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Utilization of Social Media in Strengthening Communication in Long Distance Relationships

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Utilization of Social Media in Strengthening Communication in Long

Distance Relationships

by

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of individuals, who have experienced long distance relationships, and utilize the instant access of communication through technology to strengthen and maintain their connection despite their geographical distances. Using a qualitative design, individuals between the ages of 20-30 were asked questions about their experience of utilizing social media and technology as a mode of communication to sustain their long distance relationship. The researcher analyzed the data by looking for codes and themes within the participant's answers. The findings indicated that the participants found that social media and technology were beneficial in helping them sustain their communication and connection throughout their long distance relationship. The participants also expressed involvement in a long distance relationship entails sacrifices, but as a whole found that the benefits of their relationship outweighed the costs. The findings of this study demonstrate the need for future research within the area of social media and relationships.

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Relationships

Technological advances have transformed relationships, creating an atmosphere where

individuals have access to more people, in more ways, and at more times than ever before

(Brimhall, Miller, Maxwell, & Alotaiby, 2017). From the use of computers to smartphones,

humans are constantly connected and have the ability to communicate at the swipe of their

fingertip. With more access comes more power associated with the ability to connect and build

relationships with a variety of people utilizing a variety of different applications and sites hidden

behind a locked device. Research indicates Internet-related activities between people outside of

their primary relationship has accounted for a significant increase in relationship distress and

divorce (Brimhall et al., 2017). Studies also found Facebook gives network members

unprecedented access to information about a romantic partner, including relationship status,

photographs, social commentary, and even communication between partners (Fox, Warber, &

Makstaller, 2013).

Social media is defined as, "a specific set of online offerings that have emerged over the

past three decades – including blogs, social networking sites, and microblogging" (Treem,

Dailey, Pierce, & Biffl, 2016 pg.769). Treem et. al 2016 stated that social media is connected to

Web 2.0, which refers to web-based applications that allows users to post online content and

accessed through multiple devices. Studies have found that communicative use of social media

was found to increase bonding capital and reduce loneliness among college students (Chen & Li,

2017). Among other positives, Social media has been essential in the building of intimate

relationships among individuals despite geographical distance. Participants in long-distance

intimate relationships reported higher levels of satisfaction, more positive reminiscences about a

partner, increased levels of perceived agreement with a partner, and improved communication quality than their close-proximity counterparts (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2013). The theoretical lens I will utilize within my study will be Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory examines processes in intimate relationships and explains the development, maintenance, and decay of these relationships in regards to the balance between costs and rewards (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1968). I find Social Exchange Theory connects with individuals in long distance relationships, because the reward of the relationship outweighs the cost of the geographical distance.

There is a vast amount of literature stating the negative impacts of technology. In regards to intimate relationships, Brimhall et al, 2017 stated that using technology to engage in extra-relational contact or using it to monitor a partner's behavior has the potential of increasing the secrecy in a relationship and undermining the level of relational trust. In terms of balancing the negative research regarding social media within the field, I find it to be impactful and necessary to further explore the positives associated with social media. With technology being such a prominent aspect of the lives of individuals, there is a lack of research expressing the overall impact of how social media is utilized in maintaining and strengthening communication in long distance relationships. As a result, this qualitative study analyzes how intimate relationships utilize the instant access of communication through technology to strengthen and maintain their connection despite their geographical distances.

Literature Review

The primary research question was: How is web-based technology and social media utilized in maintaining and strengthening communication in long distance relationships? Today's society has utilized mobile and web-based technologies in a variety of social and communicative realms to connect with others. With the progressive emergence of online platforms, self-presentation takes place beyond face-to-face encounters (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). Mobile social media platforms such as Facebook not only let people connect with social contacts and communicate with each other through messaging or voice calling, but they also provide a space to share their personal information and feelings. This is a function that is significantly different from traditional mobile communication (Chen & Li, 2017).

These media platforms have transformed the ability connect with individuals from both close are far geographical distances. Throughout the literature, the terms web-based technology and social media are used interchangeably. Social media use mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms where individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). There is a range of literature that expresses the positives and negatives associated with web-based technologies as well as the impact they have had on relationships. Also, I wanted to take a more extensive look at what the literature said about how social media is utilized in maintaining and strengthening communication in long distance relationships.

History of Social Media

For both children and young adults, it may be difficult to recall a time in which communication was not utilized through a mobile device or web-based technology. In 1997 a

website called Six Degrees launched and allowed users to create a profile and then "friend" other users to be a part of their network (Hale, 2017, February 26). By 2000, nearly 100 million people had access to the internet and utilized chatrooms for making friends and discussing topics (Hale, 2017, February 26). In 2003, MySpace became the popular website to post photos, connect with friends and share music. LinkedIn also launched that year, creating a space for professionals in the working field to socialize, find jobs, and connect with each other to network (Hale, 2017, February 26). In 2005, Mark Zuckerberg launched TheFacebook.com for Harvard students to converse, but eventually saw its potential and released it to the world as facebook.com (Hale, 2017, February 26).

In 2006 the popularity of text messaging and social media sites inspired the creation of Twitter, a site that allowed users to send "tweets" of 140 characters or less (Hale, 2017, February 26). By 2010, there were an array of websites providing social media services and photo sharing sites such as Photobucket, Flickr, and Instagram (Hale, 2017, February 26). Social media eventually became an outlet for internet marketers and website owners to expand the visibility of their websites (Hale, 2017, February 26). In a matter of 20 years, social media has continued to expand and develop. Campbell & Murray (2015) found that about 75% of individuals in the United States are connected to the Internet, and an estimated 83% of individuals online between the ages of 18 and 29 have at least one social networking account.

Mobile Phones and Social Media

As mobile use has become increasingly prevalent, there is a body of research exploring it and its social and psychological consequences (Chen & Li, 2017). Informational use of mobile phones has been shown to enhance online discussion and political participation, while communicative use improves subjective well-being (Chen & Li, 2017). The mobile phone is

essential in everyday life. Evolving mobile technology has continued to expand its affordances by combining different types of media and enhancing individuals' connection and interaction in daily life (Chen & Li, 2017). It was noted that studies are concerned with the mobile phone as an integrative tool for mobile communication, like voice and text messages (Chen & Li, 2017). However, with the rise of the smartphone; applications (apps) on mobile phones have had the most dominant usage, especially social media apps (Chen & Li, 2017). Smartphone users spend 85% of use time on smartphones in apps; Social media use on-the-go has become essential to everyday life, highlighting the enhanced functionality of smartphones (Chen & Li, 2017).

With social media apps now being embedded in the mobile platform, individuals can keep in touch with close ties, disclose personal information, friend others, and communicate on a constant basis (Chen & Li, 2017). Mobile social media also encompass the services of texting, voice calling, and video calling so that people can maintain close, despite far geographical distances (Chen & Li, 2017).

Negatives Associated with Social Media

An essential factor in any relationship is the ability to trust one another. With trust and communication being the foundation of a relationship, integrating the use of technology can impact the dynamic of the groundwork associated with a couple and family (Hertlein, 2012). Technology permits one to connect with a wide range of available partners, allow relationships to be conducted in secret, and mimic a breach of relationship rules similar to off-line infidelity (Hertlein, 2012). With individuals utilizing locks and passwords on their devices, partners become increasingly curious. Brimhall et al. (2017) state technological threats can make it easier to cheat and harder to heal in events where trust is breached. They include increased availability, less inhibition, harder to track/monitor, frequent triggers, and harder to disengage. Since online

relationships do not encounter the same level of day-to-day challenges faced by primary

relationships (e.g., bills, child-rearing), the central relationship can often be experienced as a

source of conflict while the online relationship becomes a source of comfort (Brimhall et al.,

2017).

Prior to innovations in technology, partners could assume if their partner was home, any

inappropriate interaction with another person was restricted to landlines or in-person visits to the

home (Brimhall et al., 2017). Therefore, unwanted contact was easier to monitor. New

technologies challenge the ability to monitor another partner's interactions (Brimhall et al.,

2017). "Text messaging, social media sites, and other technologies allow individuals to remain

constantly connected even while the primary partner is sitting in the same room." (Brimhall et

al., 2017). With mistrust comes the urge to monitor and assure that infidelity is not a factor

within a relationship (Brimhall et al., 2017). Using technology to engage in extra-relational

contact or using it to monitor a partner's behavior has the potential of increasing the secrecy in a

relationship and undermining the level of relational trust (Brimhall et al., 2017). Since both

partners may experience these behaviors as a betrayal, it is vital that couples engage in

conversations and develop rules and expectations around how much surveillance is acceptable

(Brimhall et al., 2017).

If infidelity has been a factor within a relationship, a partner may be easily triggered by

the use of technology. Since social media is so prominent within society, utilizing boundaries in

regards to technology can pose difficulty. Campbell & Murray (2015) found Technology has

changed the ways humans interact by shifting the boundaries for initiating, maintaining, and

terminating relationships. In situations where a partner has had an affair on another, technology

can trigger the partner that has been victimized (Brimhall et al., 2017). A partner can be

prompted by negative feelings from the ringing of a phone or seeing their partner use a computer (Brimhall et al., 2017). These technological intrusions can trigger a traumatic response where the betrayed individual feels unsafe, constantly worrying whether the partner is still involved in the affair (Brimhall et al., 2017).

Expectation and Attachment

Before technological devices were available, a person was limited in their ability to contact their partner during working hours and was often unable to communicate while commuting, in a meeting, or in an area without a landline or computer (Brimhall et al., 2017). Now, smartphones have fostered the expectation that one's partner should be constantly accessible even during important work functions (Brimhall et al., 2017). From an attachment perspective, connected presence may be the digital equivalent of an attachment-based model, where couples utilize text messages and other forms of communication in an attempt to establish secure connections that clearly and consistently communicate each partner's accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement (Brimhall et al., 2017).

Expectation within a relationship can have both negative and positive aspects to its dynamic. Brimhall et al. (2017) found increased expectations are the foundation behind what is known as "connected presence." Connected presence occurs in a relationship as partners rely on a variety of digital communication technologies to sustain a continuous source of connection that helps create a feeling of stability and safety (Brimhall et al., 2017). Different expectations can increase misunderstandings and cause potential ruptures in the primary relationship; technology provides increased opportunities to develop and nurture connections outside of the primary relationship that can lead to infidelity (Brimhall et al., 2017).

An individual's ability to disclose information and build a connection without the implications of face-to-face interaction inhibits a human's ability to attach without insecurities. (Brimhall et al., 2017). It was found that participants in online relationships reported disclosing more personal information to online partners and feeling more understood (Brimhall et al., 2017). Also, an uninhibited interaction between online partners can result in a perceived level of intimacy that forms very quickly, often much faster than it occurred within the primary relationship (Brimhall et al., 2017). This process may increase the likelihood of engaging in emotional affairs and can often be accelerated when individuals connect with a previous partner via social media (Brimhall et al., 2017).

Social Media Maintenance

The content and reaction to an individual's post on social media can also impact the dynamic of a relationship. The literature specifically addressed the content individuals post on their Facebook page. Facebook users create a profile and can add 'friends' in which gives them access to other profiles and content. Facebook offers individuals the ability to exchange messages, post status updates and share photos and videos with one another both publicly and privately (Northrup & Smith, 2016). Excessive Facebook use in general can create Facebook-related conflict, which leads to adverse relationship outcomes such as physical or emotional cheating (Northrup & Smith, 2016).

Mod (2010) states, according to Facebook's press room, the typical user spends 55 minutes each day on the website, it was also discovered that the more time an individual spends on Facebook, the stronger the feelings of jealousy they experience. "They report that Facebook users often discover ambiguous information on a partner's profile page that induce jealousy, creating a possible feedback loop where the jealous partner spends more time on Facebook to

find more information about their partner that confirm their fears" (Northrup & Smith, 2016, pg. 246). The literature also stated that couples who monitor one another's behavior might be more likely to encounter negative information, and this action can be linked to negative relationship outcomes (Murray & Campbell, 2015).

Many partners feel the need to display their relationship online for others to see, which can have an impact on a couple's dynamic. Many online social networks, including Facebook, give users the option to declare his or her ''Relationship Status" (e.g. married, single, dating, ''it's complicated," etc.), thus creating a boundary that declares and defines the relationship to the rest of their online social network (Northrup & Smith, 2016). Studies suggest that when partners change their relationship status on Facebook to reflect their real-world relationship, they experience a sense of making the relationship ''official," as it is such a public declaration (Northrup & Smith, 2016). Northrup & Smith (2016) presented the question of, why would couples who engage in more Facebook maintenance seem to experience less love? The answer may be that couples who feel less love for each other may feel the need to present to friends and family online as if everything is fine, and therefore engage in more relationship maintenance via Facebook (Northrup & Smith, 2016).

Sexual Media

Technology gives not only quick access to communication but also instant access to sexual media. Individuals are now able to access an array of sexual media from their smartphones at any place or time (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Results suggest that there are times when a partner's use of sexually explicit materials can negatively impact a romantic relationship in a variety of domains, including feeling a sense of decreased intimacy, of being a sexual object rather than a participant during lovemaking, and decreased self-esteem (Bridges &

Morokoff, 2011). It was mentioned in the literature that married women were significantly more

likely to report more negative perceptions of a partner's sexual media use than were women who

were dating their partners. (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Women whose partners used sexual

media more frequently and for more extended periods of time held significantly more negative

attitudes than women whose partners viewed sexual media less often (Bridges & Morokoff,

2011). A survey of adults in the United States revealed that men were six times more likely to

access an Internet sex site than women and found using sexual media to cope with depression

and stress is associated with a higher risk of sexual compulsivity (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011).

Satisfaction and Intimacy

Murray & Campbell (2015) found more compulsive Internet use was associated with

lower levels of intimacy and passion and higher levels of feeling excluded. Also, people who

compulsively used the Internet were more likely to conceal their behaviors from their partners.

Murray & Campbell (2015) concluded that that compulsive Internet use has deleterious effects

on relationship quality. The literature also found that technology was also utilized to build and

strengthen relationships. One study found that the presence of a mobile communication device

was negatively associated with closeness, connection, and conversation quality (Novak,

Sandberg, Jeffrey, & Young-Davis, 2016). Although, many couples enjoy using technology to

send affectionate messages to one another. Couples may utilize technology to enhance both their

emotional affection and physical intimacy (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Some couples

discovered that their sexual interactions were strengthened when they mutually view sexual

material together online (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Many relationships which start from

meeting in face-to-face situations will develop using "Internet-assisted" processes, meaning the

individuals utilize the Internet to facilitate their interactions and gain knowledge about one another (Murray & Campbell, 2015).

Partners may utilize technology to engage in watching TV and online gaming, they may also seek self-help information to assist them in improving their relationship (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Technology can help couples sustain long-distance relationships. For instance, couples who meet online can correspond from essentially anywhere in the world (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Video-based forms of communication (e.g., Skype, FaceTime) may especially be valued because they provide partners with ways to see one another even when they are not together in person (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Also, when interactions are mediated through technology, individuals with social anxiety report feeling safer to disclose personal information (Campbell & Murray, 2015).

Technology's Impact on the Family Unit

Utilizing cell phones to communicate is becoming one of the most common and most natural ways to connect with others (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011). "Approximately 58% of married couples with children live in households with two or more computers; 89% of these households have more than one cell phone, and nearly 60% of children in these homes ages 7 to 17 have their own cell phones" (Hertlein, 2012, p.374).When emerging adults were asked why they preferred mobile phone conversations and text messaging over face to face communication, they expressed not speaking with others via face-to-face communication gave them the opportunity of talking to multiple individuals at once, to leave spaces in the conversation, to express truth, and the immediately clarify misunderstandings (Coyne et al., 2011).

There has been a 50% rise in the number of 12 to 15 year olds owning smart phone devices and approximately one in seven children aged between 5 and 15 years of age now use a tablet device at home, a figure that has risen threefold since 2011 (Simpson, 2016). The literature continued to state that adolescent Internet use was not related to overall time spent with parents; however, their Internet use had a negative correlation to the closeness of families even when regulating for the amount of time spent together (Coyne et al., 2011). Hertlein (2012) found advances in technology leads to increased accessibility. People can access the Internet from a variety of places (Hertlein, 2012). The increased accessibility ''implies greater choice and control, while greater access to others also extends one's sphere of influence beyond the local context." The boundaries around what is kept private and what is shared become more rigid when youth feel violated when parents examine their postings on social networking sites. In this way, parents function differently to protect their children from the blurred structure and boundaries (Hertlein, 2012).

Redefining boundaries is a complex transaction for couples and families because families have to negotiate both the physical space and structure to accommodate technology in their home. They also must negotiate how to maintain nurturing relationships with one another while still incorporating new media into their lives (Hertlein, 2012). In some ways, parents' roles have diminished because children and adolescents are more adept at using communicative technologies than adults. As a result, parents may not be aware of the websites their children are visiting (Hertlein, 2012).

Positives Associated with Social Media

      Social Media Enhancing Well-Being

      Paquette (2017) noted that the concept of technology will not be going away anytime

soon. Therefore, individuals need to learn how to make enlightened choices to navigate through

the digital age. As mentioned prior, individuals tend to compare themselves to others on social

media. Paquette (2017) expressed that individuals can harness the positive power of our devices

to do things like update a digital gratitude journal or express our gratitude to someone online.

The gratitude-building app Happier, for example, gives people the ability to share positive

moments and expressions of gratitude across social media (Paquette, 2017). A recent survey

found that around 90 percent of Americans believe the internet and social media have had a

positive impact on their lives (Paquette, 2017). Technology can enhance our ability to be present

via apps that offer guided meditations and breathing exercises, making mindfulness techniques

accessible on a broad scale (Paquette, 2017). Some apps are designed to provide reminders to

slow down throughout the day; others offer yoga instruction, mindful-eating cues, calming

music, and connections to people who can further support the pursuit of living mindfully

(Paquette, 2017).

      Recent studies show that more people report being treated with kindness and generosity

online than those who say negative interactions (Paquette, 2017). Another emotional contagion

survey found that positive social media posts spread more rapidly than negative ones (Paquette,

2017). It was discovered that a group of teens in Iowa City concerned with cyberbullying took to

Twitter to spread messages of helpfulness and compassion to their classmates and teachers,

inspiring many others to do the same (Paquette, 2017). "It is not a question of whether things like

Facebook, smartphones, or Instagram are good or bad, but rather how we can best use them for

happiness and fulfillment. Used in the right way—to foster connection, meaning, and purpose—technology can enhance our happiness" (Paquette, 2017, pg. 27).

Social Media Enhancing Social Capital

Social capital is described as the "features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Kim & Kim, 2017, pg. 620). Chen & Li (2017) noted social capital is a multidimensional concept developed to explain features of social life, the key elements that maintain community life as well as resources accrued through personal relationships. Researchers consistently found that using social network sites is related to higher social capital (Chen & Li, 2017). Kim & Kim (2017) found most studies have confirmed that interpersonal interaction on social media, time spent, and frequency of social media use are positively connected with bridging and bonding social capital. Studies have documented that social capital has a positive association with psychological well-being because strong and weak ties can help to reduce loneliness, circulate useful information, and provide social support (Chen & Li, 2017). Mobile social media link accounts between different social media platforms to combine users' social networks and connect mobile phone numbers to their database to make friend suggestions (Chen & Li, 2017). This provides more opportunities to communicate with weak ties whom users do not have a chance to meet in daily life or frequently interact with. Thus, mobile social media provide the expansive affordance to maintain bridging social capital (Chen & Li, 2017).

The number of friends on social media platforms was also found to enhance both bonding and bridging capital, decrease loneliness, and increase life satisfaction (Chen & Li, 2017). The existing literature on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and social capital suggest that students who partake in online spaces also report higher connection to their campus relationships (Chen & Li,

2017). Chen & Li (2017) noted that a survey sample of college students found that their

continuous Facebook use is positively related to bridging and bonding relationships. In a similar

study of Texas students, researchers also found that Facebook use was positively associated with

characteristics of social capital (Chen & Li, 2017). Students who used Facebook more often

reported higher levels of trust, and participated more in civic and volunteer groups (Chen & Li,

2017). Social media is a vital source of social capital for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB)

individuals. It enables them to cultivate a sense of group membership using community

surveillance, identity expression, and emotional support (Chong, Zhang, Mak, & Pang, 2015).

Social media can be beneficial for shy people, who can express themselves and make friends

online instead of face to face (Chen & Li, 2017). Positive feedback on profiles has been found to

improve adolescents' social self-esteem and well-being. Thus, self-disclosure fulfills the need for

social connection that could contribute to bonding and bridging capital (Chen & Li, 2017).

Self-Disclosure and Well-Being in Social Media

Self-disclosure is a networking behavior that focuses on self-revealing approaches and

how they contribute to interpersonal relationships (Chen & Li, 2017). Self-disclosure has

increasingly gained popularity in social media, according to Pew Research Center, teens are

sharing more information about themselves on social media than they did in the past (Chen & Li,

2017). A body of research has documented the increased nature of self-disclosure online and

shown that those who engage in better self-disclose strategies online are likely to form successful

relationships (Chen & Li, 2017). Not only does self-disclosure play a significant role in close

relationships because receiving intimate disclosure increases trust in discloser, but it also

highlights activities that signal attention, build trust, and desire favorability from weak ties (Chen

& Li, 2017).

Ahn (2012) found behaviors in SNSs, such as self-disclosure and networked communication, lend themselves quite naturally to relationship building. Researchers found that college students reported more motivation to take a class, and projected a more positive classroom environment when they viewed a professor's Facebook profile that was high in self-disclosure (Ahn, 2012). When a Facebook user updates their status, they not only write about private experiences or opinions but also conduct a presentation of self-disclosure to his or her social network (Kim & Kim, 2017). Previous studies have suggested that expressions of an emotional state are one of the central forms of self-disclosure on Facebook, this type of self-disclosure may enable communication about stressful events, provide a means for coping with hostile events, and a way to access social support (Kim & Kim, 2017).

Chen & Li (2017) noted psychological well-being refers to people's feelings and assessments about their lives, the concept includes self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Although some studies discovered a negative relationship between general media use and psychological well-being, most of the studies that focused on relational use of a specific medium, such as the Internet, mobile phones, and social media, have more consistent findings of a positive effect of relational use on psychological well-being (Chen & Li, 2017). Research on mobile phone use has shown that social use by phone calling increases well-being as it drastically decreases loneliness and shyness (Chen & Li, 2017).

Utilizing Social Support Through Social Media

Social media has provided a new form of connecting to others, friends, and strangers, through the creation of online social support. Online social support and support groups emerged in the 1990s and offered groups for almost every distress topic possible (Hartwig, 2016). As the

popularity of social media increases, research has focused on understanding the motivation for using online social support (Hartwig, 2016). Lu & Hampton (2017) noted a primary function of a person's social network is the provision of social support. In this situation, the term "social network," is not referring to Facebook or social media, but to a person's network of relationships with friends, family, and other acquaintances, both on and offline. Social support is not social capital but is one type of resource that can flow through a person's network (Lu & Hampton, 2017). It is noted by Lu & Hampton (2017) that there are three distinct ways to conceptualize social support: perceived, enacted, and received. Networks provide support through directed communication and a variety of outlets (Lu & Hampton, 2017). For example, face-to-face, via the phone, and via social media. The degree to which an individual finds that his or her need for support can be satisfied is his or her perceived social support (Lu & Hampton, 2017). An examination of a person's social network revealed that the quantity of social ties, total network size, and the variety of their overall network foresee higher levels of perceived support (Lu & Hampton, 2017).

Lu & Hampton (2017) noted a number of studies stating Facebook has a positive relationship between frequency of overall use and perceived support. The most common actions on Facebook include "status updates," a way for users to broadcast information to their connections, "comments" on other people's status updates, "likes" (equivalent to placing a thumbs up next to another person's status update), and "private messaging," which is comparable to email (Lu & Hampton, 2017). A study by Lu & Hampton (2017) found an unsuspected positive relationship between Facebook private messaging and companionship. The relationship between Facebook private messaging and companionship might be interpreted as a comparable affordance for the coordination of activities, and thus companionship (Lu & Hampton, 2017).

Status updates are a means to access social support and a way to reassure individuals that their network is aware and responsive, which may contribute to a higher level of perceived support (Lu & Hampton, 2017). The monitoring of feedback to status updates (e.g. received comments and likes), some of which may come offline (e.g. phone calls and face-to-face conversation), provides an awareness of the attentiveness of others to one's necessity for support (Lu & Hampton, 2017).

Haslam, Tee, & Baker (2017) found that the growing use of social media has transformed communication behaviors among parents and provides the opportunity to access social support online. Research found that 66% of people aged 30-39 are using social media more frequently, given its high levels of use, social media has the potential to provide easy-to-access support for parents (Haslam et al., 2017). Increasing evidence is emerging for the effectiveness of Internet-based interventions for improving outcomes in a range of areas including mood disturbance, anxiety, comorbid depression and chronic illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and for child behavior problems and parenting (Haslam et al., 2017). Although online parenting programs are efficient, they typically do not include a social component to provide social support, which may improve intervention outcomes (Haslam et al., 2017). Parents can utilize blog posts to share their personal experiences or give advice; readers of blog posts can respond interactively to posts by leaving comments or interacting with other parents in the comments section, or by validating posts with "likes" to indicate agreement or approval with particular posts (Haslam et al., 2017). In comparison to traditional forms of support such as family and friends, social media is well placed to provide parents with informational and emotional support from others in a time-efficient manner (Haslam et al., 2017).

Research indicates that normalizing perplexing parenting experiences is encouraging for parents of children with behavior problems (Haslam et al., 2017). Social media increases the immediacy with which parents can receive reassurance, and the volume of validation they gain from using social media may be highly reinforcing (Haslam et al., 2017). Parents with low levels of real-life support may be more likely to turn to online sources to meet their support needs via non-traditional methods like social media (Haslam et al., 2017). Also, parents who have low parental self-efficacy may feel uncomfortable pursuing support for fear that they may be ostracized or stigmatized by their face-to-face support networks if this is the case the opportunity to be anonymous may encourage them to access social media for parenting support online (Haslam et al., 2017). Research exploring social support and single mothers has created a foundation for the positive influence of social networks for single-parent families (Hartwig, 2016). Hartwig (2016) further defined social support as a coping function, where support networks respond to an emotional or material need, and as a mobility function, such as a friend connecting a single mother to a job or training opportunity. Results from a study suggested that Internet-based intervention may be effective in improving psychological health, parenting, and health care utilization outcomes for single mothers (Hartwig, 2016). This study identified online-based interventions as an approach to increase emotional support, access to information, and support the utilization of online social support for single mothers (Hartwig, 2016).

Increased Self-Identity

Technological advancement has brought new opportunities for marginalized individuals such as Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) individuals to empower themselves and build connections (Chong et al., 2015). Qualitative studies both in the US and in East Asia have confirmed positive psychosocial effects of online interactive spaces for LGB individuals at risk

of stigmatization (Chong et al., 2015). In the US, for instance, a sample of gay/bisexual male youths used the Internet as a means to facilitate their knowledge of the gay/bisexual community, connected with other gay/ bisexual peers, and ultimately gained self-acceptance (Chong et al., 2015). Research on the use of the Internet by lesbian, bisexual and transgender women showed how significant the Internet is in the development of sexual and gender identities (Chong et al., 2015). LGB and transgender individuals utilized online mailing lists to discuss meaningful community issues, enhance access to resources, and generate participation and actions for social change (Chong et al., 2015).

Self-presentation is the process in which individuals portray an image of themselves to others; it is a vital element in the composition of one's self and efforts to establish a reputation within a social context (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). This is a major task for adolescents and young adults as it entails developing a clear and integrated sense of self with a positive view (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). This self-presentation takes on increased significance when individuals transition into a new environment that requests a reassertion of self and reconfiguration of social relationships (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). A fundamental feature of social networking sites is that they allow users to present an image of one's self to others, which proposes that social networking sites may be especially influential in a successful transition to the residential college environment (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). College students use social networking sites to express various aspects of their identities by displaying photos, showcasing friends' comments, or writing explicit self-descriptions (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016).

International students' use of social networking sites (SNS) on a regular basis and their access to such sites may provide communication and academic benefits in their adjustment

process into a new environment (Binsahl, Chang, & Boshua, 2015). A study of 195 international

students at a large Midwestern university in the United States, analyzed the relationship between

SNS use and international students' social and psychological adjustments to their new

environment (Binsahl et al., 2015). They found that 78.5 percent had used SNS to interact with

friends, which provide international students with a wide range of activities that supplement face

to face interactions, including posting or sending messages to old friends, checking on their

recent activities, and displaying their background and interests to others (Binsahl et al., 2015).

Previous research suggests that SNS provide migrants, such as international students, with

unprecedented opportunities to help them remain connected to their distant home (Binsahl et al.,

2015). By engaging with the strong ties between college students and their friends and families

by virtual connections, Facebook can provide international students the social support they need

for psychological adjustment and emotional well-being during a cultural transition (Binsahl et

al., 2015).

Increased Self-Empowerment

As the role of social media is growing popular, the literature shows that these platforms

are being progressively used by citizens to shape their social and political environment

(Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). Social media has also been an environment for individuals

to achieve self-empowerment through continued peer-to-peer interaction (Tagliacozzo &

Arcidiacono, 2016). Social media is believed to enable the empowerment of people and

communities by turning them into active individuals of the information and knowledge of

developing countries, as well as during disasters (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). In the

recent literature, social media has been represented as an enhancer of community competence in

that it allows people to harness resources and to collectively create the conditions for change (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016).

Social media creates new contexts for activism that do not exist in the world of traditional mass media organizations, with social media, the grounds for activism have been multiplied and transformed (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). Social media provides an alternative space where social movement's history can be discussed, supported, and negotiated (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). They also represent tools in which networks of people with parallel ideas may be formed and expanded outside the control of mainstream media (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). Individuals have also utilized social media during and after natural disasters to empower themselves. In the Katrina recovery, social media represented a tool for citizens to unofficially plan the rebuilding of their city (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016). People self-organized through social media to propose an unofficial plan of the reconstruction of their neighborhoods to meet the population's needs (Tagliacozzo & Arcidiacono, 2016).

Social Media and Intimate Relationship Development

Social networking websites have become a fundamental avenue for communicating within and about interpersonal relationships (Fox et al., 2013). Despite this growing power of online social interaction, research has yet to catch up with the potential implications for how our romantic relationships unfold both online and off-line (Fox et al., 2013). Before sharing a romantic relationship status online, individuals wore wedding rings and varsity jackets to symbolize commitment (Fox et al., 2013). Today social media makes it easier to broadcast information about the status of our romantic relationships to a broader network of people and to do so more rapidly than via traditional face-to-face communication (Fox et al., 2013). Today, Facebook can broadcast the news broadly across the user's online network, which according to

recent studies averages between 200 and 250 friends (Fox et al., 2013). Understanding how traditional models of relationship formation play out in online environments is fundamental to understanding the function of computer mediation in modern interpersonal communication (Fox et al., 2013).

Knapp's stage model of relationships was examined through the lens of Facebook, which explores the escalation stages of intimate relationships (i.e., initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding) (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013). In the initiating stage includes the first interaction between two individuals, it occurs immediately upon meeting someone and involves making a first impression (Fox et al., 2013). Experimenting is the next stage, where couples seek more comprehensive information as a means of determining whether or not a potential partner would be a good fit (Fox et al., 2013). The next stage in escalation, intensifying, occurs when the relationship becomes more natural. Relational partners' self-disclosure increases and commitment begins to manifest (Fox et al., 2013). During the integrating stage, couples form a sense of shared, public relational identity (Fox et al., 2013). Couples are less likely to rely on social norms to control their relationship and instead focus on connectedness (Fox et al., 2013). In this stage, couples usually refer to themselves as ''we" and ''us" as a way to publicize their relationship which is often solidified in the formal, sometimes legal (e.g., marriage or civil union) in the bonding stage of Knapp's mode (Fox et al., 2013).

There is limited research focused on the implications of SNS on our off-line lives, particularly in our romantic relationships (Fox et al., 2013). Therefore, it is increasingly imperative that researchers examine what this means for romantic relationships (Fox et al., 2013). Users may be developing new expectations and behaviors based on what they observe and experience on these sites (Fox et al., 2013). Fox et al., (2013) found a study that addresses how

SNSs may play a role in how people interpret their romantic relationships, as well as how those

relationships transpire. Once a person has access to a romantic target's Facebook page, he or she

has access to a wide range of information about that individual: education, religious and political

affiliations, interests, activities, group memberships, friends, and photographs (Fox et al., 2013).

A Facebook profile essentially maps aspects of a person's identity and social history for the

network's consumption (Fox et al., 2013). With the breadth of information available on SNSs,

individuals can learn a lot about another person without having to interact with him or her, thus

interrupting the norms of a suitable rate of disclosure early in a relationship (Fox et al., 2013).

Participants almost universally stated Facebook as their primary tool for interaction early

in the experimenting stage of romantic relationship development; one frequent topic was how

Facebook interactions had replaced the role of phone calls (Fox et al., 2013). Facebook users can

avoid the pressure of directly expressing relational interest in the first encounter by asking for a

phone number, which several individuals described as ''too forward" (Fox et al., 2013). Rather,

they can log into the nearest computer or smart phone and look the person up on Facebook. If

they want to pursue further contact, they can send an informal friend request so that they can

access each other's profiles and open the lines of communication (Fox et al., 2013). Rather than a

threat of rejection in a face-to-face situation, a Facebook user can send a depersonalized friend

request, system- generated message that requires minimal effort or emotional investment (Fox et

al., 2013).

Facebook empowers the pursuer during the initiating and experimenting phases, allowing

him or her to use the means to initiate or pursue a relationship with a target (Fox et al., 2013).

Participants indicated that this pursuer also has a variation of ways to engage with the target after

initiating through posting on the target's wall, commenting on pictures, or sending a Facebook

message (Fox et al., 2013). According to the participants, pictures are the primary source of

judgment about romantic targets and are vital in the experimenting stage of relationship

development (Fox et al., 2013). From their experiences, participants had developed ''red flags"

for picture content that would terminate their interest in a target. These Facebook behaviors

relate to the uncertainty reduction strategies which suggests that in interpersonal relationships,

people are motivated to learn about others which leads to knowledge-seeking behaviors (Fox et

al., 2013).

Long Distance Relationships

Couples in long-distance relationships often deviate from spatial and socio-temporal

norms, that is, social expectations concerning the use of space and time (Kolozsvari, 2015).

Spatial closeness is assumed for couples in romantic relationships, for those experiencing long

distance these preconceived notions are violated (Kolozsvari, 2015). Couples are often defined

by "being together," and long-distance couples negate this definition by spending at least some

of their time apart and in separate spaces (Kolozsvari, 2015). This situation provides an

interesting opportunity to study how people create a sense of togetherness, transcend perceived

boundaries between being together and apart, and mark their space, which, in the case of long-

distance partners, might be a space that only exists in their cognitive realm (Kolozsvari, 2015).

Kolozsvari (2015) states, "geographically close couples mark their boundaries and create

their reality; however, this boundary work is even more difficult for long-distance partners

because their relationship is less socially legitimated" (pg. 103). The phrase "long-distance

relationship" (LDR) socially differentiates it from "regular" relationships that are assumed to be

geographically close (Kolozsvari, 2015). Cyberspace is arguably less structured and more

infinite than most physical spaces, people in these spaces have more opportunity for limitless

social interactions than they do in physical spaces (Kolozsvari, 2015). Behavioral norms may

also not be as rigid in cyberspace which provides more freedom and individualism which can

help bridge any real or perceived gaps and generate feelings of closeness (Kolozsvari, 2015).

With the creation of these spaces through modern communication technologies, long-distance

couples of today possibly have better tools than long-distance partners of the past to lessen

feelings of separateness (Kolozsvari, 2015).

It is still unclear what specific communicative and cognitive activities improve relational

quality, sustain intimacy, and reduce stress in LDRs (Merolla, 2012). The LDR maintenance

model captures the relational cognition, face-to-face communication, and third-party interaction

that partners enact before, during, and after periods of separation (Merolla, 2012). Scholars

suggest that geographic separation functions as a relationship stressor that promotes attachment

threat, relational uncertainty, and psychological distress (Merolla, 2012). However, Research on

the effects of distance in relationships is mixed. Although some studies specify that distance

increases the likelihood of breakups and negative outcomes, others indicate that distance is

unrelated to breakup potential and that LDR partners experience relational quality levels equal to

or higher than those of geographically close relationship (GCR) partners (Merolla, 2012). The

rates of LDRs are increasing among committed dating and married couples, The Center for the

Study of Long Distance Relationships estimates that 2.9% of United States marriages are long

distance, with 1 in 10 marriages conveyed to have included a period of geographical separation

within the first 3 years (McCoy, Hjelmstad, & Stinson, 2013). In an LDR, partners often live and

work in different locations for a myriad of reasons, such as educational needs, professional goals,

or family ties (McCoy, Hjelmstad, & Stinson, 2013).

LDR partners travel to reunite for a short time before separating again, creating a separation–reunion cycle. This cycle may create distinctive difficulties for LDR's (McCoy et al., 2013). Due to the geographical distances between partners, many utilize videoconferencing services, one of the most popular videoconferencing services is Skype (McCoy et al., 2013). The Skype application can be downloaded at no cost and allows users to make private video calls to other users. A Skype account can be set up easily can be used on a computer, mobile device, or tablet, with a microphone and webcam (McCoy et al., 2013). Opinions about LDRs tend to be pessimistic, with 66% of college students involved in LDRs expecting that most of their partnerships will end within the year (McCoy et al., 2013). This expectation that LDRs will be less stable than geographically close relationships is problematic because of the belief that a relationship is likely to last, termed reliable alliance, accounts for a significant portion of relationship satisfaction for all couples, regardless of physical proximity (McCoy et al., 2013). Research finds that the physical separation may create fewer opportunities for LDR partners to engage in intimacy-building processes such as physical affection, nonverbal cues, and live self-disclosure (McCoy et al., 2013). Therefore, partners in LDRs must make a more concerted effort to engage in these types of interactions than geographically close partners, who can generously engage in face-to-face contact to meet their proximity needs (McCoy et al., 2013). Qualitative studies of partners in LDRs highlight the importance of using technology to maintain connection (McCoy et al., 2013).

Participants in long-distance intimate relationships reported higher levels of satisfaction, more positive reminiscences about a partner, increased levels of perceived agreement with a partner, and improved communication quality than their close-proximity counterparts (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2013). There are a variety of reasons why we might expect

individuals in LDR's to report increased relationship value than those in close-proximity relationships. One reason is that geographical distance might be a filter for certain types of partners and relationships (Kelmer et al., 2013). In deciding whether or not to enter into or continue in an intimate relationship with a partner, individuals may have increased expectations when it comes to long-distance relationships (Kelmer et al., 2013). A qualitative study of LDR's reported that they felt the need to ensure high-quality time during visits with their partners. Close-proximity partners may be less likely to view time together as valuable, and may be less motivated to participate in special activities to ensure that time together is not misused (Kelmer et al., 2013). "Due to the current economic climate, high rates of military deployment, and ongoing immigration policy debates, long-distance relationships are a topic of timely importance to couple therapists, relationship researchers, and policymakers (Kelmer et al., 2013, pg. 257).

Conceptual Framework

The perspective that I utilized when conducting and theorizing this research is Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory examines processes in intimate relationships and explains the development, maintenance, and decay of these relationships in regards to the balance between costs and rewards (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1968). Nakonezny & Denton (2008) went on to explain that costs are the factors that impede or prevent a performance of a sequence of behaviors within a relationship, whereas rewards are the pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications that a person enjoys within a relationship. Therefore, when the rewards are equitable and outweigh the costs, a sense of solidarity develops within the relationship (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1968).).

By analyzing the results through this lens, the researcher was able to decipher how social media is utilized to balance the costs and rewards within a long-distance relationship. Collett (2010) stated that when an individual considers whether they are satisfied within their particular relationship, they will weigh the costs and benefits and compare whether they would be content continuing the relationship or moving to an alternative partner. Partners that are involved in a long-distance relationship have essentially balanced their costs and rewards and value the rewards to the point of being able to problem solve around the costs. In a situation where geographical distance is a cost, partners utilize social media and web-based technology to assist in connecting them on a more personal and intimate level. This study further explored the experiences individuals face in balancing the cost of distance with the reward of companionship and connection.

Methods

Research Design

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study was to understand the distinctive experiences of how social media has had a positive influence on the communication and relationship satisfaction between partners who have experienced long distance. The qualitative design for this study was chosen because qualitative research looks to tell a story to help create understanding or meaning of a certain topic and can use words or sentences to represent the data (Grinnell, Williams & Unrau, 2016). In comparison, quantitative studies use variables that can be measured, analyzed and statistical significance determined (Grinnell et al., 2016). The researcher believes that a richer understanding was gained through exploring each individuals story in regards to how social media and web-based technology provided support despite geographical distance. As the literature review has stated, much of the studies have been focused on the negatives of social media and technology, therefore, the researcher found the importance of focusing on how this expansive topic can be viewed from a positive perspective and utilized as a tool for strengthening relationships.

Sampling

The participants for this study were collected through purposive sampling. This involved looking for eight individuals who met select criteria for this study. To recruit participants for this study, the researcher reached out to individuals on Facebook who were interested in sharing their experiences associated with LDR's and social media. An online post was created with information regarding this study to reach out to potential participants that were interested in sharing their experiences (see Appendix C). The individual contacted the researcher via private

email to express their interest in being a participant. Snowball sampling from participants was used to gain additional participants.

To get a better understanding of this study, the term social media is defined as, "a specific set of online offerings that have emerged over the past three decades – including blogs, social networking sites, and microblogging" (Treem, Dailey, Pierce, &Biffl, 2016). The requirement for participating in this study was that individuals needed to have been in a LDR for at least six months and be involved with connecting with one another on social media at least four times during a week. Long distance was defined as being more than 150 miles away from one another. Participants also needed to be able to share their experience in an audio-recorded interview, either in person or via phone. Participants for this study could have had any sexual orientation but must have fallen between the ages of 20 and 30 years old. These characteristics were identified within the questions of the interview to help analyze the data. Of the eight participants the average age was 24 years old, the average years' participants were in a relationship was 4.5 years, the average years' couples have been involved in a LDR was 3 years, and the average distance of the LDR was 1,720 miles.

Protection of Human Subjects

Thorough measures were taken to ensure the protection of the participants throughout the study. The researcher obtained approval for this study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before recruiting and presenting any interviews for this study. The researcher also received feedback from the research chair and committee to assure the study and interview questions were ethical and appropriate.

Participation in this study was voluntary. The researcher posted the IRB pre-approved social media post to their social media site. Because participants needed to contact the researcher

directly via private email, the researcher's other social media contacts were not informed of who responded or agreed to participate in the study. This assisted in the confidentiality of the study.

A consent form was given to participants via email before the interview took place. The consent form contained information regarding the emphasis and purpose of the study, the interview and research procedures, as well as the risks and benefits of participating in the study. It also described the measure that were taken for voluntary nature of the study, protection of participants, and confidentiality (See Appendix A). Information in the consent form was reviewed either at or before the interview and signed by participants before the interview began. Any questions that came up from the participant before the interview were addressed at the time. The participants were informed of the audio recording process for the interview and that they could have chosen not to answer any questions or to end the interview at any time they felt was necessary. All signed consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet to maintain confidentiality and will be destroyed one year after the date signed. In the case that a participant was not located within the Twin Cities/ Metro area, an emailed consent form was deleted from the researcher's email and printed to be stored in a locked cabinet.

Procedures were taken to ensure the participant's confidentiality for this study. Names and identifiers that would have jeopardized the participant's privacy were eliminated in the exposition of this study. The researcher and participants met in a secluded location of the participant's choosing to ensure confidentiality. Participants that were a far geographical distance from the researcher were interviewed via phone or computer. The researcher conducted the interview in a private location and utilized headphones to ensure the privacy of the participants. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored in the researcher's locked mobile device. Any contact information such as email and phone number in which the client provided were also

saved in the researchers securely locked mobile device and were deleted upon the completion of this study. All transcriptions of the interviews were typed and stored on a password-protected computer. All printed transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet. All recordings and transcripts will be destroyed by June 20, 2018.

Data Collection

Data were collected from individual participant interviews and recorded on the researcher's computer for transcribing. Data for the interview was collected using a semi-structured interview form. The questions were formed based on the literature review and designed to focus on the individuals' experience with social media during their LDR and how they utilized this space for communication. The questions were shaped to assist in creating an understanding to help answer the final research question (Appendix B). Demographic data about the participant's age, gender, sexual orientation, and current relationship status were collected to assist in analyzing the data. The questions were reviewed by the researcher's chair and committee as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After approval, recruitment for participants and data collection began.

Data were collected through in-person and phone interviews during January and February 2018, at a location of the participant's preference. These locations included a coffee shop, participants home, and a private space at The University of St. Thomas. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher to decipher and theme the results. After the interview, an email or private Facebook message was sent out to the participants, thanking them for their time and willingness to self-disclose for the study. Participants were informed that they may have a copy of the final research which will be sent to

them via email upon request. They were also invited to attend the presentation of the final

research project.

Data Analysis Plan

The primary research question is: How is web-based technology and social media utilized

in maintaining and strengthening communication in long distance relationships? This study was

analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach. When using content analysis, the aim is

to build a model to describe the phenomenon in a conceptual form (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). Both

inductive and deductive analysis processes are represented as three main phases: preparation,

organizing and reporting. The concepts are then derived from the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2007).

The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed for frequently used words and phrases that were

congruent with the research question. These words are called codes (Monette, Sullivan, &

DeJong, 2008). The process of analyzing the data involved reading the transcripts word by word

to find the codes. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure that all codes were being

acknowledged. Codes were further categorized to form overall themes. A theme will compose of

three of more codes with a shared meaning.

Strengths and Limitations

Despite the parallel correlations that may be found in the literature and the data, it is vital

to note that due to the design of this case study, there may be limited data due to engaging in

only eight individuals who have experienced long-distance relationships. It cannot be concluded

that all individuals in LDR'S have the same experiences and share the same theory associated

with the impact social media has on individuals. It is also of importance to state that the

researcher and participants may hold similar views which may have introduced the possibility of

bias in analyzing the themes found within the data. In regards to strengths of this study, by using

qualitative, instead of quantitative data, individuals were able to share their experience and had

the opportunity to provide the researcher with more meaningful and substantial data to code and

interpret.

Findings

This qualitative study explored how intimate relationships utilize the instant access to communication through technology to strengthen and maintain their connection despite their geographical distances. Each of the participants had different perspectives from their own experiences within a LDR. There were a variety of consistencies and similarities between all of the participant's individual experiences with utilizing social media to maintain their long-distance relationship. The research showed the following themes: Ease of communication, remaining connected, communicating with/without nonverbal cues, the enhancement of a discussion, sacrifices, dedication/commitment, and trust. Many of the quotes could be used in different themes but were incorporated into the theme that was most relevant.

Ease of Communication

The first theme encompassed how social media has created an ease of communication between both partners involved in a LDR. All of the participants discussed this concept within their interview. This theme includes allowing communication time to move faster, checking in with one another on a regular basis, being within reach of communication, and continual conversation.

The following is a quote that summarizes this theme:

> *Having social media as a mode of communication was huge. If we didn't have it, I*
> *really don't know what we would have done. We wouldn't have been able to stay*
> *in contact being across the world. We could have used snail mail but I think that*
> *is totally different. It definitely made things move faster.*

The main element of this theme was the ease of using an application called WhatsApp to call and text one another. Not only was it simple and quick to use, but it made the participants feel much closer to their partner despite not being in close geographical proximity:

> *WhatsApp was the primary way we would connect with each other and*
> *communicate. It was a way of checking in with each other. I feel like this*
> *makes it as close as you can be to being physically together. It is always in*
> *your pocket and within reach.*

> *I prefer WhatsApp over texting because you can see when they are typing*
> *or you can see when they have viewed when they read it. You can also see*
> *when they are online or when they were last online.*

Another important element of this theme was incorporating Skype. However, it was noted that at times connection speeds and extensive planning made it challenging to utilize Skype on a regular basis.

> *WhatsApp was the main thing we used. I think we tried Skype once or twice*
> *but I don't think we ever had enough time to set aside an hour to sit and*
> *talk. The beauty of WhatsApp is it was always on, like we never said*
> *goodbye... the conversation just kind of continues to roll on.*

> *WhatsApp was the main application we would use for talking and calling*
> *on the phone. Snapchat was a big one as well as Instagram and Facebook.*
> *We would also use Skype depending on how the connection was.*

Remaining Connected

Another theme found with all participants was the importance of remaining connected and utilizing social media despite the barrier of busy schedules. This theme includes connecting despite busy schedules, making connecting a priority, enhancement of relationship and closeness.

The biggest thing was calling, we don't text very much because we are so busy during the day but at night it is always a priority that we talk on the phone for a half an hour to an hour every night. As for applications, we snapchat each other and we also use Instagram, twitter and Facebook.

The main positive is it helped me feel more connected. Without social media it would have been difficult to remain so connected, we would have maybe written letters but we would have really only just had text. Video call applications made the person more than just text on a screen. I think that social media does help enhance our relationship in certain ways. I think it helps in terms of having conversations about different things going on and it also helps us celebrate milestones too.

Another aspect of this theme was participants expressing how vital social media and web-based technology applications were in sustaining their long-distance relationship.

I can't imagine it would be nearly as easy to get through without social media. Not saying it was easy but we may not have stayed together without the ability to talk as often.

Social media as a whole and more specifically WhatsApp were really

helpful. Like how else would you connect when you are long distance? I

reckon it paid the majority of what kept us together because if you can't

speak to each other then things fall apart.

Communicating with/without Nonverbal Cues

The following prevalent theme was the difficulty of communicating on social media via text or on the phone due to missing out on body language and nonverbal cues which often leads to misinterpretations. This theme includes voice tone and inflection, body language, misinterpretations, facial expressions, and communication skills.

It is really hard when it is not face to face communication because voice

tone and inflection is really important and something that is easily picked

up on but there is that whole lacking of body language and the nonverbal

piece. That is completely missing when you are having a conversation on

the phone, especially if it is an argument.

When we get in any type of argument and can't see each other it is really

hard because all you can do is talk... so that piece is kind of hard to never

be together while wanting to bel in each other's presence. I think you can

tell a lot about how a person is doing by their body language.

When you live together you can get in arguments and get over it within an

hour, but if it is over text things can get misinterpreted, so it is more of a

struggle.

However, it was also noted that the application Skype is useful in regaining the ability to see the person's facial expressions and nonverbal cues via webcam.

> *It helps make you feel like you are in the room with the person. When you*
>
> *are on video on Skype the person is simply in the room with you. You are*
>
> *sat there talking and laughing with them and seeing their face expressions.*
>
> *You can physically see them react with their nonverbal cues to a funny*
>
> *story you say and they no longer seem 3,000 miles away, they are right*
>
> *there in the room with you.*

All participants expressed the importance of strong communication skills in maintaining a LDR with social media and web-based technologies.

> *If you don't have good communication skills with your partner before*
>
> *going long distance, I don't think it would ever last. Communication is all*
>
> *you have in a long distance relationship. That is all you do, all you do is*
>
> *communicate with them with a webcam or text. Without the*
>
> *communication piece, you aren't in a relationship with the person you are*
>
> *just thinking about what the person is doing.*

Enhancement to Discussion

Social media's ability to enhance discussion and build a foundation of connectedness was a prevalent theme discussed by the participants. Utilizing Facebook and sharing articles and photos was an important way for participants to enhance and provoke interesting and meaningful discussion. This theme includes tagging each other in posts, meaningful conversations, counting down the time together, and discovering things about one another.

We used Facebook a lot. When we were long distance we would always see something on Facebook that made us think of the other one and we would immediately send it to them. Just so we knew that the other one was thinking about them even if it was just a cute puppy picture or something.

…So, if he were to tag me in some sort of article that I would have never seen before then the next time we would call, I would say, "wow thank you so much for doing that, I thought the article was really interesting." and then that will carry our conversation. So, I think it really does help because then it helps us have deeper more meaningful conversations.

I think it was almost a formative part of our relationship because we would make plans around things we tagged each other in on Facebook. For example, seeing a recipe we shared with each other. We would say, the next time we see each other we will try it together. I think that social media sparked so much conversation for us that we would bond over certain things and discover things about each other that we didn't previously know.

I think that the little things we learned about each other when we would tag each other on Facebook was beneficial. Like, if that wasn't there it would take a lot longer to get to that point of finding it out on our own without Facebook. One day my boyfriend messaged me this story about his

Mom and cooking with her when he was younger and this whole

conversation happened because he saw this recipe on Facebook. He told

me all these things about the relationship he has with his mom and I don't

think it would have come up as authentically as it did without Facebook.

You can talk about what the person has posted on Facebook. Whether it is

photos of where they have been that day or their expressing something

they are feeling. It enhances discussion because you can bring up

something that they have said but not necessarily said to you.

Sacrifices

Participants all expressed the sacrifices they make while involving themselves in a LDR. They expressed the difficulty of not having physical touch as well as the sorrow associated with having limited time during their visits with one another. This theme includes love languages, physical presence, physical touch, and keeping the relationship fun and positive.

You must realize that you have to make sacrifices for the other person

sometimes. Even more so than in a normal relationship where you are

physically near each other and I feel like you also can't get hung up on the

small things. Because it's not worth it, like when you only get an hour of

talking to someone you don't want to be fighting and be short with them.

Because that time is precious.

I think that a lot of times when you don't see that person a lot you realize

how much you are sacrificing with no physical touch. I think for a lot of

people they could meet someone else and it would be so easy think, "you know this would be so much easier if I could be in a relationship with someone who is right here."

With a relationship you have to put 110% into it anyway but long distance is so much harder because you aren't with the person physically. So you have to maintain and keep messenger going with each other. You also have to think of ways to keep the relationship fun and positive.

When we do get to be together it is a countdown every time. I feel like I am never relaxed because I think the physical part of it is soon ending. Like coming home and the person not physically being there is a lot different than just speaking to someone on the phone.

…We have also had to think about how love languages play into this as well. Because for me, my love language is very much quality time and spending time with the person so with long distance the only option is a phone call… it is not preferred but it is better than nothing at all. Whereas, his love language is more physical touch so that has been difficult trying to work around those and to still keep that romantic aspect to our relationship.

Dedication/ Commitment

A theme that was predominant with every participant was the significance of being dedicated and committed to the relationship despite the barriers that are involved with being in a long-distance relationship. This theme includes honesty, overcoming barriers, and having an end in mind regarding the long distance.

> *If you are going to endeavor into a long distance relationship make sure each of you are completely honest with one another and really understand that it takes a lot of work and you really have to like the person. If you think you can do it then go for it, don't let barriers stop you. Just find ways to overcome those barriers.*

> *From my own personal experience and our journey in a long distance relationship I definitely think it requires more dedication. Because, you don't have that luxury of seeing the person every day and you have to make time for that person in different modes other than going out to dinner or going out to dates. You have to come up with different ways to spend time with that person and make sure that you are still putting the work and effort into building a relationship.*

> *I think if you are not in it 100% it is doomed to fail you because obviously if you are in love then it is the whole "absence makes the heart grow fonder thing, whereas if you aren't feeling it the absence is just going to make you grow a part. To go back and forth and visit them every couple*

weeks while everyone else is getting on with their life in one place. It is

quite a big commitment.

Another aspect of this theme was the importance of having an end in mind within a LDR. Many participants stated that knowing the distance was temporarily assisted in the difficulty of missing their partners.

If you are in love then it can definitely work and there are lots of ways

through social media to feel closer then you actually are, so I would say it

is possible but I think for me I always knew that the long distance was not

going to be forever.

Trust

The theme each participant stated was the foundation for maintaining a LDR was the concept of trusting one another and the love you share as a partnership. Participants expressed that not only trusting one another but the journey of being in a LDR is pertinent to its success. This theme includes having a good foundation, communication, love, and appreciation.

I feel like you need to have a base for how long you have dated the person

prior to starting a long distance relationship. I think it would be really

hard to start if you weren't dating the person before, but people do it

obviously. Even our good base of 4 years was difficult, so having that base

and having trust is important along with a routine to talk to each other

every day no matter how busy you are.

If one of us is questioning our foundation of trust, we will make sure to let

the other person know and we will usually have fairly lengthy phone

conversations about it because for me it is one of those things where I don't want to end a conversation and still have the problems be there. So, I would rather just talk it all out to get it out there.

Love isn't about possession, it isn't about thinking "you are mine and I am yours". You have to be able to trust and feel comfortable without them to be able to appreciate what you love about them.

Discussion

The findings explored how intimate relationships utilize the instant access to communication through technology to strengthen and maintain their connection despite their geographical distances. This study determined that social media provides a mode of communication that allows the individuals to connect instantaneously with ease as well as build a stable foundation for their relationship. The use of social exchange theory allowed for the exploration of comparing the costs and benefits associated with being involved in a long-distance relationship. This study allowed the participants to express their own personal lived experiences with weighing the costs and benefits of utilizing social media and technology to maintain their relationships from far geographical distances.

In regards to the themes that were present in this study, all involved the concept of the costs and benefits when expressing how participants utilized social media as a mode of communication in a LDR. As mentioned in the literature review, there is a substantial difference in the structure of long distances relationships in comparison to relationships where distance is not a factor. Cyberspace is arguably less structured and more infinite than most physical spaces, people in these spaces have more opportunity for limitless social interactions than they do in physical spaces (Kolozsvari, 2015).

There were salient findings within the research. The most meaningful being the emphasis participants put on the importance of Facebook in building a strong foundation for their relationship and communication patterns. All of the participants expressed that they found tagging one another in posts and sharing articles via Facebook with one another was a vital factor in assisting in their connectedness with one another. In the literature review, it was mentioned that mobile social media platforms such as Facebook not only let people connect with social

contacts and communicate with each other through messaging or voice calling, but they also

provide a space to share their personal information and feelings (Chen & Li, 2017).

Another important finding was the theme of sacrifice which aligns with social

exchange theory. All participants mentioned that not having physical touch and the

opportunity to spend time with one another in person was a major sacrifice within they

LDR. However, each participant also followed up by expressing that the benefits

associated with their relationship and the love they shared for their partner outweighed

the difficulties and challenges they faced.

An interesting pattern that was found in all of the interviews was the concept of how

Skype was a useful tool but often was not used due to less ease in coordinating a time to speak

due to busy schedules and connectivity difficulties. The literature review mentioned that video-

based forms of communication (e.g., Skype, FaceTime) might especially be valued because they

provide partners with ways to see one another even when they are not together in person (Murray

& Campbell, 2015). The findings of this study are not congruent with this discovery, as nearly all

of the eight participants mentioned utilizing an application called WhatsApp was most

beneficial. WhatsApp is an application that can be downloaded on an individual's smart phone. It

gives people the opportunity to text, send audio messages, and view when a message was read. A

core finding in this study found that the participants felt closer to their partner when they utilized

WhatsApp because of the ease and simplicity associated with this mode of communication.

The literature review mentioned research finds that the physical separation may create

fewer opportunities for LDR partners to engage in intimacy-building processes such as physical

affection, nonverbal cues, and live self-disclosure (McCoy et al., 2013). Therefore, partners in

LDRs must make a more concerted effort to engage in these types of interactions than

geographically close partners, who can generously engage in face-to-face contact to meet their

proximity needs (McCoy et al., 2013). The findings of this study found this to be true.

Participants stated that communicating with their partner via text can be frustrating and lead to

misunderstandings due to the absence of both verbal and non-verbal cues. Many participants

mentioned that disagreements take more effort to work through and may take more time. Other

participants expressed they do not utilize text as a mode of communication when there is a

disagreement and prefer to either wait until they see their partner in person or call on the phone

to avoid misunderstandings.

There were topics discussed in the literature review that were neither confirmed nor

disproved in the findings. Since this study only involved eight participants, these topics need to

be further explored. One of these topics was the comparison between the satisfaction of couples

in a LDR to relationships where distance is not a factor. The literature review stated participants

in long-distance intimate relationships reported higher levels of satisfaction, more positive

reminiscences about a partner, increased levels of perceived agreement with a partner, and

improved communication quality than their close-proximity counterparts (Kelmer, Rhoades,

Stanley & Markman, 2013). While the data collected from my participants found that there was a

high level of satisfaction within their long-distance relationships, this study did not include

participants that were involved in close-proximity relationships for a valid comparison.

The literature reviews also mentioned the rates of LDRs are increasing among committed

dating and married couples. The Center for the Study of Long Distance Relationships estimates

that 2.9% of United States marriages are long distance, with 1 in 10 marriages conveyed to have

included a period of geographical separation within the first three years (McCoy, Hjelmstad, &

Stinson, 2013). Of the eight participants five are currently engaged, and one is married after

being involved in a LDR for a range of two to seven years. All of the interviewees felt strongly that social media and technology had a positive influence on their relationship and allowed them to connect to one another with ease. Many stated that they hold social media and technology responsible for sustaining their relationship and question whether their relationship would have lasted without this mode of communication.

Research Implications

It is arguable that within research these findings would not be considered significant due to the nature of the study and the limited number of participants, however this is something to be considered for future research. Because only eight participants were interviewed, it would be important to do further research on other individuals who have experienced involvement in a LDR. As mentioned, it would also be beneficial to research satisfaction among close-proximity couples who utilize social media and technology to form a comparison. A quantitative study with a larger number of participants may gain further knowledge and a wider scope of the costs and benefits associated with utilizing social media and technology in both long distance and close-proximity relationships. Further research on this topic would be beneficial in conceptualizing successful approaches and modes of communication for individuals who are considering exploring involvement in a LDR. Further knowledge of this topic is also beneficial for future practitioners who engage with couples as well as those who do not understand the costs and benefits of social media and technology within relationships.

Practice Implications

Couples who are currently involved in a LDR, as well as couples who are considering exploring involvement in a LDR could find this research helpful in determining whether they would find social media and technology helpful in maintaining their relationship. While the

results of this study cannot be generalized, couples can try different modes of social media and technology mentioned in the findings to integrate into their relationship. The findings also provide further knowledge and depth into understanding how social media and technology factor into sustaining and improving communication among couples of far geographical distances.

One limitation of the study was that each individual interviewed successfully sustained a long-distance relationship and may have been partial to stating that social media and technology was the reasoning for its success. This may have led to bias in the interpretation of the findings surrounding the positives associated with social media and technology. If the long-distance relationship had not been successful, it might have shifted how the findings and themes were conceptualized. Another limitation of the study is that all participants within this study had formed a foundation within their relationship before beginning long distance. The results might be different if participants had begun their relationship long distance and then decided to utilize social media and technology as a mode of communication to learn about one another. Additionally, this study had a small sample size, which has a limited variety of perspectives on the topics researched. The researcher only interviewed participants within their own social media circle; the findings may have been different if the researcher expanded sampling into other settings. More perspectives and experiences may have further legitimized and expanded on the topic of social media and technology as a mode of communication within LDR's.

This study shows a variety of strengths due to the depth of analysis associated with qualitative research. Qualitative research gives the study an expansive and personalized understanding of each participant's views on the research question. Getting individual perspectives on utilizing social media and technology as a mode of communication within a LDR

gave this study detailed explanations to true lived experiences. This not only provides ample

insight into the research, but it provides further opportunities for future exploration into a topic

that continues to develop and transform relationships and society.

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Appendix A

ST CATHERINE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for a Research Study
Study Title: Exploration of Positive Impact of Social Media in Long Distance Relationships

Researcher(s): Lexie M. Gutzmann, B.S.
You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is called Exploration of Positive Impact of Social Media in Long Distance Relationships. The study is being done by Lexie M. Gutzmann, a Masters' students at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. The faculty advisor for this study is Rajean P. Moone, PHD, Graduate School of Social Work at St. Catherine University.
The purpose of this study is to address how social media and web-based technologies are utilized in strengthening and maintaining long distance relationships. This study is important because there is a lack of research focusing on the benefits of social media within the context of couples in long distance relationships. Approximately 8-10 people are expected to participate in this research. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?
The researcher reached out to individuals on Facebook who were interested in sharing their experiences associated with long distance relationships and social media. Participants for this study could be any sexual orientation and must fall between the ages of 20 and 30 years old. You have been selected for this study because you fall within this criterion.
If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Answer a series of questions in an interview, which will be audiotaped. This should last about 30 to 45 minutes. The data will then be analyzed and presented. None of the data will be attached to your name. In total, this study will take approximately 55 minutes over one session.

What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify Lexie Gutzmann and you will be removed immediately. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

There are no risks to participating in this study. In the event that this research activity results in an injury, I will assist you by providing resources in which you can utilize to assist with your injury. Any medical care for research-related injuries should be paid by you or your insurance company. If you think you have suffered a research-related injury, please let me know right away.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?
You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?
The information that you provide in this study will be transcribed from an audio tape and will be accessed and analyzed for themes. Participant names will be removed from the data? I will keep the research results in a locked cabinet and only I and the research advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by June 20, 2018. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. The audio tapes will be located on a secured phone device and will not be shared by others, these audio tapes will be destroyed by June 20, 2018.
Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, I will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.
Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?
If during the course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings
How can I get more information?
If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me at 651-270-4655 or gutz9646@stthomas. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Dr. Rajean P. Moone at rpmoone@stkates.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be audiotaped.
My signature indicates that I have read this information and my questions have been answered. I also know that even after signing this form, I may withdraw from the study by informing the researcher(s).

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Parent, Legal Guardian, or Witness   Date
(if applicable, otherwise delete this line)

_____

Signature of Researcher

Appendix B

Interview Questions:

1.) Do you mind explaining the background of how you met your partner and became in a relationship?

2.) What circumstances led to your long distance relationship?

3.) Can you please share your age?

4.) Geographically how far are you from one another?

5.) How long have you been in a relationship?

6.) Of that time, how long were you experiencing geographical distance?

7.) What were the social media and web-based technology applications that you utilized to remain connected, and how often would you use them to connect with your partner?

8.) Did you have a routine on when you would connect on social media? If so, what was it and how did it impact your feeling of being connected?

9.) How has social media and web-based technology had a positive effect on your long-distance relationship?

10.) What are some of the downsides of a long distance relationship?

11.) If social media and web-based technology did not exist, how do you think you would continue to maintain your relationship? Do you think it would be successful?

12.) What do you think is the most important factor in a long-distance relationship?

13.) Do you think that long-distance relationships tend to need more dedication than just a normal relationship?

14.) What advice would you give to someone wanting to have a long-distance relationship, or someone that is currently in one?

Appendix C

Social Media Post:

Hello everyone! I am currently working on a clinical research project for my master's in social work at the University of St. Thomas and St. Kate's. I am seeking participants ages 20-30 to be involved in an interview regarding how web based technology and social media is utilized in maintaining and strengthening communication in long distance relationships. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes. Please send me a private email me at gutz9646@stthomas.edu if you wish to participate, any help is greatly appreciated! If you are aware of any individuals who are currently or who have been involved in a long distance relationship for longer than six months, please do not hesitate to let them know about my study. If you have any comments about the study or questions for me, please contact me via private email. To ensure confidentiality please do not inquire via comment on this post. Thank you!