in a certain manner in certain situations) plays an integral role in close relationships. Dainton et al. (2001) provide empirical evidence, however, that LDR and GCR couples often experience similar or identical levels of trust and jealousy in the relationship. Using the premise of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (for partners to maintain a relationship, they must both self-disclose regularly) it was hypothesized that, because uncertainty often causes jealousy and

mistrust, greater uncertainty would cause greater levels of jealousy and, in turn, mistrust in a

relationship. They concluded that while a relationship does indeed exist between relational

uncertainty, jealousy, and trust, there were no significant differences in any of these areas

between LDR and GCR couples. These findings may be the result of increased levels of

idealization, which can prevent couples from feeling low levels of trust and jealousy.

Maintenance of LDRs

As a result of the emotional and communicative challenges that LDR couples face, much

research has been devoted to understanding how LDR couples manage their relationships.

Approximately 36% of individuals in a study done by Stafford et al. (2006) terminated their

relationship following reunion, making relationship maintenance of extreme importance.

Canary et al. (1993) provided the most exhaustive list of maintenance behaviors (12) in a

study that compared maintenance strategies among different types of relationships. The ten

strategies in order are: openness, assurances, sharing joint activities, positivity,

cards/letters/phone calls, avoidance of difficult topics or each other during an argument, sharing

tasks, anti-social behaviors that coerce a partner to produce a certain behavior or think a certain

way, social networks, and humor. Romantic relationships tend to use positivity, openness, and

assurances most often. Furthermore, romantic and familial relationships tend to use positivity,

openness, assurances, sharing tasks, and cards/letters/phone calls more frequently than friendship

relationships. This likely results from people desiring to maintain romantic and familial

relationships more so than their friendships. These are important findings for LDRs and GCRs

because it provides insight for the general maintenance strategies couples use.

Some researchers have proposed that attachment style can be utilized to predict how

certain individuals will seek to maintain their relationships. Pistole and Roberts (2010)

discovered that people with certain attachment styles not only are more likely to seek out a

certain type of relationship, but are also more likely to use some maintenance strategies more frequently than others.

Securely attached partners have a positive view of themselves and of their partner, and seek out proximity with their partners. Dismissive-avoidant people have a positive view of self, but a negative view of their partner, preferring low emotional involvement. Fearful-avoidants have a negative view of both themselves and their partner and fear rejection. Preoccupied attached people view themselves negatively, while the partner is viewed as essential to their self-worth. They also tend to use a hyperactivated affect regulation strategy "involving vigilance to proximity threats and continuous attempts to maintain partner proximity" (p. 537).

Pistole et al. (2010) relate seven categories of relationship maintenance to the attachment styles: (1) assurances of love and longevity of the relationship; (2) openness in discussing feelings and the relationship as a whole; (3) conflict management; (4) sharing tasks; (5) positivity- engaging in pleasing interactions; (6) giving advice to each other; (7) the use of social networks to support the relationship. Securely attached partners handle maintenance behaviors best and utilize them more often, especially assurances and positivity. Avoidant partners often engage in fewer assurances because they view the partner negatively and avoid self-disclosing. Preoccupied, or anxious, individuals tend to over-disclose and are often disappointed in their partner and may use more assurances than avoidant individuals.

Four discoveries were made. First, secure individuals scored higher in conflict management and positivity than fearful. Second, secure individuals used their social networks more than dismissive or fearful. Third, secure and preoccupied individuals scored higher in advice giving than fearful. Fourth, secure and preoccupied individuals were higher on assurances than fearful and dismissive individuals. LDRs and GCRs used maintenance strategies in equal frequency and both experienced similar environmental stressors (e.g., Pistole and Roberts, 2011).

However, attachment styles and maintenance behaviors may have a strong effect. Attachment styles often determine how a person will react to certain stressors. For example, a preoccupied person will heighten his or her stress by worrying over the lack of his or her partner's presence in an LDR because he or she is dependent on the partner for stress relief. These findings are important for two reasons. First, they demonstrate that it is possible to maintain healthy relationships over distance or within close distance. Second, attachment styles may influence a person's ability to manage a LDR and, if he or she can, attachment may also influence the level of idealization that is present in the relationship.

Other researchers have found that individuals' preferred cognitive style of communicating (verbal or imaginative) and frequent visitation are the most helpful methods of LDR maintenance. Holt and Stone (1988) related coping strategies with different coping outcomes and, given that individuals tend to either prefer verbal or imaginative communication (i.e. daydreaming), discovered that for most couples, using their preferred communication style and increased visitation positively affected the relationship and helped to reinforce the LDR's strength.

Other proposed maintenance strategies for LDR couples include gossip and self-disclosure (Lee and Pistole, 2011). Gossip can play a major part in helping LDR couples feel more proximal and together, building bonds and providing entertainment. It further creates conversation and informs one's partner of his or her day. The use of gossip as a maintenance strategy has also been linked with some attachment styles. Avoidant individuals, for example, may choose gossip over self-disclosure because it does not require as much personal information and helps keep a comfortable distance. Insecurely attached individuals may also choose to self-disclose more than gossip in GCRs, but choose to gossip more frequently in LDRs. This could be to create conversation that will make the couple feel closer by gossiping about mutual friends

and to keep conversation less personal, perhaps because an insecurely attached individual may

have doubts about the longevity of the relationship due to the distance. Some couples also use

gossip as a means of indirectly communicating relational rules. For example, one partner might

share a story of her friend's affair and demonstrate disdain for her choice, indirectly

communicating to her partner that cheating will not be tolerated.

Idealization

As a result of the benefits of LDRs and couples' increased efforts to maintain an LDR,

couples may experience inflated levels of idealization. Idealization is the "tendency to describe a

relationship [and one's partner] in unrealistically positive terms" (p. 39, Stafford and Merolla,

2007). Couples may perceive their relationship and their partner to be better than they may

actually be because they enjoy the benefits an LDR offers. They might also choose to ignore

disillusionment and credit it to the distance, rather than problems with the relationship itself or a

partner. Idealization takes on many forms and can be caused by many different factors.

Stafford and Merolla (2007) suggest that there are three routes of idealization. The first

route of idealization is cognitive idealization, which includes positive illusions. A second route

of idealization is behavioral idealization, meaning that the "honeymoon phase" of the

relationship never fades. A third idealization route is selective self-presentation in which partners

only see what the other chooses to show him or her. In LDRs, romantic love, relational

reminiscence, and perceived agreement are more pronounced than in GCRs. Furthermore, they

suggest that idealization is not necessarily mitigated by phone calls, text messages, or video chat,

and extreme levels of idealization are also associated with post reunion stability, as the partners

are often reminded of characteristics in each other that they dislike.

These findings are empirically supported by Stafford and Reske (1990), who found that

LDR couples report higher levels of idealization, feelings of being in love, and satisfaction

within the relationship. Additionally, restricted communication is strongly correlated with more intense levels of idealization, as GCR couples do not report such high levels of idealization and have less restricted methods of communication available.

Dellmann-Jenkins et al. (1994) found that there is no significant difference between GCR and LDR couples' levels of relationship satisfaction or intimacy. This is possible if LDR couples experience extreme levels of idealization, as they are not perceiving their relationship accurately. Thus, LDR couples would report the same feelings as GCR couples. It has also been posited that LDR couples' levels of idealization may occur as a result of their perceptions of distance between them. Some couples may not perceive the distance between them to be enough to be considered "long-distance," so the relational effects they experience might also be perceived to be of less significance. Thus, they would perceive fewer problems with the relationship, which leads to increased levels of idealization.

However, some researchers do not agree. Guldner (1995) found that among GCR and LDR couples, identical levels of satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment are reported. It appeared that the amount of time couples spent together or apart did not affect overall satisfaction within relationships. As a result of this contradiction with other literature, Guldner (1996) suggested that there are other factors that support the relationship when physical togetherness is not an option. Guldner (1996) himself does not suggest examples of such other factors, but suggests this be the subject of future research. This implies that LDR couples are not as highly idealized as other researchers have concluded.

This debate has prompted other researchers to question why these results differ. Niehuis, Lee, Reifman, Swenson, and Hunsaker (2011) suggested conflicting results may be attained because relationships are a process; they are in constant flux. Results from one study may stem from an earlier stage of a relationship, while results from another may stem from a later stage,

for example. The different stages of a relationship could influence results regarding idealization because an earlier stage, such as the "honeymoon phase," may yield a highly idealized result, while a later stage may yield lower idealization because of the length of the relationship at that time. As a result, they provided a model of idealization and disillusionment, which they believe to accurately reflect the four stages of idealization couples go through during a relationship. Stage one, which occurs early in a relationship, is optimism; this is characterized by high idealization with little to no disillusionment. Stage two is confusion, characterized by high levels of both idealization and disillusionment. Stage three is realism in which the couple experiences low levels of both idealization and disillusionment. The fourth and last stage of a relationship is devastation, where the couple is often faced with a potential break up due to high disillusionment and little to no idealization. This suggests that research on actual existing levels of idealization can be skewed based on the context of the relationship and the stage in which the relationship currently exists.

The Influence of Media on Idealization

With the emergence of social media and an increase in media usage, it is possible that mediated communication is a source of high levels of LDR idealization. Daft, Lengel, and Trevino (1987) studied media richness and message equivocality. Managers revealed that different types of media are preferred depending on a message's level of equivocality. Media-rich communication is that which includes all aspects of communication, such as gaze, body language, and verbal cues. Message equivocality is the level of clarity of a message. Managers tended to use media low in richness when messages were also low in equivocality, and rich media when messages were high in equivocality. This is important because it demonstrates that not all mediated communication is the same.

In an LDR, it is possible that if one person wants to discuss a problem with his/her

partner but knows that he or she will react poorly, he/she might choose to use a less rich media channel to downplay the severity of the problem. Consequently, the partner is less likely to perceive any problems in the relationship to be of great concern, thereby sustaining or increasing levels of idealization. A partner might also choose to use a rich media channel to convey one's love for the other person, because the partner will be able to see non verbals and hear the tone of voice he or she is using. As a result, partners may perceive the relationship to be in better condition than it really is, or to be more in love, because of the media channel chosen to convey certain messages.

Three contributions to understanding LDR relational processes and mixed-mode communication were made by Jiang and Hancock (2013). First, LDR status magnifies the mediated effects of perceived partner responsiveness. Second, LDR couples experience greater intimacy on an interaction-by-interaction basis than GCR couples. Third, the medium of communication can affect the strength of behavioral adaptations and idealization. Essentially, LDR couples often find themselves perceiving the relationship to be of better quality than it is because certain channels of communication omit or do not require certain behavioral adaptations. For example, if a couple is texting and one makes a joke, even if the other person does not find it funny, he or she can still respond positively and his/her reaction be perceived that he/she enjoyed the joke. In person, however, non verbal cues would more than likely reveal the partner's dislike of the joke. As a result, the less rich the media channel, the potentially higher the level of idealization. Furthermore, LDR couples only interact in small, disjointed bits of time. Even a one hour Skype call is a much smaller interaction period than that of a GCR couple, who are able to interact for a full day or more at one time. LDR partners are also only able to interact in media-rich mediums on occasion, causing disjointed communication periods that may not relate to each other at all. LDR couples often perceive these moments of communication to be of great quality

and will, thus, experience greater intimacy in these moments than on average.

Four additional themes are also common among LDR couples, despite the length of the relationship, amount of time apart, or amount of time spent physically together. The first theme is technology as closeness. Video chatting often created a feeling of closeness between partners which texting cannot achieve. The second theme is emotional closeness. Video chatting is correlated with improved understanding and more communication cues which makes the couple feel more emotionally close, as partners can see more of each other's reactions. The third theme is physical closeness. Video chatting made the couple feel more physically close despite the physical distance that remained between them. The fourth theme is technology as pseudo presence. Video chatting caused couples to realize the vast difference between *being* close and *feeling* close (Kusisto, 2015). *Being* close was described by couples as physical proximity, while *feeling* close was the illusion of physical proximity. Other findings by Kusisto (2015) indicate that video chatting influences beneficial idealization and uncertainty management in the relationship. Beneficial idealization is defined as seeing the partner positively in order to help manage the distance, even though this view may not be entirely accurate. A positive view of the relationship and the partner related to confidence in the longevity of the relationship, despite the distance. LDR couples also indicated that they managed uncertainty by controlling the aspects of the relationship which they could, like planning visits and putting forth effort and time into the relationship. The study demonstrated that the more in control the couple felt, the easier it was for the partners to manage the distance. Implications of these findings are that LDRs, then, will have a greater sense of idealization about a partner and the relationship as a whole, which can be further heightened through video chatting and other uses of media.

However, similarly to the debate of whether LDR couples are actually idealized or not, not all researchers are convinced that media increases idealization. Neustaedter and Greenberg

(2011) discovered that couples use multiple types of communication channels throughout the day for different purposes, similar to the findings of Daft et al. (1987). For example, couples tend to use less rich communication methods, such as text messaging, for short, easy to understand messages, as they are often low in equivocality. Video chat is primarily utilized to see each other while partners talk, because it makes most couples feel closer emotionally. Video chat is also a way to gauge each other's facial expressions and body language as well as the emotional state of the other person. However, many couples express more difficulty in connecting through video chat than other modes of communication, whether that be a result of poor signal or time constraints (Neustaedter et al., 2011). Therefore, most couples use video chat for extended periods when they have considerable free time. In contrast with previous studies, many couples reported talking about negative topics over video chat and even arguing. Thus, video chat did not necessarily increase levels of idealization in a relationship because most couples often argued over video chat due to its richer communication medium.

Future Research Suggestions

After analyzing the existing research regarding the presence of increased idealization as a result of using mediated communication, two specific areas of conflict have arisen among researchers. First, some researchers have found that LDR couples are indeed more idealized than GCR couples, while others have found that LDR and GCR couples report similar levels of idealization. Second, not all researchers agree that social media contributes to increased levels of idealization, if different levels do occur between GCRs and LDRs. Specifically, since GCR and LDR couples often experience similar relationship stressors (Rempel et al., 1985; Pistole et al., 2011) and they use similar maintenance strategies (Pistole et al. 2011), it is likely that LDR couples do not experience higher levels of idealization simply because of physical separation. Thus, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: Will LDR couples report similar levels of idealization and satisfaction as their GCR

counterparts?

Furthermore, it is unclear whether the use and duration of mediated communication does

influence levels of idealization (Jiang et al., 2013; Kusisto, 2015) or whether it does not

(Neustaedter et al., 2011). Thus, a second research question is proposed:

RQ2: Does the frequency or mode of mediated communication influence levels of

idealization in LDRs?

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