Can You Handle the Distance? A look into Social Media & the Affects on Long-Distance

Relationships

Bailey House, Marisa McGinty, and Linzy Heim

Concordia University - St. Paul

Abstract

The following research study focused on long distance romantic relationships and the communication used when faced with separation. Many different medias are utilized in relational maintenance and the literature review of this paper explores those options. Online communication and numerous social media sites can positively or negatively affect the relationship quality. After analyzing secondary research, a primary research study was conducted monitoring one newly formed college age couple and their communication for a four-week time period. When looking at the information and data collected, there were numerous examples to show the Social Penetration Theory in this couple's growing relationship. The final section offers limitations and suggestions for further research of similar studies.

Statement of purpose with overview of contents

Communication continuously changes with the development and shifts in the world and cultures. Long distance relationships are no stranger to communication evolutions. Whether it is romantic or non-romantic, the number of people who experience long distance communication in relationships is on the rise. Long distance relationships are a common form of dating in current culture. The relationships are often popular in younger generations and made possible by the expansion of social media tools, as well as advancements in technology. With millennials, the variety and reach of online communication can sometimes be troublesome to specific areas of romantic relationships such as privacy, jealousy, and authenticity to name a few. This study looked to explore the ways in which communication is affected by social media in romantic long distance relationships. According to Jones (2016) "Research indicates electronic communication is common in romantic relationships and may be particularly useful in long distance relationships." A closer look was taken at forms of online communication, specifically social

media. Furthermore, the main focus centers around different aspects of relationships that are most heavily influenced by media outlets. Satisfaction, loneliness and validity were examined closely.

The research concentrated on individuals in a long distance relationship and their experience of different levels of satisfaction within the relationship as a whole. Primarily, the research analyzed whether social media acted as a positive form of communication between partners. In addition to examining if specific outlets such as FaceTime and other technological advances enhanced or interfered with relationship quality, the study analyzed if social media acts as a positive form of communication between partners or if it interferes and causes issues. These ideas are explored and addressed with this study.

Literature Review

Computer Mediated Communication in Long Distance Relationship

The Internet is a crucial part in our everyday lives. Because of its presence, online relationships are becoming more and more common and are "the least understood and studied relationship type" (Bonebraker, 2002, p.553). However, long distance relationships are not unlike close proximity relationships. Research suggested similarities in the process of how a relationship gets started when compared to traditional face-to-face interaction. The same phases of attraction, mere exposure effect, and common values and beliefs are all present in both types. Pauley and Emmers-Sommer (2007), found "61 percent of people who use Internet at home maintained some type of interpersonal relationship using computer mediated communication" (p. 412). In this study, researchers found the primary form of online communication was texting formats such as chat programs or instant messaging (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). "In

2015, approximately 99% of US cell phone owners between the ages of 18 to 49 sent and received text messages" (Jones, 2016).

An aspect of online communication studied is media richness and its correlation with intimacy. As noted in Pauley & Emmers-Sommer's study, face-to-face communication showed the most positive outcomes when dealing with intimacy and self-disclosure. When understanding online communication, past research suggested using more synchronous communication supported a higher level of intimacy rather than asynchronous communication (Pauley, Emmer-Sommer, 2007). Thus requiring more effort from both partners, in long distance relationships utilizing communication online, to maintain consistent interactions that happen when both parties are present to respond.

The differences in intimacy levels may be related to the uncertainty reduction and information seeking which happens when there is a lack of cues typically received in face-to-face communication. These cues include nonverbal, verbal, physical proximity, and physical attractiveness. Without the use of cues, intimacy is not as easily achieved online. It is built over time by self-disclosure. Intimacy occurs differently online because profiles are easily manipulated and responses can be delayed for extended amounts of time. Online also has the impact of personal perception of the other person as well as the individual itself. One may present his or herself in a certain way in order to appeal to the other person. Pictures, items liked, and comments made can paint a specific picture of the way someone wants to be as opposed to the way they are in real life. According to Bonebraker (2002), self-disclosure online can sped up the relationship more rapidly than traditional face-to-face relationships since it is easier to share this information online when it is through a screen with less pressure. Online communication is however, cautioned because of the possibility of deception.

When further analyzing Computer Mediated Communication, some unique characteristics were brought forth. Pauley and Emmers-Sommer saw through their participants online, fewer impressions of others are formed, but the opinions formed are stronger. On the other side, people tend to be more honest with one another and are less socially conscious. With the chance to create the perfect message to send online via asynchronous chat, an "unrealistic positive impression of their relationship partner" is produced (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007, p. 411). Self-presentation online gives complete control to how one wants to be viewed. This can be a negative aspect seeing as "63% of the sample lied in their online interactions" (Bonebraker, 2002, p. 555). All online communication is up to the how the users wants to utilize its convenience. Whether it be to take advantage of the system or actually grow a relationship is a personal decision. In addition to instant chat programs, email communication can influence intimacy and self-disclosure.

Email communication holds both positive and negative affects on relationships. A study of college students and their use of relational management strategies found, those who used email as a way to maintain their relationships exhibited openness and positivity with friends, family, and romantic partners (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2012). It is warned however, that utilizing email may not always result in relationships being maintained. Many choose to look for connections online due to the ease of finding someone with similar interest. Participants with higher loneliness and surprisingly lower social skill scores, found it easier to find people similar to them online and form a relationship. In a study done by Bonebraker (2002), "36 out of 104 college students found some type of relationship online, either professional, friendship, close friendship or romantic" (p. 554). The greater amount of time a participant spends online, the more possibilities new relationships will form.

Social Media Usage in Long Distance Relationship

"In 2014, 71% of social networking users over 18 reported accessing Facebook on their smartphone, 30% reported accessing LinkedIn and Pinterest, and approximately 25% reported accessing Instagram or Twitter" (Jones, 2016). With the online world continuing to grow and produce different outlets for communication, social media plays an important role in long distance relationships. Social networking sites, when used effectively, can be a positive influence on intimacy and happiness in relationships. However, if those involved in the relationships already possess low self-esteem, relationship happiness will be lower and jealousy will be higher (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Relationships are threatened with social media when individuals involved have a high need for popularity. This in turn leads to jealousy on social networking sites. Couples who posted heavily, sharing pictures and updates of their relationship, sometimes experienced a watchdog effect. "This impression management function can backfire by progressing into an obsessive information seeking function" (Hultgren, 2013, p.22). With regard to happiness, researchers found neither high nor low self-esteem had an impact on relational happiness when using social networking sites (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig & Wigley, 2008). However, it is indicated the loss of nonverbal cues in long distance relationships placed greater importance on verbal communication. When verbal communication was satisfactory, then positive levels of affection were achieved (Hultgren, 2013).

Relationship Quality in Long Distance Relationship

Long distance relationships consist of a unique set of circumstances to ensure that the quality and stability of the relationship is upheld. Because face-to-face interaction is limited, couples must find ways to maintain happiness and reduce uncertainty. When long distance

relationships are defined based on interaction-by-interaction, couples have greater satisfaction, intimacy, and partner responsiveness than those in geographically close relationships (Hultgren, 2013). Not always do couples get to see one another as often as they would like, but this can benefit the relationship because once they come together face-to-face, these interactions will then provide a greater sense of intimacy between partners, ultimately increasing quality, commitment, stability, and providing less feelings of constraint for the relationship. In some situations, individuals felt a lack of individuality when they felt their partner reached out too many times over text and voice calls (Hultgren, 2013). This was strenuous on the relationship because it showed either a lack of trust or some other form of dependency that may not always be healthy for a relationship. College student interviewees referred to the LDR as "an investment for the future" (Pistole, Roberts, Mosko, 2010, p. 147) Others felt a disconnect with partners who they perceived did not communicate enough (Hultgren, 2013). Long distance relationship partners may rely on verbal communication, with open communication signaling the partner's availability (Pistole, Roberts, Mosko, 2010). "Dialectical tension in romantic relationships will only increase in severity and number, as society continues to put more emphasis on cell phone use as a primary means of communication. Concrete or objective rules for cell phone use in a relationship do not exist. In order to have balanced autonomy-connection dialectics, two people must have the same level of availability expectations for cell phone use" (Hultgren, 2013, p.22).

Long distance relationships suffer through difficulties with regard to online communication and relationship quality. If a discussion is not held before the long distance relationship begins, it is likely each individual involved will perceive situations differently through the communication lens, thus, leading to a decrease in stability. While being constantly connected such as consistently speaking and interacting with a significant other in a long

distance relationship, conversations tend to become mundane. Conversations such as these involve the "same talk regarding daily activities and experiences" (Hultgren, 2013, p. 25). Couples often run into the issue of not being able to share in-person moments while in their long distance relationship, which again leads to having the same conversation over and over, threatening both their stability and communication.

Along with stability, satisfaction is another key aspect that many people seek in a long distance relationships (LDR). This type of relationship is seen to be more common among college students during the past few decades (Sahlstein, 2004). A LDR can be the choice of different colleges that the couple decide to go to or a job that brings them to a different place than their significant other. With the expansion of technology, this has opened up many opportunities for couples to communicate with each other and maintain their relationship without having to terminate it on account of the physical distance that separates them. Couples search for some type of communication that helps keep their relationship stable because in a LDR, there can be obstacles that are not always easy to overcome.

McKinnels (1994) found that one third of college students will involve themselves in a LDR that is defined as a fifty-mile radius. A 25-item questionnaire was administered to over 150 undergraduate students who had either been in a LDR or was in one at that time. The results showed that the obstacles that couples experienced made the relationship worse in 20% of those who had currently been in that type of relationship. Also, another 20% said that their past relationship had ended for the reason of the physical distance between the pair and if they were given the opportunity to be in another LDR, they would choose to deny that. This study suggested a friendship before the romantic relationship is a good foundation that helps the couple cope with the separation aspect of the relationship, but the connection between the two is the

main focus of keeping the relationship alive and healthy. Being in close proximity may not always be the answer to relationship satisfaction, but quality communication triumphs quantity of communication when it comes to LDR.

Stability and satisfaction are good components to have in a relationship that have the added element of distance. Like most things, it is two sided. Sometimes distance can be beneficial, other times it can cause tension between the couple. Loneliness is defined by Peplau and Perlman (1982) as an emotional state of mind resulting from inconsistencies between expected and achieved social contact. Loneliness is a big factor when it comes to long distance relationships. Couples may be very committed to each other but when it comes time to separate, their loneliness can sometimes be unbearable.

Satisfaction and stability are all real factors in close proximity relationships. But how valid are those factors in long distance relationships? Try adding the element of loneliness to the previous group of factors, how do you think that will affect the relationship? Many scholars have claimed that a vital piece to a successful relationship is close proximity (Stafford, 2005). Compared to close proximity relationships, studies have shown that couples in long distance relationships spend significantly less time on face-to-face interactions together (Dellmann-Jenkins, 1994). To get a better idea of this claim, researchers have reported that long distance couples spend approximately every 23 days apart compared to people in close proximity relationships (Guldner & Swensen, 1995). However, other research has been done to combat the earlier stated claims. Other studies have shown that long distance relationships are just as satisfying as close proximity relationships (Stafford, 2005).

Defining a long distance relationship into one clear and concise definition is challenging, since it is a greatly situational topic. For some, it is defined as having a large amount of distance

between the couple i.e. living in different cities (Helgeson, 1994). In other situations, it can be defined as only seeing each other twice a week, because of having two separate households and other assorted living situations (Holmes, 2004). Along with distance and separate living situations, other couples that consider themselves long distance have even put themselves into that category because they only see each other a few times during the workweek because of their busy careers (Bunker, Zubek, Vanderslice, & Rice, 1992).

Pistole & Roberts (2011) examined the factor structure of the LDR index and provided evidence supporting the external aspect of its validity. To create a solid foundation for the LDR index, Pistole & Roberts (2011) asked participants about their sex, age, educational status, dating/marital status, and their ethnicity. Along with asking participants about those demographics, couples were asked if they classified themselves as a LDR couple or a CP (close proximity) couple, as well as stating some couples live geographically close to one another and some do not; their goal was to look deeper into the differences and similarities between the two.

Time together and relational importance are factors to consider when determining if a relationship is valid or not (Pistole & Roberts, 2011). The couples that scored high on the LDR index reported that geographic distance was a barrier to daily physical togetherness (Pistole & Roberts, 2011). When it comes to long distance relationships, the factor that is most difficult to measure is time together. Everyone has different definitions of what that means. For some, talking on the phone, FaceTime, and texting defines being together. Especially when in a long distance relationship, this type of definition stands true. However, couples in close proximity relationships would not consider the previously stated examples as time together. Research ultimately has shown that the external validity of long distance relationships is present within the

relationship, in the same way that it is present in close proximity relationships (Pistole & Roberts, 2011).

Due to varying definitions, room for disapproval may be presented threatening the validity of relationships. LDR formed online can still be considered a nontraditional relationship. Because of this, nontraditional relationships are likely to experience "less approval, acceptance, and support from social network members and society in general compared to individuals involved in more traditional romantic involvements" (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006, p. 41). Less support and social acceptance of LDR might pose as a threat to the relationship quality and satisfaction, but affecting levels of commitment. The growing number of online LDR would suggest, however the recognition and validity of these relationship will become non marginalized in the coming years.

Research Questions/Hypotheses and justification

Though there is extensive literature concerning social media's role in relational maintenance in many of the articles contained within the literature review, current research has not fully explored social media's role in maintenance of long distance relationships. With the huge presence of technology in our culture today, it can make communicating with a significant other easier through multiple asynchronous and synchronous options. Today "one in five 18-24 year olds report using mobile dating apps" (Pew Research, 2016, para 1). That statistic is a contributing factor to long distance relationships since distance does not separate you online. According to Statistic Brain 2016, 14 million Americans are in a long distance relationship, with the average distance away being 125 miles. "Increased communication time and effective conflict management skills were two factors that contributed to making the move to face-to-face communication" from an online relationship (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). This study

focused specifically on site preference as well as how platforms were specifically used in maintaining the relationship while apart, thus leading to the research question: How do couples in long distance relationships use social media and other platforms in their relational maintenance?

Methodology

For this study of long distance relationships and social media sites, research was conducted using one newly formed couple, currently attending college and in the range of eighteen to twenty-four years old. Long distance is defined as a couple who is in a relationship and is separated by one hundred twenty five miles or more. In order to get the most accurate results, this experiment was field dependent with the couple separated by distance. Convenience sampling was used to find a couple. A major limitation of this research study is the sensitivity of information being disclosed. The lack of intimate topics that may not have been shared due to it being too personal prove difficult for the couple to open up to researchers whom they are not familiar with.

A single-subject research design was utilized to insure a baseline for which to refer back once the research was started. According to Frankel, Wallen, and Hyun (1993) single-subject research design is defined as "research that focuses on individual study participants, rather than groups." A pre-interview was conducted to achieve a baseline of communication interaction, and then later, a post-test to examine the extent the communication changed. The time period for this study was a longitude study spanning over a month. In the first week, the couple was allowed to use the platforms of their liking in order to stay in touch with one another. After examining which platforms were considered to be most comfortable, the familiar communication channels were replaced by a new communication format. Week two focused on increased communication

through adding the independent variable of phone calls, while week three increased the use of social media platforms the couple had not used prior to this study. Observations were collected with close attention to how the communication shifted between the individuals, along with new communication patterns or strategies used, and how these influences impacted the satisfaction of the relationship. The last week consisted of a post-interview to evaluate if the couple returned to their old communication patterns or continued to implement the communication strategies introduced in week two and three.

The qualitative data for this study was collected using journal entries written by each individual, observations during interviews, and a log of the couple's communication times. With these three different methods, a detailed view of the communication between the two was provided. The information gathering techniques offered a broad perspective on the subject from multiple viewpoints. Not only was personal information provided by the individuals on their perspectives of the communication within the relationship, but also information collected by the researchers observing the same patterns externally.

For this study the pre-interview and post-interview were an extensive semi structured interview where the couple was asked questions to help the researchers understand how each individual felt and their thoughts toward their chosen communication. This information was recorded and transcribed by all of the researchers in notes and later coded thematically. Within the four weeks of the case study, weekly half hour meetings occurred. Journal entries describing the feelings of the couple and the communication shared between the two were collected at that time.

Results

To conduct the research study a couple with the of ages 20 and 21 were found through the process of non-probability convenience sampling. The couple's relationship was maintained across a distance of 1,158 miles. The study took place over a four-week period. During this time, individual meetings were held with the participants as well as and the individuals were given a journal assignment with detailed accounts of their day-to-day communication and personal reactions. Through the use of face-to-face interviews with each individual, the information obtained included a number of findings that supported our hypothesis of how couples in long distance relationships use social media and other platforms for relational maintenance.

Each week of the study, communication was manipulated to understand if social media had a positive or negative impact on the relationship. The first week was used to get to know the couple and their background while week two was dedicated to communication over phone calls. During the third week of the study, the couple was asked to rely on communication through social media. It was during the second week, we found evidence that suggested voice calls were the best for relational maintenance. By taking social media out of the immediate communication channel, the couple was then forced to overcome the comfort of normal communication patterns that heavily relied on social media platforms. The data suggested that more information is disclosed during voice calls and FaceTime as opposed to social media platforms. The couple also experienced higher levels of satisfaction in their relationship over the course of this week.

The use of many social media tools helped to maintain and grow the relationship over the four-week period in which the study took place. Although not all social media was equal in creating relational closeness, we found a positive growth when social media was used as a supplement and not the main form of communication. On the third week, interactions were

manipulated to occur primarily over social media channels, however, there was a decrease in relational satisfaction which led to negative attitudes toward the relationship. Thus, social media was best used in addition to the couple's communication style of texting with limited phone calls ranging from 1-3 times per week with 10-15 minute conversations.

The rate of disclosure was a key item monitored throughout the study. Each week led to an increased rate of disclosure. When analyzing the number of times phone calls were utilized as well as the length of the conversations, the claim of increased disclosure was supported. In the pre-test, the couple stated phone calls were not their preferred method of communication, rather texting was more comfortable and common. During the third week of the case study, the couple was forced to increase their interactions over the phone. In the beginning of the week, the length of the conversation was on average 10-15 minutes. However, each day the conversations got longer and by the end of the week the couple was averaging 30-40 minutes.

As the couple became more comfortable with one another, they become more comfortable with the study. This process led to new disclosure of more personal information each week. Not only were longer conversations achieved but more information shared. This self-disclosure was more in depth than the couple allowed back in week one. Some topics discussed were political preferences, taking stances on issues that were important in each person's life, how each got along with family members and how those relationships have changed with age, and what each other's biggest fears were in life. To note the change in disclosure, topics covered in week one were for example, favorite television shows, favorite part about the state they lived in, classes and assignments for each day, and what each other's roommates were like. Overall, the evidence presented a positive increase in disclosure with each week but when looking separately at male and female disclosure rates, the results of the study noted the female subject disclosed

more information at a faster rate than the male subject. The next section takes a closer look into the supporting evidence of how the couple used social media and other platforms within their long distance relationship to ensure relational maintenance.

Discussion

Social Penetration Theory

When dealing with a long distance relationship, there are a lot of factors that go into ensuring its success. The way you act towards the relationship can be key, but also the actions you take can either benefit or harm the relationship. The basic idea of self-disclosure in the Social Penetration Theory is one of the main concepts that you see when relationships begin to develop and can be most effective when information is given a little at a time and reciprocated (Taylor & Altman, 1987). This theory is closely related to the idea of an onion. People start out with disclosing small and simple things that generate small talk, but then as the relationship grows, one can see the self-disclosure increases while the nature of the information given increases. This may represent personal or more intimate information that can allow the couple to feel more connected to one another. Atlman and Taylor related people to onions when it comes to self-disclosure. There are four layers of the onion, but at this point of the case study and in the couple's relationship, because it is so new, they only exemplify three of the four stages.

In this case study, we found that the outermost layer of "the onion" was illustrated by the usage of social media, more specifically. This layer of the onion is where basic information is disclosed before the personal information. The rate of such disclosure occurs more frequently at this stage due to the low sensitivity of information being disclosed. The deeper the layer, the lower the frequency of disclosure. Snapchat was utilized as a way to save face and portray the self that was most liked in the relationship. Snapchat was one of the main ways that they

communicated. This social media platform gave the couple the chance to send pictures to each other that would only last about 10 seconds at max as well as the opportunity to present themselves in a way that would seem appealing. When talking with the female participant, she had mentioned how she would make sure her makeup and hair was in place before sending a snap to him because she wanted to present herself in a way that she knew he liked. This was the couple's chosen way of initially communicating in the first two weeks of the study because they were especially fond of the idea that you could see the other person's face but only for up to 10 seconds, which built the anticipation for the next Snapchat encounter. The multiple features within this one communication application such as sending just plain text messages, pictures with text, videos, and the capability to draw on the screen, allowed for a more fun and interactive way of sending information. Because of this, Snapchat had a dual purpose. Not only was this platform used for sending pictures back and forth, the couple also took advantage of the instant messaging section. In relation to the theory, disclosure starts small, and in the couple's conversation over Snapchat, it was light topics about random information, which was considered surface level.

Research has shown that one of the reasons as to why a couple chooses to disclose information at a small and short rate is because participants see more of a risk if they disclose too much information and fear that it could damage the relationship by losing respect (Derlega, V. J., Winstead, B. A., Mathews, A., & Braitman, A. L., 2008). Communicating is not just what is said, but as well as what is portrayed through your body language. Even though the initial thoughts toward social media were positive, the course of the study revealed negativity when asked to rely heavily on it for day-to-day conversation. Both described it after the fourth week as "forced, frustrating, and more difficult to communicate." In addition to making it hard to

maintain significant conversations over such short interactions, the couple found the platform to be disruptive with multiple alerts throughout the day.

After manipulating interactions to occur apart from social media, we then found that the next layer of the onion was exemplified through the idea of texting. This was an additional form of communication the couple enjoyed using. As it relates to the theory, the deeper into the onion, the more information is disclosed, connecting the couple at a more intimate level (Taylor & Altman, 1987). We saw this develop through texting because it allowed the couple to be able to go back into the conversation and review or reread the conversation at their convenience, whereas that was not an option when using Snapchat. For that reason, as the study went on, there was an increase in texting within the couple's communication because it allowed the couple to have a longer and more intimate conversation. This helped the couple disclose more personal information that was then further discussed when it came to their phone calls.

The next layer of the onion that we interpreted was their phone calls. As we analyzed the data that was collected in week three, we found that at this point when the couple was forced to communicate over the phone more, their relationship reached the third level of the onion. At this level, the theory explains that penetration can be fast at the beginning of the relationship but slows down when approaching the inner layers (Taylor & Altman, 1987). There is always some kind of resistance, but this couple managed to reach this level, making their relationship more meaningful to each other. Although this form of communication was not used as often in the beginning, after the third week was done both individuals commented that the communication over the phone was "better conversation, easier to communicate, and faster time length to get caught up." The one downfall of communicating over the phone was that both individuals missed seeing each other's face which was an important aspect of the social media platform. The

outcome of that week was very positive and the communication over the phone continued after we were done with this particular manipulation.

"I feel the relationship comes full circle discussing the items we exchanged over snap and text to be then talked about over the phone. It makes me actually feel like I am communicating with a human."

Over the course of the study, the couple was able to engage in a face-to-face encounter between weeks three and four. While together they experienced an increased amount of satisfaction due to the disclosure that was given prior to seeing each other. This helped make their communication easier and flow smoothly. The couple also experienced relational maintenance by being able to express affection in gifts with the use of information disclosed during long distance. Understanding more about each other in the deeper layers of the onion allowed for a greater sense of togetherness and in turn decreased instability. This was presented in the case study when the participants interacted face-to-face. The exchange of gifts that were meaningful provided feedback to each partner, allowing for an understanding that both were present and involved in the communication in prior weeks. In the weeks that led up to the encounter, we saw the self-disclosure change. Previous research has suggested that people are more likely to disclose more personal information over social media rather than face-to-face (Wang, H., & Andersen, P. 2007). We saw the same pattern in our case study with our participants at first, but as time had gone on, they became more comfortable with each other because they became more familiar with each other. Although intimacy online is based on perception from other person's point of view, the couple was able to break this barrier of long distance relationships because they were able to meet face-to-face for a short period of time and not solely rely on social media communication.

Each layer of the onion reveals a different level of self-disclosure. We saw this in the communication between participants and also interactions in the individual's interviews with us. Nonverbal communication was a big indicator of the way the relationship was developing. As the weeks progressed, in the study the amount of disclosure increased in all aspects. The main way we were able to understand this disclosure was through nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues can suggest something the participant does not say out loud but subconsciously communicates through their body and interactions. The individuals were excited to share information about their relationship to us; they were happy with full smiles, giddy, blushing, smiling through the eyes, and body language was relaxed and open. However, when we asked more in depth questions that may be personal, the participants touched their neck, fidgeted with hands, played with a coffee cup, broke eye contact, played with hair, and closed off body language. Paying attention to body language gave us an idea of how they were feeling towards a particular topic without them vocalizing it. An example of this was when they were asked to talk about the conversation of their phone calls to one another. Having previous knowledge from the female participant of what topics were discussed due to the scheduling of interviews, the male's communication patterns were more evident. The male participant immediately became more nervous than his calm and collected self with the nature of the information being more heavy and private. When asked to disclose the information he stuttered through sentences, looked down at the ground, and rubbed his neck. These were all signs of nonverbal cues that were seen throughout the case study that played a big role into understanding the couple's relationship and how comfortable they felt disclosing information.

Overall, the couple was able to overcome the distance and maintain their relationship with the use of social media, texting, and voice communication. Each element alone would not

be as effective for maintaining, but together they allow for a more interactive relationship. Over the course of the study, evidence was presented that supported the couple's relational stability. Because both participants shared their expectations of communication patterns and availability in the beginning of the relationship, they were able to increase stability early on. We found this to be the driving factor of relational maintenance and something the couple could fall back on if instability was to arise.

Conclusion

In this research study, the findings concluded that couples in long distance relationships enjoy being able to communicate over social media and find it helpful when the platform involves some kind of video or picture feature so the individuals are able to see each other. When faced with the obstacle of distance, social media was the couples main form of communication feel connected and communicate new and different information together.

Limitations

When conducting a study, there are limitations which arise throughout the process. These restrictions can sometimes affect the results of a study in different ways. One limitation faced in this study is only analyzing one couple. Only one relationship viewpoint was described as opposed to multiple, differing viewpoints. In most cases, one relationship has little affect because there are not the statistical figures of a large group to support findings and also limited evidence to compare said finding to. In future studies, broadening the scope of the study to include more couples could help to find a consistent effect of social media on long distance relationships.

One challenge faced was the sensitivity of the information presented and how the couple could react to sharing that information with strangers. Interviewing becomes a balancing act in order to ensure the individuals feel comfortable with each researcher. The delicacy of the

information also leads to a limitation of confidentiality. A separation must lie between the researchers and each individual to keep each disclosure confidential.

Finally, the study was limited to a four-week period. Such a short amount of time simply cannot dive deep enough into a relationship to understand everything that is going on outside of the interviews. While four weeks is sufficient to see some change and adaption of communication styles, a longer case study could provide better supporting evidence for the hypothesis.

Suggestions for future research

With the limitations of this study in mind, future research is suggested to further explore multiple couples participating in long distance relationships. Specifically, how social media could influence certain aspects of a relationship like loneliness and jealousy, because this study primarily focused on technologies used to enrich communication, it is suggested future research study the implications technology and social media have on the quality of relationships.

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