Mediated Communication in Long Distance Relationships

Marlene Monge

Chapman University
Abstract

Many people in this day and age are experiencing and living a long distance relationship. Long distance relationships have the challenges of time, space, and few physical encounters; therefore, it is important to research the level of satisfaction that these couples experience. This study is a naturalistic inquiry and its purpose is to examine long distance relationships satisfaction and the way they communicate through media devices. This study consisted of three individuals between the ages of 22-26 who were currently in a long distance romantic relationship. These participants were interviewed about the level of satisfaction of the relationship and the type of media they use to communicate and maintain their relationship. Physical embracement (physical contact, such as kissing and hugging), self-disclosure (revealing information about oneself), and positive communication (communication that relies on the positive side of situations, instead of the negative) are important aspects that couples in long distance relationships consider to be very important in managing their relationship. The analysis of the study compares and relates the relationship experience of the different participants and provides an adequate answer to the research questions of the study. It is discovered that long distance relationship partners maintain their relationship with constant communication via different types of media, which makes them feel more connected to their partners and experience similar feeling as if they were face to face. The relationship cultivated online is based on more trust, time, effort, communication, and understanding. Secondly, it is found that couples use video chatting more often than cell phone to create more intimacy and closeness in their relationships.

Keywords: long-distance relationship, online, positive communication, self-disclosure, physical embracement
Mediated Communication in Long Distance Romantic Relationships

Nowadays, people in long distance relationships face the challenge of time and geographical distance and are not able to maintain physical, and face-to-face relationships with their significant others. To be able to maintain some contact, and intimacy, people are using mediated communication. Having a long-distance relationship is especially difficult for couples because of the amount of time it is needed to be able to manage and satisfy a relationship. This research paper discusses how couples and people in a romantic relationship maintain and develop their relationship through mediated communication and how this technology helps them create intimacy and closeness even though they are not communicating face-to-face.

The use of Internet and mediated devices to communicate is not new. However, the use of those devices in order to maintain a relationship is fairly new. There are many couples that have always been in a long-distance relationship and other couples that met offline and later became a long-distance relationship. This situation brings a struggle to the relationship because it hardly gets the quality and satisfaction that comes from a face-to-face relationship. Nonetheless, some researchers say mediated communication can bring a relationship closer. It is important to discover whether or not long-distance relationships can work through time and bring sufficient satisfaction for them to last and even help take the relationship a step further.

Mediated communication has been fascinating throughout the years. It has been especially important for the author’s personal life, which has included many long distance relationships where technology has been useful. Therefore, this research is especially personal and important to explore.
MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The topic of mediated relationships is both theoretically and practically significant because it is widespread in our current world. It is necessary to explore if there is research that supports mediated and long-distance relationships and if these relationships are able to work or not. There are many theoretical and practical issues to be resolved. Long-distance relationships are very important to research, and this study focuses on case studies of people who live in a mediated relationship and their level of satisfaction with the relationship. This study is also important because it will be measuring several types of communicating devices, such as cellphones and Internet programs and applications like Skype and email. The research will explore which one is used more and if the use of several devices creates further satisfaction in the relationship.

Literature Review

Couples in long distance relationships have had to turn to technology in order to maintain and develop their relationship. Some of the media tools that are used are cell phones, social networking sites, and chat systems, such as Skype, Google Plus, FaceTime or iChat (Greenberg, 2011). Research has found that these media devices bring relational satisfaction and psychological intimacy to long-distance relationships (Baym et. al, 2007; Canary et. al, 1993; Coyne et. al, 2011; Sidelingier et. al, 2008; Miller-Ott et. al, 2012; Duran et. al, 2011).

Psychological intimacy through media

A study examining video chats as the medium of communication for couples demonstrated that couples were able to maintain psychological intimacy through video chatting, for it created a feeling of having a shared sense of presence between the couple (Greenberg et. al, 2011). This research further concluded that video chatting has become a more important media device for couples since being able to see face-to-face and observe facial expressions through a
screen added more elements needed to feel content and more connected in a relationship (Greenberg et. al, 2011). These findings are inconsistent with another study that measured different types of media used in romantic relationships, which found that couples rarely rely on webcams to contact their significant other, and the most used media device in couples is the cell phone (Coyne et. al, 2011). This inconsistency could be that partners do not have as much time or opportunity to use a computer and see their significant other face-to-face. However, with the current screen technology in cell phones, couples now have the possibility to talk with their partner and see them on their cell phone screen. Thus, more research on this area could reconcile inconsistencies between these studies.

Frequency of communication

Sidesinger et. al, (2008) findings discovered that both men and women spend almost an equal amount of time on the internet communicating with their romantic partners. Individuals who are more satisfied with their relationships were in constant communication with their partner to express their affection (Coyne et. al, 2011; Miller-Ott et. al, 2012). Frequency of media use can be very positive for couples. In addition to couples using media constantly to communicate, couples usually make use of media in a good way; women were more likely to offer positive communication than men (Coyne et. al, 2011; Sidelinger et. al, 2008; Houser et. al, 2012). Positive communication exists when people keep the topic of conversation positive and rely on mentioning the positive or good side of situations when communicating, instead of relying on bad or negative comments. However, the majority of the participants in several of the studies were women, so this finding could be biased.

Mediated romantic relationships and satisfaction
In studying long-distance relationships and the perceived closeness through media, it has been found that these romantic relationships are perceived as closer than friendships or family relationships but less satisfying than friendship and family relations (Baym et. al, 2007). This could mean that romantic relationships require more attention and time in order to maintain their relationship. The different ways of communicating, such as face-to-face, telephone, and online communication did not predict relationship satisfaction as well (Baym et. al, 2007). This means that the quality of communication in a relationship is not dependent on the types of communication medium used. Instead, satisfaction in the relationship strongly relies on commitment, communication satisfaction, and other relational factors (Sidelinger et. al, 2008).

**Cell phone usage and rules in a romantic relationship**

Constant cell phone use between couples increases relationship satisfaction. However, research explains that it is also necessary to analyze what rules couples have regarding the use of cell phone, such as timing, frequency, and topics (Miller-Ott et. al, 2012) and the couples sense and preference of autonomy and connection (Duran et. al, 2011) since these situations and differences in needs can cause conflict in a relationship. The results of this study show that partners felt more satisfied when there were certain rules about not discussing interpersonal issues over the phone, and no rules about restricted access to partners cellphone and calling or texting other people in the presence of the significant other (Miller-Ott et. al, 2012). This means that partners are more content when personal issues are dealt in person and in private, instead over the phone, and when there are no restrictions in accessing the partner’s cellphone or using it while they are together. In addition, another study found that people with higher availability expectations were less satisfied with the amount of time spent with the partner, with feelings of restricted freedom, and with more desire to control the partner (Duran et. al, 2011). Relationships
that were not satisfied with cell phone use were also less satisfied with aspects of the relationships that created tension between autonomy and connection. Therefore, the amount of time spent interacting with partner is associated with how satisfied and content partners are.

*Cell phones and relationship satisfaction*

Couples frequently used cellphones as a way to communicate with their significant others, and the cellphone is considered the most important medium for relationships (Coyne et. al, 2011; Miller-Ott et. al, 2012; Duran et. al, 2011). Cell phones are the most available medium that is commonly used to nurture a relationship and express affection (Miller-Ott et. al, 2012; Coyne et. al, 2011). Therefore, they are very important for people who are in a relationship because of the device’s ability to let partners feel connected. Cell phone use is significantly related to relationship satisfaction; therefore, it could be likely that couples refer to their frequency of communication and interaction through cell phone as a way of feeling the relationship is going in the right direction (Miller et. al, 2012). It appears that text messaging on a cell phone device had the strongest influence on relationship satisfaction than actually talking through the device (Coyne et. al, 2011). This could mean that text messaging is the best way to communicate when multi-tasking; when people are busy or have to do other things, text messaging helps relieve that sense of absence and limited time that couples have.

*Openness and positivism*

Long distance romantic couples frequently use self-disclosure and positive communication to maintain their relationship (Wright et. al, 2004; Canary et. al, 1993). Long distance relationships seek to accentuate intimacy and positive talk in their relationships when they are separated; however, they may also have few opportunities for conflict and avoidance (Stafford et. al, 2010). Another study found that married couples and pre-marital relationships
use greater levels of openness and assurances in their mediated communication (Houser et. al, 2012). Furthermore, individuals find it easier to use positive connotations and self-disclosure in their communication if they feel that their partner is also communicating in a relaxed, open, and in-depth way (Wright et. al, 2004).

**Commitment and satisfaction**

A committed relationship can become a happy couple; it has been found that the higher commitment a relationship has, the greater the satisfaction in the relationship (Mietzner et. al, 2005; Pistole et. al, 2010). Some indicators of a higher commitment is the travel time invested, communication maintained, and financial support that long distance relationships might need (Pistole et. al, 2010). Furthermore, when a relationship is highly committed, both individuals in the relationship use similar high levels of maintenance behaviors (Rabby, 2007).

**Independence and self-satisfaction**

One of the skills gained in long distance relationships is independence because individuals learn to manage time for themselves as well as for their partners. Couples also learn to dedicate the time apart they have in their relationship to fulfill their personal goals and ambitions (Mietzner et. al, 2005). When couples are apart, they allow space for each one of them to re-evaluate themselves and their relationships, as well as devote more time to the relationship when they get to be together (Mietzner et. al, 2005; Sahlstein, 2004).

There are still many gaps in knowledge about romantic relationships and media use. According to Coyne et. al (2011), there have been very few studies explaining how digital communication influences feelings in relationships (Coyne et. al, 2011). How do couples maintain their relationships when they can only rely on media to communicate and develop their relationship? In addition, there is little to no information about how couples use this technology
specifically to gain psychological intimacy and closeness in their relationships. Can digital communication really support and maintain a relationship? Does the frequency and length of interaction, as well as the type of media used affect relationship satisfaction?

The findings across these studies seem to indicate that mediated communication can bring satisfaction to couples, whether it is through video chatting or cellphone usage. Couples seek different kinds of intimacy with different mediums whether it is a shared presence between the couple or just an individual way they express their affection. There are some inconsistencies in research regarding which mediated devices couples use most and what is the correct way to manage the use of devices for satisfaction relationship. Studies have been done only on women or the majority of the participants have been women (Coyne et. al, 2011; Miller-Ott et. al, 2012; Baym et. al, 2007; Duran et. al, 2011; Pistole et. al, 2010). This creates bias since most of the studies are based on a female perspective. In addition, studies used college students taking communication classes as participants for their studies (Baym et. al, 2007; Sidelinger et. al, 2008; Duran et. al, 2011; Miller-Ott et. al, 2012). Further research is needed with a different age and population. Research relies mostly on surveys, questionnaires, and self-report methods (Sidelinger et. al, 2008; Baym et. al, 2007; Duran et. al, 2011; Miller-Ott et. al, 2012; Coyne et. al, 2011; Pistole et. al, 2010; Rabby, 2007). Relying on these methods leads to many biases since participants could misinterpret questions, not be able to recall situations, or not be completely honest in their reports.

Some of the strengths include the increasing amount of new research that includes technology as part of studies; there has been other research done on families and friends, but these studies aim to demonstrate that romantic relationships can also survive and maintain their relationships due to new technology that makes them feel more present in the lives of their
significant others. Other studies have not examined the quality of communication between partners (Sidelinger et. al, 2008). This research seeks to analyze relationships with case studies and study the actual content and dialogue of couple’s mediated communication.

In order to fully understand how couples manage their relationships through media and how much they use them to bring satisfaction and psychological intimacy, this research focuses on couples that are in a long-distance relationship and analyzes with case studies the quality of their communication, and how much time they spend using media devices to communicate with their partners. The research questions that this research seeks to answer are listed below:

**RQ1:** What kind of quality of romantic relationships is cultivated online versus face to face?

This question seeks to understand how couples maintain their relationship when they are relying on media all or most of the time to develop and nurture their relationship, and if there is a possibility that such a relationship can have similar levels of quality and satisfaction of a face-to-face romantic relationship.

**RQ2:** What is the relationship between the types of media used and relationship satisfaction, psychological intimacy, and closeness in romantic relationships?

This question seeks to understand what kind of media couples in long-distance relationships use most and if their use has an effect on couples’ satisfaction, psychological intimacy and closeness.

These research questions were broken down into interview questions and served as a basis for the direction of the study.
Method

Naturalistic inquiry

Naturalistic inquiry was used since it was aimed to understand how people create meanings in their relationships in everyday online settings, and includes interviewing. Naturalistic inquiry is also known as ethnography, which involves a certain amount of time of face-to-face interaction and observation in a setting, and taking of field notes to be used for research analysis (Warren, 2010). This research focuses on how participants behave and interact with their romantic partner in their everyday life experiences. This method was used to understand people’s romantic relationships in a natural setting. Three interviews were conducted. By using interviews, very detailed information was gathered in order to understand more in depth the long distance relationship of each participant.

A case study is a compilation of qualitative approaches that highlights the nature of a certain social case (Warren, 2010). Part of this qualitative research includes case method and unstructured interviewing.

In addition, using multiple sources increased the credibility of the findings in this research, as well as gaining in-depth knowledge of what it is to be in a long-distance relationship. In the future, people will be able to compare the patterns from this study to future studies about the subject. A disadvantage of this method is that findings could not be generalized to the entire population. Adding more participants in the study would have taken a greater amount of time. The data collection and this study sought to be interpretative research. This means that the researcher does not have any set concepts or ideas about the topic prior to the study but rather lets the research tell what concepts are important. This method fits the topic and research questions because topic is to gain knowledge about a situation that is very subjective to each
individual in a romantic relationship. Therefore, naturalistic inquiry helps this study be more reliable and valid because it assesses how people in a romantic relationship relate.

Data collection instrument

The primary instrument for gathering data was a formal in-depth interview and unstructured interview. Participants were able to have the opportunity to express their ideas and their own observations. Two of the interviews were made face-to-face and Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) was used to transcribe all the information being collected. The other interview was made via Skype and all the information was collected using CAPI as well. The instrument used for this study, which was an interview questionnaire is valid and reliable because the participants’ reality was determined. In addition, data and questions were organized so that participants could thoroughly understand what they were being asked.

The subject matter is very personal, and participants seemed to be more likely to give details about their private life to a person that is closer to them than a stranger. Participants’ reaction to the analysis was considered, and they knew exactly what was happening in each stage. This study’s goal was to be accurate, fair, and valid to participants and to the research itself. It is reliable because the data collection instrument and analysis used enhanced this study’s reproducibility and possibility of being used as a pattern and guide for other studies. This study has mechanically recorded data and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Each question in the data collection instrument is related to the research questions. Questions one through six are related to the first research question, and seven through eleven are related to the second research question.
The first interview question, “How would you describe your relationship?”, seeks to understand the kind of relationship in which the participant is currently engaged in his or her long distance relationship; therefore, it analyzes the kind of romantic relationship that has been already cultivated online.

The second question, “In what ways do you maintain your relationship when you rely on media all or most of the time?”, seeks to analyze in what ways couples who rarely or never see one another maintain their relationship; therefore, knowing this can show how their relationship is being cultivated.

In the third question, “How have your satisfaction needs been met in your long distance relationship?”, The research seeks to know what long distance relationships offer and if they can meet the basic satisfaction needs that are needed to sustain the relationship. This question also answers what kind of relationship develops online versus face-to-face by knowing the satisfaction of couples.

The fourth question, “What differences do you see and feel in the quality and satisfaction of your relationship interactions and involvements face-to-face versus through a medium?”, compares long distance relationships versus close relationships and the different qualities of relationships.

The fifth question, “What communication styles do you use when communicating long distance versus in person?”, reveals how couples communicate in long distance relationships versus face-to-face and what this says about their relationship.

The last question related to the first research question is “How do you manage your time and goals when you are apart from your significant other?” This question also seeks to answer
the kind of relationship that develops when people are far from each other and understand how they manage autonomy versus connection.

From the questions related to the second research question, question seven, “What kind of media do you mostly use to communicate with your romantic partner? Why?”, identifies if there is a kind of media couples use most often and how this affects their relationship.

Question eight, “What kind of rules do you have in the usage of this particular media?”, analyzes how couples manage their interactions through the media used and if this management has any relationship with their satisfaction as a couple.

Question nine, “Do you think this particular media(s) that you are choosing has any effect on your relationship satisfaction, psychological intimacy, and closeness? Why?”, seeks to describe any effect that the media used has on the relationship in different levels. This question is very similar to the second research question.

Question ten, “In what way do you make use of the media chosen in order to gain more psychological intimacy, closeness, and satisfaction with your partner?”, is a version of the second research question, and seeks to understand how couples use their media to sustain their relationship and how they manage the use of media to feel happier in their relationship.

The last question in the interview is “Do you think that the frequency and length of the interactions you usually have with your partner affect your satisfaction needs? Why? And what have you done about it?” This is a very important question because it may not be only the type of media used that has an effect but also the length of time used. This explains if the frequency of using a media creates further satisfaction.
Participants and consent

Confidentiality was insured to the participants. It was explained that whatever was told in the interview or observed in any way would only be used for research, if it was applicable to the research. In addition, their names or any identification information do not appear in this research. Specific details about participants, such as their name, where they attend school, and their residence are not mentioned throughout the study. Participants were not recorded, and this study only used information pertinent to the study. Most of the information used was regarding participants’ communication styles and the satisfaction that participants currently have in their relationships; therefore, participants are anonymous because no other details about the participants appear in the study. The author gained participants’ consent by describing the research and what this researched sought to achieve, which is to know the level of satisfaction and communication styles of long distance romantic relationships. It was also explained to them that the findings of this research could be beneficial to them and to other couples who also experience the same situation.

Formal consent was reached after detailed explanation of their participation. They signed two IRB consent forms from a private comprehensive masters university on the west coast of the United States of America. In accordance to ethical standards, participants were completely aware of what their participation constituted of and what the research consisted of, and were noted of their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Three participants that are currently in a long distance romantic relationship were chosen and were known personally by the researcher. Two of the participants were interviewed face-to-face, and the other participant was interviewed via Skype. The interviews took place at each participant’s home. Participants were interviewed during the day and at a time they were relaxed.
with no other occupations in mind. They were interviewed alone and data was collected via an electronic resource (i.e. computer) where notes were taken.

**Data Description**

Three people that were relatively close to the researcher of this study were interviewed. Names were changed to respect and protect the anonymity and confidentiality of those involved in the study. Each question has the answer of each of the participants, and each answer is separated from the others to understand that it is a different participant. Therefore, each answer presents the relationship of one couple and their communication routines.

**Mediated Communication in Long Distance Romantic Relationships Questionnaire**

1. How would you describe your relationship?

   “*We talk to each other everyday. For me it’s not hard to have a long distance relationship, but for him is harder*” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

   “*I see my boyfriend once every one or two months. He is the kind of person I can see me with together in a long term*” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

   “*We see each other every two weeks more or less. We have been together for almost a year and a half*” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

2. In what ways do you maintain your relationship when you rely on media all or most of the time?

   “*We talk at least once through the day on the phone. If he is very busy, he will let me know. There is an understanding*” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

   “*We talk every day. We always find time to talk to each other. We usually use cellphone because video chatting gets difficult to use*” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

   “*Portable computers and smartphones are the main source of communication. When I’m at home, I use web-cam video to create a sensation of being close to my partner*” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

3. How have your satisfaction needs been met in your long distance relationship?
“For me it’s not as hard to be satisfied because I know I will see him soon. He has more trouble with it because he has more of a physical need” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“Even though we’ve been together for four years, it’s still feels fun and spontaneous. We always resolve any conflict. He puts a lot of effort” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“I feel satisfied when we are together, but I feel that I am missing much when we are apart” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

4. What differences do you see and feel in the quality and satisfaction of your relationship interactions and involvements face-to-face versus through a medium?

“When we are apart, it requires more effort into maintaining emotional connection. You have to use more words to express yourself” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“When we are apart, it is hard for me to concentrate on other things. When we are together, we don’t spend every much with each other because we know we are there” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“Face-to-face interactions create a different sensation, a different environment than hearing a person through a speaker or seeing them through an open computer window” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

5. What communication styles do you use when communicating long distance versus in person?

“Something that usually didn’t bother him would bother him, so I have had to be use very supportive communication and more reassurance” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“When we are apart, It gets hard to distinguish when we are actually mad or joking. In person he always knows exactly what I am feeling and we hardly have miscommunications” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“When having online conversations, misinterpretations commonly occur. Because of this, we prefer to use video chatting, so we can also rely on other cues” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

6. How do you manage your time and goals when you are apart from your significant other?

“This time is not tension divided between school and boyfriend. I think it is more quality communication since we don’t see each other and talk as often” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).
“When we are apart, I am constantly distracted. When I am at home with him, I can completely focus more in my things because we have the same breaks and we don’t need to schedule things so much” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“Times are very flexible since most of the time we can just call each other, text or leave a voice message. We usually do our own things during the day, and we start talking after 5pm when we both get home” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

7. What kind of media do you mostly use to communicate with your romantic partner? Why?

“Lately, we’ve been used Facetime, but it is either facetime or phone. Facetime is not always available because we need to have Internet” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“We mostly use cellphone and texting. His connection is so bad, so video chatting doesn’t work for us. If we could rely on video chatting, we would use it more often than anything else” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“We mostly use online webcam, since it creates an environment of being there with my girlfriend. We are also beginning to use the iphone as a way to communicate” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

8. What kind of rules do you have in the usage of this particular media?

“We always call each other before going to sleep. Once he does that, I know not to call him or text him” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“We don’t have any set rules. His phone is off many times because he works at the airport, so he just calls me back whenever he is free. He also knows that I will call him back if I don’t answer” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“We usually talk when we both have time, but there are no times or exact moments when we do it. Sometimes we can talk all day through Skype and/or iphone” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

9. Do you think this particular media(s) that you are choosing has any effect on your relationship satisfaction, psychological intimacy, and closeness? Why?

“I am pretty happy with Facetime. You definitely can tell more than by cellphone or texts” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“It’s positive in fact that at least we can talk to each other every day, and I know what is going on with his life, but at the same time is difficult to convey a certain feeling or message” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).
“It has a positive effect since it is the closest to an actual physical face-to-face encounter. Through this medium we have been able to grow more as a couple and understand each other in a better way” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

10. In what way do you make use of the media chosen in order to gain more psychological intimacy, closeness, and satisfaction with your partner?

“Now we have to have more quality talk, so I know him better now, and we miss each other more. Other times, we just watch each other do our own stuff without having to talk” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“We talk every day. If one of us is busy, we just say good morning and good night. I believe with us it has been all about multitasking. I understand we are both super busy, so we find time for each other” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“Sometimes we are not talking because she is busy, but just seeing her makes me feel she is there with me in some way. Other times we are both doing our own things while still being connected through skype” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

11. Do you think that the frequency and length of the interactions you usually have with your partner affect your satisfaction needs? Why? And what have you done about it?

“In the beginning he was very busy, but when he started school. Also, sometimes he didn’t answer some texts but we talked about it, and it was good after that” (E. Alice, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

“Before, we had to find a balance. Now we don’t need to talk every single hour. We are comfortable now, and we found our routine that works for us” (E. Kristina, personal communication, November 4, 2012).

“The fact that we talk every day and we dedicate time to our relationship has really help ease the fact that we don’t see each other very frequently” (E. Robert, personal communication, November 2, 2012).

Data Analysis

Differences being online and offline

When couples are online, they often feel they are missing non-verbal cues that could tell them how their significant other is truly feeling and if there is something bothering that person. Kristina explains that when she and her significant other are apart, the lack of non-verbal clues
can create misunderstandings. Kristina states, “When having online conversations, misinterpretations commonly occur, especially with text messages where the reader, to their will can decide emotional connotations.” Roberto also agrees with Kristina. Kristina further explains that when she communicates with her partner in-person there are not many misunderstandings and thus are able to enjoy their relationship more. Alice adds to this saying she feels she has to be more supportive emotionally with her partner and reassure him even more when they are apart than when they are together. For Kristina, being apart makes her unable to concentrate in her everyday tasks because she constantly wants to keep in touch. She wants to be talking with her partner on the phone or at least be texting him. She reiterates that they have grown in their relationship. Even though they have been apart, the relationship has been functional and they have improved as a couple by being more understanding and supporting of each other. Roberto explains that face-to-face interactions create a different sensation and environment for him, so no online interaction can offer the same feeling that face to face interaction offers; however, video chatting helps him feel the presence of his girlfriend. Alice says that one of the most important differences is that she has to use more words to express herself and express any feeling in general with her boyfriend.

Physical embracement and emotional connection

Roberto, the single male interviewed in this study, mentions physical embracement as something he misses from his significant other. Alice mentions that her partner tells her that he misses the physical embracement, such as hugging and kissing her, since they are apart. They used to be very affectionate when they were living in the same city. However, Alice, on the other hand, explains that she looked more for an emotional connection that she worked on to maintain in the relationship. She further explains that she can tolerate the little physical embracement, but
she needs the emotional connection and support from him. Alice says that being in a long
distance relationship requires more effort to create emotional connection because both partners
are busy doing different things and far away, which makes it harder to be in touch with the
partner’s feelings. Therefore, there are differences in what each partner misses from a face-to-
face relationship while in a long distance relationship.

*Managing goals and time when apart*

For Kristina, it was harder to accomplish her own personal goals when she was apart
from her significant other. She explains that she thought about him and became distracted by her
thoughts of him. Kristina is not satisfied with her needs of seeing him or being physically close
to him, which makes her miss him even more. However, for the other two participants, Roberto
and Alice, time is more flexible in their relationships since they have various ways of
communicating, such as video chatting and other Internet applications that Kristina is not able to
use with her partner. Roberto and Alice say that they accomplish daily tasks throughout the day
and interact with their partners when available. Alice further explains that she can dedicate more
time to her things while apart because she has more time to herself and there is no tension of
dividing time between her boyfriend and school.

*Preferred media*

These couples prefer the use of video chatting, and cellphones to maintain their
relationship and gain intimacy. But for two of the couples video chatting doesn’t work all the
time. One couple did not use this medium constantly only because of their bad Internet
connection, but would use it if they could. This is understandable given the fact that video
chatting is a media tool through which couples can see their faces, gestures, and have both verbal
and nonverbal communication. Cellphone is an easy and fast way to communicate with someone, and if it is used frequently, it can give the sense of connectedness.

**Media preference effect on relationship**

For Roberto and Alice, video chatting has a very positive effect in their relationship in the sense that video chatting makes them grow as a couple and helps them understand each other in order to continue with their relationship. They feel this is the closest way to achieve a physical feeling, which helps them feel better about their relationship and satisfy certain needs. This sense of almost being with the person brings more satisfaction. Alice explains, “You definitely can definitely tell more from [a video chat than when texting or talking through the phone].”

However, Kristina relies more on cellphone use since both her and her partner’s Internet connection does not work very well. She explains that talking through the phone is more personal than texting or using Facebook. Nonetheless, she explains that it is still difficult to communicate true feelings because they miss nonverbal clues. Thus, at times she sees the media they use as negative and other times as a very positive medium where she can communicate with the person she loves.

**Media usage to gain intimacy and closeness**

For Roberto and his partner, as well as for Alice, when they are video chatting with their romantic partners, it isn’t so much anymore about communicating all of the time, but about being able to see each other and know they are present. It is about sharing the same space even if they are not physically present. However, for Kristina it is more about communicating constantly and every day since she is missing the visual aspect in her relationship. She also mentions that multitasking is an important part of her relationship because they are both busy most of the time. Thus they need to be aware of the other’s work and goals. Sometimes Kristina may be doing
another task, but she still tries to talk with her partner or schedule times when they are able to do so. It is important to her to keep their intimacy going on when they don’t have a different kind of media to help them perceive and feel more intimacy, such as video chatting.

**Media usage rules**

The participants that were interviewed did not have to use explicit rules. They mostly rely on implicit rules learned through time and depending on the relationship. For all the participants, the primary implicit rule was to let each partner know about their availability and saying good night when they go to bed, so the other partner knows what is going on and does not stay wondering why the other person is not calling or that something may be wrong. The rule is to stay connected and to let each other know if they will be busy during the day or if they will be available after a certain time. Therefore, staying in touch is an important rule in a long distance relationship. Another implicit is that all participants said they talked everyday with their significant others, and this is just a rule that over time has been acquired by them. If one of the partners does not communicate, the other partner is left wondering what may have caused the unresponsiveness, which can lead to assumptions and thinking that the other person is mad, or possibly worried.

**Frequency and length of interactions and satisfaction**

Kristina and Alice believe they have a balanced relationship that depends on their availability. Individuals understand that they may have busy schedules and they need to be patient to talk with their partners.

In her interview, Alice explains that even though she is content with the relationship, her boyfriend would like to interact more and have more physical embracement, such as hugging and kissing. Similarly, Roberto describes that even though they have very flexible schedules and they
can talk for hours through Skype, these medium only helps ease the distance, but is not the same as being physically present. He continues, “We have a need for physical embracement.” Therefore, it seems to be that no matter how long or frequent the interactions are for men in the relationship, being in a long distance is harder for them because they always need that physical touch. Women seem to be able to tolerate little physical embracement for a longer period of time.

*Long distance relationships satisfaction*

Overall, all participants agree that as long as both partners are understanding of the situation they live in and resolve conflict when there is one, the relationship becomes better. As long as they can still talk about their problems, they are satisfied. They also agree that they miss each other very much when they are apart and Roberto even says, “This can lead to anxiety.” However, when they finally see in person, they feel all the satisfaction they need and also feel more comfortable with the relationship.

This study discovered the type of media that couples use the most, the way they use it, and how the use of media helps maintain their relationships. In the first research question it was important to find out what kind of quality of romantic relationship is cultivated online versus face to face. With this study, the researcher was able to know that long distance relationship partners maintain their relationship with constant communication via different types of media. The relationship cultivated online is very different from one that is face to face; however, couples use media to feel more connected to their partners and to be able to have a similar feeling as if they were face to face. The kind of relationship that is cultivated online is based on more trust, time, effort, communication, and understanding. According to this study, one of the most difficult parts of being in a long distance relationship was the lack of physical embracement that relationships that are geographically close usually have.
In the second research question, the author wanted to know what the relationship between the types of media used and relationship satisfaction, psychological intimacy, and closeness in romantic relationships looks like. This study discovered that couples use video chatting more often, followed by cellphone to create more intimacy and closeness in their relationships. Cellphone was used mostly when video chatting failed, but as a first option couples preferred video chatting since it gave them a feeling or sense of having their partner present.

Both research questions of this study were fully answered since we were able to learn from these relationships that long distance relationships are difficult to maintain and require more effort, time, and understanding from both partners, but are not impossible. All of the interviewed partners have been in relationships longer than a year and even though they have had struggles, the people they are with and their relationship as a whole satisfies their needs at least for the most part.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to understand how long distance relationships make use of media to manage their relationship. The interviews describe intimate feelings that partners have about their long distance relationship, their communication routines, and the importance the relationship has for them. Through these interviews, we were able to learn that the kind of romantic relationship that is cultivated online is very different from the one that is face to face. First of all, all the participants mentioned they had to be very understanding and patient with the partner in regards to time, schedules, and specially conversations, which many of the times can have misunderstandings. It is also a relationship that has to rely on media all or most of the time to maintain their relationship and media may not function all the time; therefore, reducing their satisfaction at times. In this kind of relationship, having quality communication becomes more
important since they do not have all the time they would want to keep building their relationship. They have to be more focused on their words and be able to express all they want in less time and in a more understanding and subtle way to avoid misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Contrast to other studies that have cell-phone as the primary and most important media tool used by long distance relationships, participants in this study preferred video chatting as the primary way to interact and connect as a couple. Only one participant said they used primarily cellphone because their Internet connection was very bad and would drop every video chatting call, so they preferred not to waste valuable time trying to fix it. However, this participant did explain that if it were not for the bad connection, they would use video chatting instead of cellphone. For the rest of the participants, video chatting is possible and it gives them a sense of closeness to their partner, which enhances their intimacy and satisfaction within the relationship. They may talk and text briefly by phone about certain subjects, but when they seek to have quality interaction as a couple, they use video chatting, such as Skype or Facetime as their intimate media.

Some of these findings can be related to the investment model theory of Carol E. Rusbult. This model explains that a relationship can last long if we have made significant investments in the relationship; this is independent of whether the rewards outweigh the costs or the costs outweigh the rewards (Rusbult, 1980). Long distance relationships require much more investment than a close romantic relationship; therefore, it could be that because people in a long distance relationship invest more effort in the relationship, it is harder to leave the relationship and easier or necessary to see the positive side, as well as eradicate any cognitive dissonance they could have about the relationship in order to feel satisfied.
Limitations of the study

Some of the limitations of this study is that we cannot generalize this study to a larger population, as three interviews with different people that have a long distance romantic relationship are not enough to describe all long distance relationships. In addition, only one partner of each relationship was interviewed, so this study is focusing in one interpretation of a relationship, instead of also analyzing if both partners in a relationship think alike regarding their long distance relationship. However, this study can serve as a pattern for future research in long distance relationships.

Conclusion

These interviews reveal patterns for communication that couples typically have and use to maintain their relationship. This study shows that these relationships are difficult to maintain and require more effort, time, and understanding from both partners, but are not impossible. All of the interviewed partners have been in relationships longer than a year and even though they have had struggles, the people they are with satisfy their needs, so this is how they are willing to take an extra step to maintain the relationship even though they are far the majority of the time.

In addition, long distance relationships survive through media, and in this day and age it is not just any media. It seems that couples now prefer the use of video chatting and cellphone to maintain their relationship and gain intimacy. Overall, long distance relationships will never completely satisfy what a face-to-face relationship satisfies, but given the new technology, there are ways to manage that distance and to be able to have a good relationship that can last for a long time. In future studies, more people that are in long distance relationships could be interviewed, and these could involve both partners in a relationship, instead of only one. This
way, there could be two sides of the story and a deeper understanding of what the couple as a whole believed of their long distance relationship.
References


APPENDIX I  Mediated Communication in Long Distance Romantic Relationships

Instructions: You will be asked a series of questions regarding your current relationship. You may stop, refuse to answer any question, and/or withdraw the study at any time.

1. How would you describe your relationship?
2. In what ways do you maintain your relationship when you rely on media all or most of the time?
3. How have your satisfaction needs been met in your long distance relationship?
4. What differences do you see and feel in the quality and satisfaction of your relationship interactions and involvements face-to-face versus through a medium?
5. What communication styles do you use when communicating long distance versus in person?
6. How do you manage your time and goals when you are apart from your significant other?
7. What kind of media do you mostly use to communicate with your romantic partner? Why?
8. What kind of rules do you have in the usage of this particular media?
9. Do you think this particular media(s) that you are choosing has any effect on your relationship satisfaction, psychological intimacy, and closeness? Why?
10. In what way do you make use of the media chosen in order to gain more psychological intimacy, closeness, and satisfaction with your partner?
11. Do you think that the frequency and length of the interactions you usually have with your partner affect your satisfaction needs? Why? And what have you done about it?