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Distance Makes the Heart Grow Fonder: Do Long-Distance Relationships Have an Effect on Levels of Intimacy in Romantic Relationships?

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Introduction

Numerous studies have sought to find out how long-distance relationships differ from geographically close relationships. Most have shown that long-distant relationships are related to higher levels of intimacy. For instance, Pistole, Roberts, and Mosko (2010) suggested that long-distance relationships may actually correlate with whether a couple is committed to each other or not due to the large amounts of time couples have to invest in the relationship in order to make it successful. Additionally, they state that because geographically close relationships require less time and effort to see each other, they do not always invest as much in each other and the relationship, resulting in lower levels of commitment.

Another study found that because couples in long-distant relationships tend to have more time away from one another compared to geographically close couples, they have more time to reminisce about the positive times together or focus on “resetting” their emotions, causing an increase in relationship quality (Jacobs & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Mietzner and Lin (2005) also offer support to the argument that long-distance relationships encourage a closer relationship than geographically close couples. Both suggest that being physically apart gives more opportunities for the two individuals to develop a sense of independence and autonomy. This also gives couples an opportunity to build a better non-physical connection.

Recently, Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley and Markman (2013) revealed that long-distance relationships have significantly higher levels of adjustment, love for partner, fun with partner, and conversational quality. Additionally, long-distance relationships were found to have lower levels of problematic communication and less psychological aggression. Finally, Stafford (2010) found that long-distance relationships, compared to geographically close relationships, are very highly correlated to high levels of perceived intimacy within the couple.

Although the mentioned studies present strong evidence for the theory that couples who are not geographically close tend to have overall better and/or stronger relationships, some studies have found otherwise. One such study determined that the more face-to-face interactions couples have with each other, the greater amount of intimacy and happiness there is within the relationship. Also, the more distance between the couple was positively correlated with higher levels of stress (Merolla, 2012).

Which one holds more truth? “Distance makes the heart grow fonder” or “Out of sight, out of mind?” This study attempts to find out which statement is more accurate by closely examining two types of relationships: long-distance and geographically close. Further, this study will also attempt to answer the question if long-distance relationships demonstrate a higher or lower amount of intimacy

than relationships that are not physically apart (geographically close couples). Due to the high prevalence of long-distance relationships in college students, this study will survey young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, primarily within Pepperdine University students.

For the context of this study, long-distance relationships are defined as any couple that is not located in the same geographic region and are physically unable to visit one another without great travel expenses, planning, or inconvenience to ones set schedule. Geographically close relationships are defined as any couple that live in the same city, town or area that does not require travel plans, expenses that are out of the ordinary from their daily routine and can physically visit with each other regularly and frequently. Notably, these relationships may look different in each couple. Whether a couple considers each other “boyfriend” and “girlfriend,” significant others, or simply have an unlabeled yet understood committed relationship is irrelevant. This is due to the fact that many couples in unlabeled relationships can act very similar if not identical to couples in labeled relationships. In some instances, couples in an unlabeled relationship can even be more serious in their commitment and investment levels than those who choose to have a public label such as “girlfriend,” or even fiancé.

Intimacy can be defined in several ways. In this study, it will be defined as a combination of the following attributes: perceived togetherness, level of commitment, and level of satisfaction a participant feels in their romantic relationship. Perceived togetherness is subjective and a self-reporting measure by the subject. It will be defined as how well the participant feels that their relationship is in agreement and harmony and in a unified or coherent structure or integrated whole. Commitment, for the purpose of this study, will be defined as “an agreement or pledge to do something in the future” and being “in the state or instance of being obligated or emotionally impelled” (Merriam-Webster, 2013) as it applies to their relationship. Lastly, overall satisfaction will be defined as an overall happy or pleased feeling and a perceived sense of fulfillment of a need or want in the relationship.

The present study seeks to investigate whether long-distance relationships promote superior intimacy in romantic relationships than couples that are geographically close. It is hypothesized that individuals who are in long-distance relationships will have higher levels of intimacy in their relationship than their counterparts.

Method

Participants

This study was available to anyone between the ages of 18 and 25, with most participants being undergraduate college students at Pepperdine University. To participate, individuals needed to be currently involved in a romantic relationship. Surveys were distributed through means of e-mail, and Facebook. The survey was posted through class groups on Facebook from a personal Facebook page and e-mailed to peers. In addition, the survey was posted via Kwiksurveys. Those who chose to participate in the study were entered to win one of three \$5.00 Chipotle gift cards. The winners were chosen with an online randomizer to prevent any personal biases while selecting the winners.

There were 95 participants in this study (69 women (73%) and 13 men (14%) of those who stated their gender). The lack of male participation in this study suggests a large gender bias in the results and does not act as a true representation of the population being studied. The average participant has a senior class standing ($M= 3.93$; 1= *freshman*, 2= *sophomore*, 3= *junior*, 4= *senior*, 5= *fifth year*, and 6= *graduated/graduate student*) and attends Pepperdine University ($M= 1.15$ with 1= *attends Pepperdine* and 2= *does not attend Pepperdine*). Most participants are not in a long-distance relationship ($M= 1.57$ with 1= *in a long-distance relationship* and 2= *not in a long-distance relationship*) and have been with their current partner for 7-11 months ($M= 3.13$ with 1= *less than 1 month*, 2= *1-6 months*, 3= *7-11 months* and 4= *1 year or more*).

Materials and Procedure

A combination of assessments was administered to participants, all of which relate to the specified definition of intimacy used for this study. The chosen tests used to assess intimacy were originally created for heterosexual romantic relationships, although homosexual couples that chose to participate in this study received the same test measures. The survey did not ask participants to indicate if they are in a heterosexual or homosexual relationship.

The Marital Adjustment Test, modified from Franzoi, Davis, and Young (1985), was used to measure “Perceived Togetherness” and “Satisfaction” with the relationship. The test focuses on degrees of agreement the individual feels toward their partner as well as overall relationship happiness. It consists of the subcategories “Agreement”, and “Relationship Happiness” and uses a 5-point

Likert-scale. Question 11 of the survey was used for “Perceived Togetherness” while questions 12-14 were used for overall relationship “Satisfaction.”

The Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale from Dibble, Levine, and Park (2012) was also used to better determine “Perceived Togetherness.” The test measures degrees of closeness the individual(s) feel in their romantic relationship using a 7-point Likert-scale. For the purpose of this study, question 6 from the original test has been omitted due to an overlap in responses from The Marital Adjustment Test. All questions from this test measure “Closeness.” Additionally, question 15 on this study’s survey answers questions from the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale.

Finally, the Modified Investment Model Scale (Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin), which is question 16 on the survey, measures the amount of commitment in the relationship examining feelings of commitment and levels of investment. Questions are measured by a 9-point Likert-scale. For the purpose of this study, all questions from the test have been applied to measure commitment levels in each of the two relationship groups.

Procedure

Participants were provided a direct link to the research study’s survey hosted by Kwiksurveys.com. From there, the participants were directed to an informed consent where they were instructed to read and click “I Agree” to. If any participant answered, “I disagree” they were taken to the end of the survey and did not have the option to answer any of the study’s survey questions.

The first questions of the survey consisted of basic demographic information (i.e., “Gender,” “Are you religious,” and “How would you define your relationship?”). Next, participants answered a series of Likert-scale questions regarding their feelings towards their current partner in their relationship or attitudes about their current romantic relationship, (aforementioned in the Methods section). Finally, participants had the choice of entering in a drawing for one of three \$5.00 Chipotle gift cards. If they checked “Yes,” they were instructed to provide their e-mail in the text box. Upon completion of the survey they were shown a “Thank you” screen and exited from the survey. Participants were unable to take the survey twice on the same computer, as the assigned link was IP address sensitive.

Results

Analyses focus on participants' responses to the 16 questions presented in the online survey (i.e. questions 17-18 were omitted due to their content regarding the Chipotle gift card). There was no removal of outliers or deletion of responses for participants who did not answer all of the questions. In these cases, the questions they did respond to were analyzed. Thus, missing responses most likely skewed the results of these analyses.

Each participant in this study received a score of the sum of the responses from each subcategory. Each subcategory score was not combined into overall intimacy initially in order to notice differences between subcategories in both groups (long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships). The sum of the three subcategories was then calculated for each relationship group to create an overall intimacy level.

Four t-tests were performed. The first t-test analyzed the Togetherness total for both the long-distance relationship group and the geographically close relationship group. The next t-test analyzed the Commitment total between the two groups, and the third t-test analyzed the Satisfaction total between the two groups. The t-tests were performed to find any statistical significance between both relationship groups and the denoted subcategories. Lastly, the sums of all three subcategory totals were combined to form an overall intimacy level for each group: long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships and a fourth t-test was performed to determine statistical significance for overall intimacy.

A t-test revealed that there was no statistical significant difference between groups to support the hypothesis that long-distance relationships result in higher levels of overall intimacy ($t = .365$, $p > .05$). The overall intimacy score of each group was compared (the sum of the subcategories). Participants who are currently in a long-distance relationship ($n = 20$) had a slightly higher mean of 155.10 ($SD = 19.79$) for overall intimacy than those in geographically close relationships ($n = 32$) with a mean of 152.63 ($SD = 25.91$); refer to Figure 2.

Also, there was no statistical significance difference between groups that long-distance relationships have a higher Commitment total ($t = .420$, $p > .05$) or Perceived Togetherness total ($t = .828$, $p > .05$) than their counterparts. Participants in long-distance relationships ($n = 20$) showed a slightly higher mean of 62.35 ($SD = 13.18$) in commitment than those in a geographically close relationship ($n = 32$) with a mean of 61.66 ($SD = 15.72$). Conversely, individuals in geographically close relationships ($n = 33$) had a slightly higher mean of 75.06 ($SD = 14.18$) in togetherness than those in long-distance relationships ($n = 23$) with a mean of 73.91 ($SD = 11.03$); see Figure 1.

The mean of the subcategory “Overall Satisfaction” was compared between each group (those in long-distance relationships and those who are not). Satisfaction was found to be slightly higher in those in a long-distance relationship, although not statistically significant. Participants in a long-distance relationship ($n = 27$) had a similar mean of 16.26 ($SD = 2.86$) in satisfaction with those in geographically close relationships ($n = 37$) with a mean of 15.59 ($SD = 2.66$); see Figure 1.

Discussion

The first hypothesis speculated that those in long-distance relationships have a higher intimacy level than those who are in geographically close relationships. This hypothesis was not supported although it has been in previous research studies. Stafford (2010) found that those in long-distance relationships had more “intimacy-focused” speech toward each other and have higher overall intimacy means than those in geographically close relationships. The difference in results could mean that this study did not address the same types of intimacy as Stafford’s study.

The second hypothesis was that those in long-distance relationships would have higher levels of togetherness and commitment in their relationships than those in geographically close relationships. This hypothesis was not supported as there was no significant statistical difference. Pistole, Roberts, and Mosko (2010) hypothesized that geographically close relationships do not require as much commitment to the relationship because couples invest less time and energy. In addition, Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley and Markman’s (2013) results are in line with the predicted results that long-distance couples have higher levels of “Perceived Togetherness,” most likely due to the quality times couples do have a chance to visit and see one another. The difference in findings between this study and previous studies could indicate that there are more factors at work than just the distance between couples in a relationship that influence commitment and togetherness.

The last hypothesis was that both groups would have similar means in overall relationship satisfaction. This hypothesis was supported, as both means were almost identical. Merolla (2012) found that couples who spend time together in person tend to have greater amounts of happiness within the relationship, and Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley and Markman (2013) found that those in long-distance relationships have better overall relationship quality. In agreement, one could imply that relationship quality and the amount of satisfaction in the relationship is dependent on the individuals rather than the type of relationship.

Because many of this study's hypotheses were not supported, it shows that this study may not be a true representation of the population, intimacy may not be defined in the same ways, or simply that the distance between a couple is not significant in terms of intimacy in the relationship.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the total number of participants primarily attends Pepperdine. Pepperdine's "ring by spring" mentality (seniors getting engaged by their spring semester before graduation) may have an effect on the study. It should be noted that not all Pepperdine seniors engage in this "ring by spring" trend, and it is primarily driven by the strength of religious affiliation, social group or familial customs. Most Pepperdine seniors are not engaged by graduation. However, this could potentially create a rushed sense of togetherness with higher levels of commitment because marriage is more plausible in their relationship.

This may be a result of having a common religious background, as Pepperdine is a Christian campus. Very religious couples tend to place their commitment in God first, resulting in a more intimate and faithful bond in their romantic relationship because it is placed in God rather than themselves. In addition, couples who are more aware of the "ring by spring" norm may have a higher likelihood of wanting to participate in this study because they have been more exposed to relationship talk.

Another possible limitation of this study is the definition of "intimacy." This brings up the question of which subcategory most accurately reflects the strength and health of the relationship. For instance, is commitment the best predictor for a successful marriage even if perceived togetherness and overall satisfaction at the time participants took the survey are low? It is best to take into consideration the natural occurring shifts in relationships. A very fruitful relationship may be experiencing a "low" at the time of participation resulting in lower levels of intimacy. A very dreadful relationship can be going through an "up," resulting in very high levels of intimacy even if that is not shown in the day-to-day relationship. Because relationships can change drastically in either a positive or negative way, it is more difficult to accurately predict which group has higher levels of intimacy; it is very dependent on the individual and cannot always be generalized.

In addition, many participants did not answer all of the questions on the survey. This should be noted and considered when looking at the number of participants involved in the study and the statistical results. This missing data could have skewed the results in a significant way.

Conclusion and Future Study

Results from this study can be included in the multiple studies already in the field that analyze the differences in couples in long-distance and geographically close relationships. By analyzing the differences in these two groups, researchers can potentially apply the results to new focuses and techniques in couple therapy sessions to improve their relationship. By studying what specific characteristics in a long-distance relationship produce higher intimacy levels, couples can potentially learn to strengthen weak areas of their relationship and consequently create a healthier and more intimate romantic relationship.

This study's results can also provide couples with more information about their own relationship by initiating thoughtful discussion regarding each of the subcategories and how each may influence the overall feeling of the relationship. For instance, if one notices that long-distance couples have higher levels of commitment, one can fairly accurately assume that physical distance and more alone time outside of the relationship can increase commitment levels in their own relationship. Further, if a couple is transitioning from a geographically close relationship to a long-distance relationship (or vice versa), the couple may use this study's results as a comforting example due to the lack of statistically significant difference between overall intimacy levels in each type of relationship.

Conclusively, this study failed to support the previous research done in this field to show that couples in long-distance relationships have higher levels of intimacy. It would be ideal to replicate this study with a larger and more diverse population to determine if the lack of significant results is generalized outside of Pepperdine University students. It would also be interesting to use a more comprehensive age range to examine if there are any differences in intimacy with older adults engaging in long-distance relationships.

The present study examined if being in a long-distance relationship can positively influence the level of intimacy a couple experiences. Although the results were not statistically significant, this study allows persons to reevaluate what relationships need to thrive and how long-distance relationships differ than geographically-close relationships. These findings suggest however, that love does not discriminate and is ignorant to the amount of distance between couples. In other words, love knows no limits.

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Appendix 1

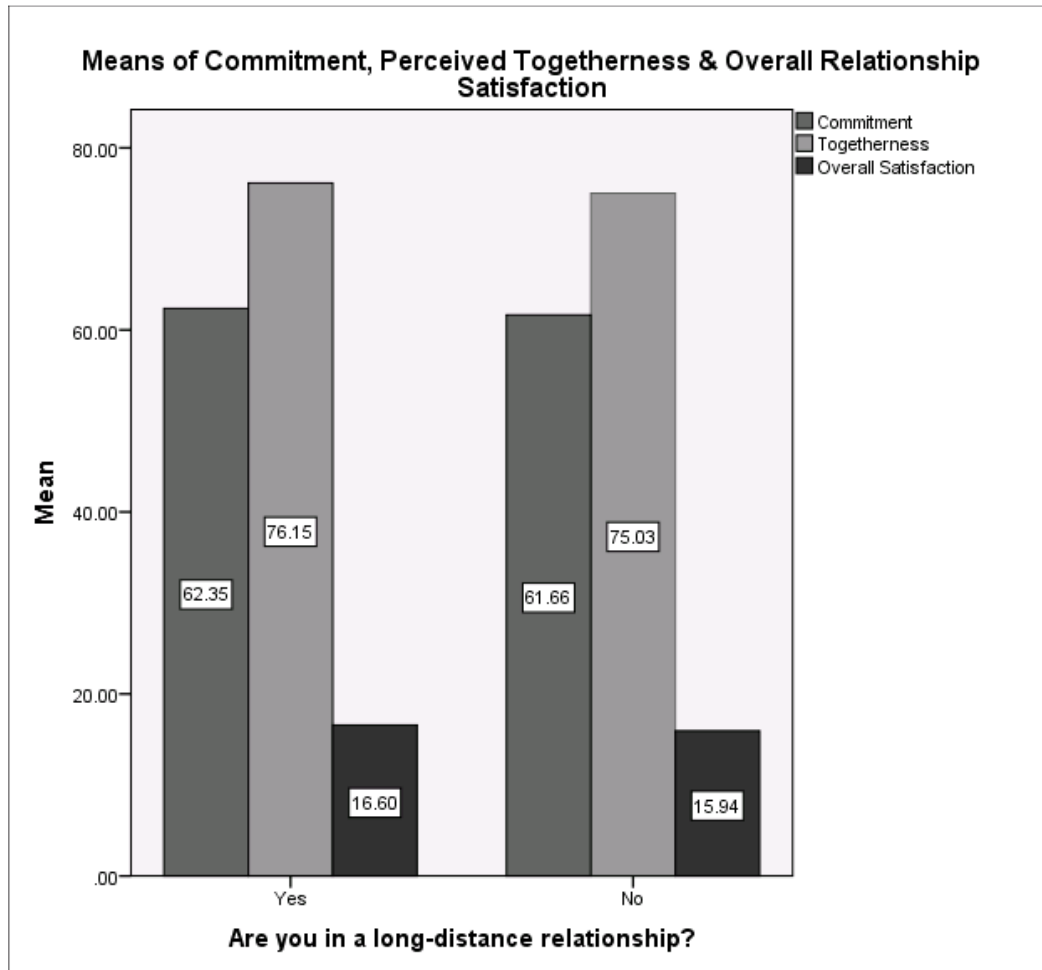


Figure 1. The Independent Sample t-test comparing the means of each of the three subcategories (Commitment, Togetherness and Satisfaction) between those in a long-distance relationship and those who are in a geographically close relationship. There was no significant difference found in the comparison of means in both groups.

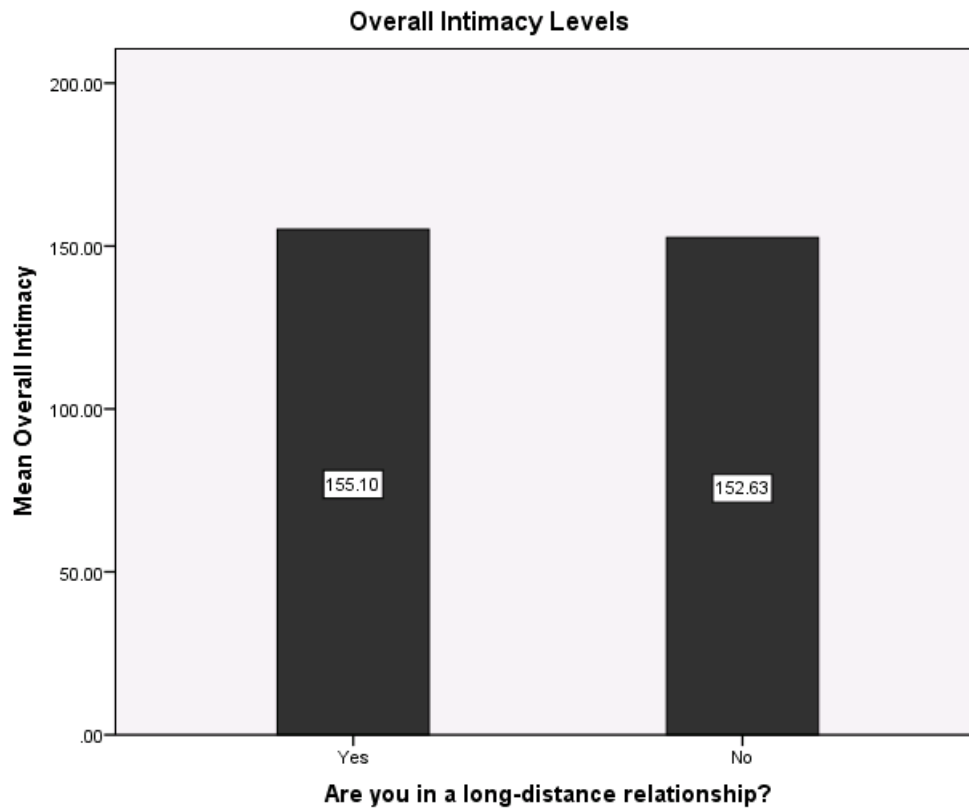


Figure 2. The Independent Sample t-test comparing the overall intimacy levels between those in a long-distance relationship and those who are in a geographically close relationship. Overall intimacy is the sum of all of the subcategory means: Commitment, Togetherness and Satisfaction. There was no significant difference between these two means.