LONG-DISTANCE DATING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS:

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF USING TECHNOLOGY

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

LONG-DISTANCE DATING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS:

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF USING TECHNOLOGY

Presented by Loni Dansie

A candidate for the degree of Masters of Science

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Colleen Colaner

DEDICATION

A very special thanks to all of my long-distance love affairs, and the insight gleaned from these valued experiences. Little did you know I was taking notes!

Also, thanks to my faithful friends who endured long nights in Gentry and other accommodating locations. To Melissa Schotthofer, Colleen Pruett, Youngjin Kang, and all the rest – you not only left an impression on the seats of Gentry, but also in my heart.

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ABSTRACT

As many as 75% of college students are or will eventually be in a long-distance dating

relationship (LDDR), relying on various communication technologies to connect with

their partner. This study seeks to explore the use, frequency, and satisfaction with

technology among college students, and its impact on their relationship satisfaction. A

sample of 463 college students completed a mixed-methods online survey about a current

LDDR. The results from frequency analyses revealed texting, phone calls, and video

chats to be the most popular methods of communication among college students, the

majority of which reported texting and calling their partner daily. In open-ended

responses, participants' described several overlapping "pros and cons" of relying on

technology to maintain an intimate relationship. Discussion and directions for future

research are included.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Romantic Relationships among Young Adults

Though romantic relationships remain prominent in young adulthood, the experiences in these relationships have changed dramatically in the past 50 years. Many young adults prolong their dating careers, postponing marital commitments until financial and educational stability are obtained (Arnett, 2000; Smock & Manning, 2004). This translates into longer periods of time that young adults remain unmarried, presenting more opportunities for dating and romantic relationships. Romantic relationships in young adulthood can yield social, emotional, and physical benefits. During this period of exploration, identity may continue to form in terms of one's ability to competently obtain intimacy with another (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Intimate relationships can offer a sense of belonging and boost one's sense of "mattering" (Mak & Marshall, 2004). Similarly, these relationships can improve one's emotional wellbeing for both men and women because "they provide a valued social identity, increase feelings of self worth, and are a source of social integration during the transition to adulthood" (Simon & Barrett, 2010, p. 177). Additionally, college students in relationships may show fewer mental health issues, risky behaviors, and health problems compared to students not in a relationship (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010).

Recently, the appearance of romantic relationships among young adults has changed; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman (2004) estimated that 60% of all couples cohabitate before marriage. Jamison and Ganong (2010) explored the phenomenon of "stayover" relationships among college students who sought the benefits of spending the night together while not committing to cohabitation or marriage. "Hook-ups", or casual

sexual encounters with no clear expectation of a committed relationship, have also surfaced as a common experience among college students (Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2010).

Long-Distance Relationships

Though many young adults appear to avoid commitment, others demonstrate the determination to maintain their relationships despite the fluctuations of life, particularly the relocation to attend college or to pursue an occupation. Long-distance relationships have gained increasing prevalence among couples in the United States. Bergen, Kirby, and McBride (2007) estimate that nearly three million married Americans live away from their spouse. This phenomenon is also apparent in the lives of young adults as they separate from family, friends, and dating partners during the transition from high school to college (Arnett, 2000; Johnson, Haigh, Craig, & Becker, 2009).

Prevalence among college students. It has been estimated that as many as one third of college students date someone long-distance (Aylor, 2003), and that up to 75% will eventually enter a long-distance dating relationship (LDDR; Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994). Some researchers have explored the benefits, challenges, and necessity of maintaining long-distance relationships (see Merolla, 2010; Stafford, 2005). Inherent challenges in these unique relationships include limited face-to-face time with one's partner and fewer opportunities to provide physical support and affection. Results from research indicate contradicting experiences of LDDR couples; some LDDR individuals reported higher satisfaction with their relationship and communication than geographically close partners (Stafford & Reske, 1990), though other LDDR individuals reported more depressive symptoms than their peers in

geographically close relationships (GCR; Guldner, 1996). Many of the couples in these studies relied on long-distance phone calls and letters to communicate with each other, though the evolution of communication technology in the past 20 years threatens the findings of past research.

Technology Use in the United States

According to the latest polls from the Pew Research Center, 83% of adults in the United States own a cell phone, and place an average of 12 calls per day (Smith, 2011a). This average jumps to 17 calls per day among individuals 18-29 years old. The survey results also indicated that while 53% of users claim to prefer phone calls, 31% prefer text messaging, and 14% say "it depends". Perhaps not surprisingly, those who text frequently prefer receiving texts instead of phone calls. Among cell phone users, 73% send and receive an average of ten text messages per day. The rate of texting peaks among young adults age 18-29, who reportedly send/receive a median of 40 texts per day (Smith, 2011a).

Smart phones, laptops, and tablets bring other methods of communicating within one's immediate reach. Email remains one of the top online activities; among online adults, 92% use email with 61% using it daily (Purcell, 2011). About two-thirds of online adults use social network sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn, to stay in touch with friends and family members (Smith, 2011c). Of the 845 million monthly users of Facebook, over 425 million accessed their accounts through a mobile device ("Newsroom Fact Sheet," n.d.). Video chats, Twitter, and blogs also allow online individuals to see, hear, or read the latest updates from other users, including romantic partners.

Clearly, phone calls, texts, emails, instant messages (IM), video chats, and many other methods help build and maintain relationships between individuals both far and near. This is especially true for young adults raised in the "digital age". Today, college students tend to have frequent access to modern communicative technology, and reportedly use them at higher rates compared to older adults (Johnson et al., 2009; Zickuhr, 2010). Perhaps their comfort and ease of using technology also enhances the relationships they are required to maintain at a distance.

Tools for relationship maintenance. Several studies have explored the technologies college students use to communicate with loved ones while away at school. A 2011 study conducted by Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman, and Nadorff found that of 211 college students, all reported using phone calls to communicate with a parent, while almost two-thirds used email and text, and only about a quarter used social networks to stay in touch. These rates may be higher when students communicate with their peers and romantic partners. Among a sample of students living at least 200 miles away from their partner, over half talked on the phone and/or emailed their partner several times per week. Furthermore, 22% talked on the phone at least once a day, and 8.8% talked several times a day (Knox, Zusman, Daniels, & Brantley, 2002).

The nature of the communication may vary depending on the content of the messages, as well as the relationship between senders. According to Reid and Reid (2010) college students tend to use texting more for relationship-focused communication. They report that one-third of texts young adults send and receive were for practical purposes, while the remaining two-thirds involved communication related to friendships and romantic relationships. In a separate study of college students, emails with family

members and friends were generally tailored to relationship maintenance including conversations about common activities and social networks, while emails with romantic partners were more likely to include assurances, openness, and positivity (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008).

The inception of Facebook in 2004 created a new pathway of sharing personal information, experiences, and ideas with others. Facebook, and other popular social network sites, allow individuals to send private or public messages, instant message, share pictures, and follow the activities and interests of others. The "chat" function of Facebook is commonly utilized among college students for multitasking while completing schoolwork, searching the Internet, checking and updating profile information, and conversing with multiple persons. According to Quan-Haase (2008), a majority of college students reported using instant messaging, 69% using it daily and 29% using it weekly.

Satisfaction with communication technologies. College students use various communication technologies on a daily basis to contact family and friends, however, few studies have specifically explored the user's satisfaction with these tools. Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) found that many students reportedly spend an average of 30 minutes to several hours on Facebook daily, though this method proved unfulfilling for those who became emotionally attached and preoccupied with their connections with "friends". Baym, Zhang, and Lin (2004) found that while students integrated technology into their social lives, face-to-face communication remained the preferred mode of interaction. LDDR and GCR couples may employ phone, email, and chat at similar rates (Stafford & Merolla, 2007), though physical time together remains widely unequal.

Therefore, further exploration is needed to understand how effective each technology is in maintaining satisfying long-distance romantic relationships.

Factors Related to Relationship Satisfaction in LDDRs

The contradiction of being together while living apart presents unique challenges to LDDRs (Sahlstein, 2004). Long-distance couples could face discouragement and loneliness after comparing their relationship to geographically-close relationships (Stafford, 2010). However, effective communication skills could alleviate feelings of isolation and stress (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Meitzner & Li-Wen, 2005).

Communication. Some couples have learned to manage the stress of separation through openness and positivity, which were found to be positively related to relationship satisfaction among long-distance couples (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Couples who are more satisfied with their long-distance relationship tend to actively cope with extensive time apart by altering their conversations to be more intimacy based, and talking about the relationship more often than geographically close couples in order to increase trust and loyalty (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford, 2010). LDDR conversations likely include more self-disclosure than GCR conversations, which generally gravitate toward daily, impersonal topics (Johnson et al., 2009).

Though their conversations may contain more intimate themes, LDDR couples tend to avoid topics that could lead to conflict or discomfort as to not ruin their limited time spent communicating, or they may choose to save uncomfortable conversations for their time together when they can discuss serious matters face-to-face (Salhstein, 2004; 2006). Couples may intentionally avoid uncomfortable topics, while in other cases these issues may simply be blocked by physical constraints (Stafford & Reske, 1990).

Regardless of the reason, avoidance of conflict could create unrealistic idealizations of the distant partner.

Idealization. Stafford and Merolla (2007) studied idealization, reminiscing, and perceived agreement among LDDR couples, hypothesizing that conflict avoidance could perpetuate idealization. They found that LDDR couples reported significantly higher levels of perceived agreement and idealistic distortion than GCR couples, and that LDDR couples engaged in more "impression management" to improve their partner's (and their own) view of the relationship. These findings support previous research illustrating the higher likelihood of idealization among LDDR couples (Stafford & Reske, 1990).

To outsiders, it may seem that LDDR couples interact in a veiled world. However, not all "deception" is detrimental. It could be the force that holds both LDDR and GCR couples together through the early trial phase of the relationship (Stafford & Reske, 1990). Similarly, LDDR couples may cope with the challenge of separation by daydreaming about their partner, or attaching meaning to various symbols (e.g. photos, keepsakes, songs, activities) that help them feel closer to their partner (Holt & Stone, 1988; Pistole, Roberts, & Mosko, 2010). Reminiscing could serve as a signal of attachment behaviors, increasing emotional bonds, and connection to one's partner.

Attachment. LDDRs often mirror the separation-reunion cycle featured in studies of attachment (Pistole, 2010). For example, a couple may separate for a specified amount of time, later spend a long weekend or holiday break together, then eventually return to their separate lives, repeating the cycle. Attachment bonds in adulthood are also revealed in caregiving behaviors. Generally, caregiving requires both partners to be physically present to exchange physical and emotional support in times of distress. However,

because LDDR couples are unable to physically offer affection, comfort, or assistance, sensitivity and availability are expressed through words of affirmation and understanding (Pistole et al., 2010).

This may prove challenging for couples in which one or more partner possesses an avoidant attachment style, and takes fewer measures to seek proximity or emotional closeness to the other. Roberts and Pistole (2009) found that among students in a current long-distance relationship, those with avoidant attachments reported lower satisfaction than students with either secure or anxious attachment styles. It appears that personal traits, such as attachment styles, can act as a mediator between relationship status (LDDR versus GCR) and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, factors tied to the current relationship, such as the commitment level and anticipated future of the relationship, influence the happiness of dating partners.

Commitment and uncertainty. Personal investment in the relationship can improve relationship satisfaction through increasing the level of commitment. Though many LDDR couples have not progressed to engagement or marriage, the growing length of the relationship could increase the perceived level of investment, therefore increasing commitment. High investments have been shown to lead to stronger LDDRs. Additionally, current satisfaction and low alternative dating options have been shown to influence commitment (Pistole et al., 2010).

Uncertainty in the future of a relationship can add stress and decrease communication, openness, and assurances crucial to maintaining a satisfying LDDR. Maguire (2007) found that LDDR couples that reported higher satisfaction were more certain of their eventual permanent reunion with their partner compared to uncertain

couples with lower satisfaction. Some have dealt with uncertainty through optimism and support from family and friends or through planning for the future with their partner (Maguire, 2007; Salhstein, 2006). The amount of time together varies between LDDR couples depending on the physical distance between them, flexibility of work or school schedules, and the cost of visiting one another. Some enjoy bi-weekly or monthly weekend visits, while others must endure longer periods of time apart. In any case, the excitement of reunions may be mixed with feelings of anxiety and stress.

Challenging reunions. Maguire and Kinney (2010) found that visits from a long-distance partner were less satisfying for high-distress females – those who were particularly affected by the stress of being apart and uncertainty – compared to low-distress females. This perhaps stems from the pressure to make each moment together perfect. Qualitative interviews of 20 LDDR couples elicited descriptions of their reunions (Sahlstein, 2006). During visits, couples attempted to schedule as many activities as possible during their limited time together, creating a sense of urgency that often led to disappointment when their plans fell through. Many felt dissatisfied by the lack of spontaneity and unnaturalness.

In contrast to the hopeful belief of many individuals, challenges don't dissipate when couples reunite permanently. About half of LDDR couples will eventually transition to a GCR, though of those couples, one-third may end their relationship within three months of the reunion (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006). The greater frequency of time together could bring disillusionment, ruining the quixotic view of one's partner (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). Stafford and Merolla suggest that couples transitioning to

GCR's may consider fostering small talk into their conversations and discuss issues that could elicit conflict in order to prepare for the "turbulence" of transitioning to a GCR.

The growing body of LDDR research provides valuable insight into the unique experiences of young adults maintaining romantic ties while living geographically separated. However, the revolutionary developments in communication technology in the past decade warrant further investigation of their use among young adults, particularly in maintaining long-distance relationships.

Research Questions

Previous studies have focused on a limited number of communication technologies, rarely examining their combined use for communicating with a romantic partner. This study seeks to explore the overall use and frequency of various methods, including phone calls, texting, email, instant messaging, video chats, social network sites, twitter, blogs, and others.

RQ1. What methods of technology do college students use to communicate with their long-distance partner?

RQ2. How frequently do college students use each method to communicate with their partner?

Long-distance relationships are prevalent among college students (Aylor, 2003), and this population appears to rely heavily on communicative technologies to maintain these relationships. However, few researchers have investigated the correlation between one's satisfaction with communication technology and one's satisfaction with a current long-distance relationship. Additionally, in this study I seek to better understand the benefits and drawbacks of relying on technology for maintaining a romantic relationship.

RQ3. How satisfied are students with the use of these methods in maintaining a long-distance dating relationship?

RQ4. Is there a significant positive relationship between use, frequency, and satisfaction with communication technologies and relationship satisfaction?

RQ5. How does communication technology improve relationship satisfaction?

RQ6. How does communication technology hinder relationship satisfaction?

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Recruitment

During the Fall semester, I recruited students through various methods; flyers were posted in public areas around the campus of a large Midwest university, announcements were made in undergraduate Human Development and Family Studies courses, a link to the online survey was posted via Facebook, and an advertisement in a mass university email featured information about the study and a link to the online survey (see Appendix A for recruitment advertisements). As an incentive, I informed participants that they would be entered into a drawing for one of three $25 gift cards to Walmart.

Data Collection

I received approval for the study from the institutional review board prior to recruitment and administration of the online survey (IRB # 1197679). Before completing the survey, participants read a letter of consent and confidentiality informing them of potential risks and benefits of their participation (see Appendix B). Over the course of three months during the fall semester, I gathered data using an online survey (Dansie, 2012) administered through Surveymonkey. I downloaded responses and imported them into SPSS version 19.0 for analysis. Additionally, I coded open-ended responses using QSR International's NVivo qualitative data analysis software, version 9.0.

Sample

Of the 497 participants who completed the survey, 463 were included in analyses. Six participants were eliminated due to their relationship status (married, divorced, or widowed). Four participants who reported living 20 miles away or closer were also

eliminated, as the distance from their partner appeared near enough for daily visits (Delmann-Jenkins et al., 1994). Furthermore, 24 participants were eliminated for not providing demographic information pertinent to the research questions. Multivariate analyses indicated no significant differences in terms of technology use, frequency of use, satisfaction with use, distance from partner, and length of the relationship between the 24 excluded students and the 463 remaining participants.

The resulting sample consisted of primarily Caucasian female college students (79.5% female, 20.5% male; 81.4% Caucasian, 8.2% Asian, 7.6% African American, 2.2% Latino, and .6% American Indian). The age of participants ranged from 17 to 38 ($M = 21.00$, $SD = 3.01$), and students were fairly evenly distributed throughout class rankings (25.3% Freshman, 18.1% Sophomore, 15.1% Junior, 20.3% Senior, and 21.2% Graduate student). The majority of students reported that their partner was also a student at the time (66.5%), while other partners were working (32%) or unemployed (1.5%). Most students reported earning less than $10,000 per year (80.6%).

The length of relationships averaged 16.57 months ($SD = 16.53$), ranging from one month to 102 months, and the distance between partners varied from 30 to 140,000 miles, with a median of 280 miles. Undoubtedly, distance limited the amount of time partners spent together; 15.1% reported seeing their partner in-person weekly, while about half (50.5%) of participants reported seeing each other one or two times per month, 17.5% reported five to ten times per year, 13.2% reported one to four times per year, and 3.7% saw their partner less than once per year. Nearly all of the relationships were reported to be monogamous (97.4%), and while some participants were engaged to their partner (11.9%), most were either dating (68.0%) or cohabiting (20.1%).

Measure

I used a mixed-methods approach to better understand the use, benefits, and challenges of relying on technology to build a relationship. I developed a 30-item survey including items from previously tested measures as well as items unique to this study (see Appendix C for survey). Questions focused on the use of technology to maintain communication, feelings about the current relationship, and demographic information.

Description of the dating relationship and technology use. For the initial items, I asked about the nature of the relationship, including length, monogamy, distance from one's partner, and the frequency of face-to-face visits. Participants then marked each method of technology they typically use to communicate with their partner, including text messaging, phone calls, email, social network sites, instant messages, video chat, blog, twitter, and "other". These methods were analyzed separately (1 = *use*, 0 = *do not use*) and summed as a score of overall technology use, with a possible range of 0 to 9. Participants then reported their frequency of use (1 = *daily*, 2 = *3-4 times per week*, 3 = *3-4 times per month*, 4 = *once per month*, 5 = *5-10 times per year*, 6 = *1-4 times per year*, or 7 = *never*) and satisfaction with their use of each technology (1 = *not at all satisfied,* 2 = *slightly satisfied,* 3 = *somewhat satisfied,* 4 = *very satisfied*, or 5 = *not applicable*).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants then answered six likert-scale items (1= S*trongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*) relating to their feelings and attitudes about the current relationship. For example, "Overall, I am satisfied with my relationship," "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner," and "I want my relationship to last a very long time." I included six items from the Investment Model Scale developed by Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998). This scale has been widely used to determine relationship satisfaction and commitment (see Etcheverry, & Le, 2005; Pistole et al.,

2010). A combined score of these six items served as a measure of overall relationship satisfaction (α = .86).

Open-ended questions. Participants also answered the following three open-ended questions: "How has technology improved your long-distance dating relationship?", "How has technology hindered your long-distance dating relationship?", and "Are there methods you use to build and maintain your relationship other than those mentioned in this survey?"

Demographic information. Finally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, reporting their age, gender, race/ethnicity, relationship status, year in school, program of study, estimated GPA, income, and the current status of their partner (unemployed, working, student attending a technical college, student attending a community college, student attending a university, or graduate student).

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSES AND RESULTS

First, I performed preliminary frequency analyses to summarize the demographics of the sample (reported above) and to identify and eliminate individuals who did not respond to demographic items (N = 24). Next, to answer the first research question, I explored the methods of technology students reported using to communicate with their partner.

Technologies Used to Communicate with a Long-Distance Partner

Frequency analyses indicated the highest percent of students use text messaging (93%), phone calls (92%), and video chat (74%) to stay in touch with their partner (see Table 1). An independent samples t-test showed no significant difference at the .05 level between males and females for each method of technology except blogs [males $M = .06$, $SD = .245$, females $M = .01$, $SD = .9$; $t(100.66) = 1.55$, $p = .034$). However, overall only six males and three females reported using blogs to communicate with their partner.

Table 1

Reported Use of Communication Technologies in a Current Long-distance Relationship

	Reported Use		
Technology	All (N=463)	Females (N=368)	Males (N=95)
Text messaging	93%	94%	90%
Phone Call	92%	92%	92%
Video Chat	74%	73%	78%
Social Networking	64%	63%	65%
Instant Messaging	38%	37%	43%
Email	34%	33%	38%
Twitter	14%	15%	13%
Blog	2%	1%	6%
Other	3%	3%	3%

In the open-ended portion of the survey, participants were asked about other methods they use to communicate with their partner. Of the 262 students who responded to this item, 86 participants reported sending letters through "snail mail", 51 send gifts, flowers, or packages, 15 send photos or videos, and 12 play online games or watch movies "together" using Netflix or Skype. Additionally, 64 participants discussed the special trips they make to see their partner in-person to supplement their long-distance communication.

Frequency of Use

Results of frequency analyses showed how often students use each method of technology. Of those who reported using each method, most students (88%) claimed to text their partner daily, and a majority (60%) spoke to their partner daily over the phone (see Table 2).

Table 2

Frequency of Technology Use to Communicate with Partner

| | Frequency of Use | | | |
Technology	Daily	3-4 times per week	3-4 times per month	Once per month or less
Text messaging	88%	6%	1%	5%
Phone Call	60%	22%	12%	6%
Video Chat	15%	20%	28%	37%
Social Networking	18%	30%	24%	28%
Instant Messaging	18%	20%	15%	47%
Email	4%	12%	21%	63%
Twitter	4%	6%	6%	84%
Blog	-	1%	2%	97%

Although males and females may not differ in the types of technology they use, they show divergent frequencies of use. Results from an independent samples *t*-test indicated that males reported significantly more frequent use of email ($M = 4.28$, $SD =$

2.03, $t(393) = -2.48$, $p = .014$), social networking sites ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.53$, $t(421) = -2.43$, $p = .004$), instant messaging $M = 3.44$, $SD = 2.39$, $t(398) = -2.80$, $p = .005$), and blogs ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 1.48$, $t(363) = -3.93$, $p = .02$) compared to females ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 2.05$; $M = 3.28$, $SD = 2.03$; $M = 4.30$, $SD = 2.46$; $M = 6.92$, $SD = .55$, respectively), with lower mean scores indicating more frequent use. However, after controlling for year in school and relationship status, there were no significant differences between males and females.

Satisfaction with Technology

Depending on the method under consideration, user satisfaction varied. Students reported highest satisfaction with phone calls and video chat, and least satisfaction with blogs and Twitter, in maintaining their long-distance relationship (see Table 3).

Table 3

Satisfaction with Technology to Communicate with Partner

| | Satisfaction with Technology | | | |
Technology	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Slightly Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied
Text Messaging	58%	32%	9%	1%
Phone Call	67%	25%	7%	1%
Video Chat	67%	19%	10%	4%
Social Networking	32%	40%	23%	5%
Instant Messaging	42%	39%	16%	3%
Email	41%	35%	18%	6%
Twitter	35%	27%	25%	13%
Blog	34%	22%	17%	27%

An independent-samples *t*-test showed only one gender difference in terms of satisfaction with technology; female users reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with phone calls ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .66$) compared to male users ($M = 3.45$, SD

= .73, $t(443) = -1.96$, $p = .05$). This held true even after controlling for relationship status and year in school.

Technology Use and Relationship Satisfaction

Overall, participants either agreed or strongly agreed to statements expressing commitment to and satisfaction with their current LDDR. Out of a possible score of 30, participants averaged 26.60 ($SD = 3.98$) in scores of overall relationship satisfaction. An independent samples *t*-test showed no significant difference between males and females.

As mentioned earlier, several students relied on in-person visits to supplement their long-distance relationship. However, for many this was not an option. The fourth research question queried about the correlation between technology (use, frequency, and satisfaction) and relationship satisfaction. In order to answer this, a sum of technologies used by participants was calculated to determine whether using multiple methods led to higher relationship satisfaction.

Results from a bivariate correlation found no significant relationship between the number of methods used and relationship satisfaction. Similarly, a linear regression showed no significant relationship between frequency of technology use and relationship satisfaction. A linear regression unveiled a significant correlation only between satisfaction with phone calls and relationship satisfaction; $t(342) = 3.7$, $p < .001$. Further exploration using a one-way ANOVA, $F(3, 392) = 14.64$, $p < .01$, $n^2 = .10$, showed significant differences between satisfied and unsatisfied callers in their scores of relationship satisfaction. Specifically, results from a Tukey's post-hoc analysis showed very satisfied phone users ($M = 27.42$, $SD = .23$) reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction compared to somewhat satisfied ($M = 25.24$, $SD = .41$), slightly

satisfied ($M = 23.96$, $SD = .72$), and not at all satisfied ($M = 22.2$, $SD = 1.70$) users. An omnibus test of differences between satisfaction levels held statistical significance even after controlling for gender, year in school, and relationship status.

Open-ended Responses

To answer the remaining research questions, I analyzed open-ended responses using thematic coding techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Most student responses were one word to a few sentences in length; however, I was able to identify strong common themes. I repeatedly read responses in their entirety prior to creating the initial codes and themes. Once constructed, I refined and collapsed the themes (see Tables 4 and 5). I identified themes not only by how commonly participants discussed the topic but also according to their relevance relating to the research questions and reviewed literature. For example, only seven participants described feeling like their partner was a different individual in person than he/she was through technology. However, this concept could correlate with relationship satisfaction and partially explain the difficulty of reuniting with one's partner, and thus, I included it.

Table 4

How does technology improve your relationship?

Benefits of Technology		
Theme	Example response	Number of responses (out of 435 total)
Constant contact with partner	"Being able to stay in contact every day" "We send 'thinking of you' emails"	128
Makes communication easier or better	"Communication is easier and more efficient"	113
Able to see (or hear) partner	"Being able to see her makes	91

20

		things easier"	

Relationship would not last without technology	"Cell phones are the only thing that holds us together"	49
Feel closer to partner	"It allows us to feel like we are in the same room together"	36
Can imitate time together through virtual reality	"We watch TV together or a movie to pretend we're with one another"	14
An inexpensive tool of communication	"Enabled a free to low-cost way to stay up-to-date with almost all aspects of my partner's life"	7

Table 5

How does technology hinder your relationship?

Drawbacks of Technology		
Theme	Example response	Number of responses (out of 419 total)
Does not hinder the relationship	"It has only helped" or "N/A"	123
Miscommunications	"Misunderstandings through texting. You can never tell exactly what the other person means"	61
Not as good as being with them in person	"There is nothing like actual physical contact"	43
Poor connections lead to frustration	"Sometimes there is no service or WiFi, so we cannot communicate"	40
Too much/not enough communication with partner	"Too much communication takes away from my social life, studying, sleep, etc."	32
Fosters jealousy and mistrust	"Seeing the things that other people post on his Facebook	31

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	make me jealous, and I wish that it could be me that was with him instead"	
Methods are impersonal	"Texts can be less personal than a real conversation"	28
Technology becomes the message	"When we forget to text each other it can send the message of neglect"	23
Makes them miss each other more	"It makes us feel connected to one another, but it also makes it easier to miss them"	13
Don't know how to communicate in person	"Sometimes the person you know in text is different than how that person is when you're actually together"	7
Don't like to use it	"My fiancé does not like to talk on the phone, and since that is our main [method] of communication, it makes it tough"	7

Benefits and drawbacks of technology. Participant responses followed an interesting dialectic path. Themes in the drawbacks of using technology were similar yet contradictory to many of the reported benefits. By comparing the pros and cons juxtaposed, the daily experiences of students can be better understood.

A constant conversation. The immediate gratification of maintaining constant contact with their partner proved most valuable for students in maintaining their LDDR. Almost one-third of participants remarked that daily connections allowed them to stay "up-to-date" with their partner's activities, thoughts, and feelings. One student, who had been dating her long-distance partner for eight months, explained, "I am able to text my

boyfriend throughout the day so that we maintain a 'constant' conversation rather than just communicating once throughout the day via telephone. This makes it seem like we aren't that far away from each other and that we actually can keep a dialog going" (Female, age 21).

Similarly, a student living 360 miles from her partner stated, "Technology obviously allows us to maintain contact constantly. While we may not have long-winded conversations over the phone or online, texting is what has truly saved the relationship. . . . Just getting a text that says 'thinking of you' makes up for the distance between us. In addition, technology has improved our intimacy as we can communicate and message each other more easily" (Female, age 21).

On the contrary, several participants reported feeling constantly preoccupied with technology, and were overwhelmed by the expectation to respond immediately to texts or other messages. A sophomore explained, "Sometimes it puts a damper on your independence, for instance, if you are in a fight and just want to be left alone and your partner is constantly calling or texting" (Female, age 20). This issue perhaps arose when students tried to overcompensate for time spent apart, smothering their partner with excessive contact. For example, one 19-year-old female explained, "It can be annoying at times because he's always there but never there. So [when I] go out with friends and hang out, I'm always updating him on what's going on."

Individuals who are apprehensive about the relationship may perceive hyper communication as an intrusion of personal boundaries. As one student said, "Technology has sometimes been a hindrance in that it almost makes for too much contact. I would say I know more about what goes on with my girlfriend than I probably would if we are

living close to each other" (Male, age 21). Similarly, "It keeps us from living our own lives" (Female, age 18).

Quality of communication. In LDDRs, many typical relationship-building activities are impossible, making personal bonding through communication crucial. Over one-fourth of participants simply stated that technology made this process easier, better, and in some cases, possible. One senior, whose partner was a graduate student, explained, "It makes communication easier and more integrated into everyday life. It's not a chore to say 'hi' on [Google] chat or send a text every now and then" (Female, age 21). Another said, "We have learned how to communicate effectively by thoroughly talking things through since we cannot read each other's body language or facial expressions as we would in person" (Female, age 18). Some students dated individuals who lived and worked in remote areas, and would not be able to reach them without technology. One student, who's partner volunteered in the Peace Corp, stated, "Letters can take two to six weeks (or longer) to be delivered, and packages can take several months. Technology has allowed us to stay in touch more than we otherwise could have" (Female, age 21).

However, certain methods led to miscommunication and felt less personal than video chats and phone calls. For example, "It's hard to decipher tone from emails, texts, and chats. . . . This has led to increased problems caused mainly by misunderstandings and miscommunication. Also, the availability of technology allows us to be in contact so frequently that sometimes the value of our interactions decreases" (Female, age 29).

Participants who reported improved communication may have learned to tailor the content of their messages to match the method being used. For example, text messages could function best to relay short, informational messages while phone calls and video

chats could be the optimal tool for more complex messages and challenging

conversations. As stated by a Journalism student, "I prefer to talk on the phone than

text/email/tweet, because I like to be able to fully explain something rather than giving

the 140-character version" (Female, age 21).

    Close, but just not the same. Texts and emails seemed to lack a crucial facet of

communication – nonverbal signals. Voice intonation and [their] facial expressions

appeared to add valuable depth and meaning to messages sent and received by partners.

One-fifth of the students discussed the benefits of "seeing" their partner via video chat.

For example, "Skype has been the best! It helps so much to see the person doing

whatever it is they're doing and facial expressions. It helps you stay in tune with their

body language, and there is less room for miscommunication" (Female, age 20). Video

chats also created an "illusion of spending time together" (Male, age 21). One PhD

student explained, "We have video dates on Wednesdays and Sundays (our 'date' nights)

and he'll text things like 'I'm picking you up for our date at 9:30 pm tonight!' I guess

video is nice because I can see his face and his funny facial expressions" (Female, age

27).

    After video chats and phone calls, returning to the reality of living apart often led

to loneliness. Many students discussed how technology helped them feel closer to their

partner, but as a result, some missed their partner more. As one female explained,

"Although you may be able to see or hear them, that does not replace their presence or

their touch that reassures you" (Female, age 18). Similarly, a graduate student remarked,

"I think sometimes technology tricks my emotions into thinking that things are, for the

most part, still the same as they were before we were long-distance. It makes me miss

him even more, and makes me realize how much I took being together in person for granted" (Female, age 23).

Technology as the message. While a simple text or email can symbolize a partner's affection, silence may communicate indifference. Communication breakdown due to poor technological connections created frustration between partners, and at times led to feelings of rejection. One student explained, "My phone blocked texting on accident for a whole day. I thought he wasn't trying to contact me, but it was a technology glitch" (Female, age 21). Another said, "It's frustrating when the Internet goes out or we have phone problems. Sometimes if I don't get a text back I wonder what the problem is, when sometimes he just didn't receive it. That happened a lot with his old phone to the point of misunderstandings and arguments" (Female, age 27). Such cases magnified insecurities about a partner's commitment and honesty.

Social networking sites also threatened trust and prompted feelings of jealousy. One student explained, "Despite its convenience, social media can create drama in a relationship. Although I have complete trust in my boyfriend, anytime a girl writes on his Facebook wall, my jealousy kicks in. . . . While I enjoy having the ability to see his communication with others through social media, sometimes I would just rather not know" (Female, age 21).

Saved the relationship. While the disadvantages of technology incurred added stress to an already challenging situation, these drawbacks were not present in all relationships. For example, over one-fifth of respondents claimed it was not a hindrance at all. Furthermore, several students credited technology as the force that made their relationship possible. "My relationship wouldn't exist if it weren't for technology. My

partner and I would not have gotten to know each other if we hadn't been introduced online through a mutual friend. Technology is how we have been able to get to know each other and establish a relationship" (Female, age 22). Similarly, a senior living 250 miles from his girlfriend explained, "Technology bridges the gap between my partner and I very well. . . . Without technology, it would be impossible for me to maintain my long distance relationship" (Male, age 21). And finally, a student living about 990 miles from her partner said, "Without technology, there would be no relationship because relationships require communication. Hand-written letters are nice, but they just don't do the job" (Female, age 18).

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

This exploratory, mixed-methods study captures the unique experiences of LDDR college students and their use of technology to maintain their current romantic relationship. The results support previous studies of technology use among young adults, showing similar and even higher rates of texting, phone calls, video chats, and social networking compared to recent reports (see Rainie & Zickuhr, 2010; Smith, 2011a; Smith, 2011b). The ease of sending texts and placing phone calls could explain their frequent use, while the reported benefits of video chat, such as seeing one's partner and communicating non-verbally, boost its popularity. The least satisfying methods of digital communication include Twitter and blogs, perhaps because of their unidirectional nature, while social network sites can be satisfying, yet frustrating. Similar to the findings of Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011), participant responses in this study indicate that social network sites can elicit negative feelings when individuals perceive their partner as living a happy, fulfilling life without them.

The combined results from quantitative analyses and qualitative findings offer unique insight into how technology impacts relationship satisfaction. Despite the non-significant correlation between the number of methods used, the frequency of use, and relationship satisfaction, participants' qualitative responses contained descriptions of the many practical effects of relying on technology to maintain an LDDR. Although the use of cell phones, computers, and other devices cannot inherently improve an individual's relationship, the messages relayed over such can either alleviate or irritate issues in the relationship and bring to surface personal traits, such as jealousy, mistrust, communication styles, and anxiety, which can determine relationship success.

Many of the technological problems students discussed are not exclusive to LDDR couples. However, when technology is the only method of connecting with one's partner, the miscommunication can be even more devastating to the relationship. Levels of trust, commitment, and familiarity with one's partner can act as mediators of miscommunication and relationship outcomes. Certainly, individuals who began their long-distance relationship online may be more threatened by misunderstandings compared to couples that were long-time friends or romantic partners who were later forced to geographically separate. Future studies should delineate and explore the differences between online LDDRs and transitioning geographically-close to long-distance couples.

Limitations

The use of online data gathering techniques brings certain limitations, which should be considered when interpreting findings. Primarily, using online surveys limits the ability to screen participants. While the criteria for participation clearly stated that participants should report on a current LDDR, individuals may have reported on a past relationship. Over 20% of participants listed their relationship status as cohabiting, and it is not clear whether these individuals cohabitate with their long-distance partner part-time, have cohabited with their partner prior to completing the survey, or were currently cohabiting with their partner while reporting on a previous long-distance experience. The reliance on self-reports may threaten the accuracy of some relationship descriptions.

The exploratory nature of this study limits the depth of investigation awarded to other LDDR studies. In future studies, the content of messages sent and received should be included to better understand the nature of long-distance interactions and relationship

processes (Reid & Reid, 2010). How couples negotiate conflict and other issues greatly determines the emotional connection between partners. Frequency and satisfaction with various methods may be reflective of how successful each couple is at cooperatively communicating and responding to each other's needs.

Furthermore, longitudinal approaches should be used to document the progression of LDDRs as couples move away from one another, and as they move geographically closer (Stafford et al., 2006), while also analyzing the shifts in technology use across time. In this study, roughly 25% of participants were recent high school graduates, new to the highly social college scene. The influx of favorable alternatives could diminish the likelihood that these relationships are still existent (Pistole et al., 2010).

Future studies might also consider including both partners to better understand the experiences of individuals as well as the couple together. Also, a controlled, experimental study in which individuals are assigned certain technologies to use could strengthen the evidence of the relationship between technology use and relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion

LDDRs constitute a significant portion of young-adult relationships, and the likelihood of future college students experiencing a technologically-mediated courtship is growing. Parents and professionals who work with young adults should understand the unique challenges of long-distance relationships and help LDDR couples navigate stressful life transitions, such as attending school or finding a job, in order to decrease their potentially detrimental impact on romantic relationships. To boost satisfaction, individuals in LDDRs should communicate their expectations for the amount of texts, phone calls, video chats, etc. to maintain a gratifying connection with their partner while

not overcompensating for time spent apart. Couples should also anticipate the need to

develop patience when relying on digital connections to relay personal messages, and

avoid using technology or physical distance as a scapegoat for deeper relationship issues.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Advertisements

Facebook link: Posted on primary investigator's page

Are you currently a student in a long-distance dating relationship? Visit

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/CG3CLRY to tell us about your experiences! Upon

completion of the survey, participants may be given the opportunity to participate in a

follow-up interview. All participants will be entered in a drawing for one of three

Walmart gift cards! (Part of a study on long-distance dating relationships among college

students: IRB #1197679)

Recruitment email

Are you in a long-distance relationship? If so, you're not alone! Research shows

that over 1/3 of all college students are in a long-distance dating relationship. Loni

Dansie, a Masters student in the department of Human Development and Family Studies,

is conducting a study for a thesis project on long-distance dating relationships among

college students. (IRB #1197679) If you are currently a student in a long-distance dating

relationship, please visit http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/CG3CLRY to complete a short

survey about your experiences. We would love to hear from you! Upon completion of the

survey, participants may be given the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview.

All participants will be entered in a drawing for one of three Walmart gift cards! For

more information, contact Loni at ldypb@mail.missouri.edu. Thank you!

Appendix B

Letter of Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study related to how individuals, particularly college students, use various methods of technology to maintain long-distance dating relationships. This study is being conducted by Loni Dansie, a Masters student from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri. We hope to learn more about what methods of technology individuals use to communicate (i.e. texting, social networks, email, video chats), and how these methods influence the dating relationship.

If you agree to participate, please complete the survey on the following web pages. The survey consists of 30 items (six of which are open-ended), and should take about 20 minutes to complete. Following the survey, you will have the option of entering a drawing for one of three $25 gift certificates.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and there will be no negative consequences if you choose not to participate. You are free to stop at any time or to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. There are no penalties for stopping. The study methods have little known risks, but participation may cause you some discomfort due to the topics raised in the survey. However, these risks are no greater than discussing your relationship with friends and family in an everyday setting. The benefit of participation is that you can contribute to knowledge about technological communication in long-distance relationships, and the challenges or benefits of using these methods. There is also a chance you will enjoy sharing your opinions and experiences.

All information that is obtained during the study will be confidential. The personal information we ask for is merely for demographic purposes; your name will not be recorded. At the end of the survey you will be asked if you would be willing to participate in an additional follow-up interview. If you are interested, we ask that you enter your email address at that point. A limited number of participants will be selected for follow-up interviews. If you are chosen, the data from this survey will be linked to your interview responses and other identifying information you offer.

If you agree to participate, please enter today's date in the boxes to "yes" below. Your selection indicates your willingness to participate. You are entitled to, and can print a copy of this form to keep. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Loni Dansie at ldypb@mail.missouri.edu. Also, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585 with any questions about research involving human participants. Thank you!

	MM		DD		YYYY	
Yes		/		/		
No thanks		/		/		

Appendix C

Long Distance Dating Relationship Survey

1. How long have you been in your long-distance dating relationship? _____ months

2. Is the relationship monogamous? (Are you dating *only* your partner and no one else?)
    Yes
    No

3. What is the distance between you and your partner? _____miles

4. How often do you see your partner in person?
    At least once a week
    1-2 times per month
    5-10 times per year
    1-4 times per year
    Less than once per year
    Other (fill in blank)

5. How do you typically communicate with your partner?
    Check all that apply:
        text messaging
        phone calls
        email
        social network sites (i.e. facebook)
        instant messages/chat
        video chat (i.e. skype)
        blog
        twitter
        other (fill in blank)

6. How often do you use each method to communicate with your partner?
    Answer for each method:
        Daily
        3-4 times per week
        3-4 times per month
        Once per month
        5-10 times per year
        1-4 times per year
        Never

7. How satisfied are you with the use of technology in your relationship?
    Answer for each method:

Not at all satisfied
Slightly satisfied
Somewhat satisfied
Very satisfied

Thinking about your long-distance relationship, please answer the following questions.

8. How do you see your relationship progressing in the next year?
I will probably be in a long-distance relationship with my current partner
I will probably be in a geographically-close relationship with my current partner
I (or my partner) will probably end the relationship within the next year

9. How do you see your relationship progressing in the next FOUR years?
I will probably be in a long-distance relationship with my current partner
I will probably be in a geographically-close relationship with my current partner
I (or my partner) will probably end the relationship within the next four years

10. Altogether, how much support for your long-distance dating relationship do you feel from your family?
No support at all
Very little support
Some support
A lot of support

11. Altogether, how much support for your long-distance dating relationship do you feel from your friends?
No support at all
Very little support
Some support
A lot of support

Thinking about your current long-distance relationship:
12. Overall, I am satisfied with my relationship
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

13. Our relationship fulfills my needs for intimacy, companionship, etc.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

14. My relationship makes me happy
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

15. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

16. I want my relationship to last a very long time

Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

17. It is likely I will date someone other than my partner within the next year
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

18. I generally turn to my partner for comfort when I am upset
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

19. I am able to trust my partner
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

20. I believe my relationship is as good as or better than other relationships
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

21. I feel capable of having lasting relationships with others
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

 22. A long-distance dating relationship can be just as fulfilling as a geographically close relationship
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

23. If I had a choice, I would be in a long-distance dating relationship
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Open-ended questions
24. How has technology improved your long-distance dating relationship?

25. How has technology hindered your long-distance dating relationship?

26. Are there methods you use to build and maintain your relationship other than those mentioned in this survey?

27. What do you like most about being in a long-distance dating relationship?

28. What is the most challenging aspect of being in a long-distance dating relationship?

29. Compared to what you expected, how easy or difficult is your relationship to maintain?
Much more difficult than I expected
More difficult than I expected
About what I expected
Easier than I expected
Much easier than I expected

30. What advice, if any, would you give to other students who are in a long-distance relationship?

Demographic Information

Age: _____

Gender:
        Male
        Female

Race/Ethnic group:
        Caucasian (white)
        African American
        Latino/Hispanic
        Asian or Pacific Islander
        American Indian
        Alaskan Native

Relationship status:
        Single
        Engaged
        Married
        Divorced
        Widowed
        Cohabiting

Year in school:
        Freshman
        Sophomore
        Junior
        Senior
        Graduate

Program of study: _____

Estimated GPA: _____

Income (per year):
        Under $10,000
        $10,000-$15,000
        $15,000-$25,000
        $25,000+

What is the current status of your partner?
        Graduate student
        Student attending a university
        Student attending a community college
        Student attending a technical college

Working, not attending school
Unemployed, not attending school

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us! Are you interested in entering a drawing for one of three $20 gift cards to Walmart? _____ (enter email)

We would like to learn more about your experience in a long-distance dating relationship. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview related to your current experience in a long-distance relationship? If so, please provide your email address. Thank you! _____ (enter email)

VITA

Loni Dansie was raised in Dayton, Idaho and earned her B.S. in Family, Consumer, and Human Development, with a minor in Psychology, from Utah State University. She earned her M.S. degree in the Spring of 2012 from the department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri.