

Social Media Use in the Maintenance of Long-Distance Romantic Relationships in College

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has had a dramatic impact on the way people communicate at a distance, especially in the context of long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs). College students account for a large demographic of both LDRR couples and social media users. This study investigated why college students in LDRRs use certain social media sites over others and how they use social media to maintain their LDRRs. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with college students currently in LDRRs and analyzed using thematic analysis. Utilizing uses and gratifications theory, the results indicated that the ability to share content with partners both publicly and privately was important to the maintenance of the LDRRs. The ability of a social media site to simulate synchronous communication, the interests of the couple, and the content on the social media site all helped determine the social media sites used by the couple. The findings of this study extended the current literature by indicating social media features that are helpful to LDRRs in college and the strategies that allow LDRR couples to stay connected and maintain their relationship.

INTRODUCTION

When students leave for college, many of their important relationships become long-distance, including romantic relationships (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008). College-age students are a large and unique demographic for long-distance romantic relationships (Stafford, 2010; Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006). Jiang and Hancock (2013) found that 25-50% of college students are in long-distance romantic relationships at any given time, and 75% of college students will participate in a long-distance romantic relationship at some point in their college career. Although not a new phenomenon, long-distance relationships have changed with the introduction of social media. The rise of social media has influenced how couples interact in and maintain long-distance relationships because social media offers a more efficient way to communicate support (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014; "Online," 2013). Therefore, social media has made long-distance relationships more practical (Schmall, 2018).

Distance is a compelling relationship challenge (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015). The distance between partners in long-distance couples requires them to communicate electronically more frequently, causing mediated communication to become an important maintenance tool (Johnson et al., 2008; Schmall, 2018). This is especially true for college-age students (ages 18-29) because they are the highest consumers of social media in America with 90% of them using at least one social media site ("Social," 2019). The fact that college students are high social media users and many of them partake in long-distance romantic relationships makes them an important demographic to study in the given context.

The purpose of this study is to understand why and how college students use specific social media platforms to maintain long-distance romantic relationships. Long-distance romantic relationships have been studied in the theoretical traditions of social media, relational maintenance, and uses and gratifications theory (Billedo et al., 2015; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Stafford, 2010; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Suwinyattichai, Fontana, Shaknitz, & Linder, 2017; Taylor & Bazarova, 2018), but they have not been studied in the context of all three contexts simultaneously. When studying long-distance romantic relationships, previous studies have also focused on social media broadly or a few types of computer-mediated communication at a time such as Facebook or email (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Dainton & Stokes, 2015; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Sheldon, 2008; Urista, Qingwen, & Day, 2009). Studying long-distance romantic relationships within the contexts of multiple social media, relational maintenance, and uses and gratifications theory simultaneously will aid in a better understanding of why and how long-distance partners use social media in their relationships.

First, an examination of the literature on long-distance romantic relationships and relational maintenance will demonstrate how scholars currently understand communication and social media in these specific contexts. Then, an explanation of uses and gratifications theory will follow to serve as the lens through which to analyze why college use specific social media sites, and how they use them to maintain their long-distance romantic relationships. After the literature review, an explanation of this study's methods and results is provided. Lastly, a discussion of the findings will follow, concluding with limitations and future directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how college students use social media to maintain their long-distance romantic relationships using various platforms, this paper will review the research on long-distance romantic relationships. This paper will focus on communication patterns and social media uses for initiation and maintenance. The review will then offer an overview of relational maintenance and its relationship to social media to aid in understanding its application to long-distance romantic relationships. This paper will conclude with an examination of uses and gratifications theory and how it has been used to study social media.

Long-Distance Romantic Relationships and Communication

Definitions of long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) take many forms, including numerical mileage minimums and communication barriers. Stafford (2005) defined a relationship as long-distance "when communication opportunities are restricted because of geographic parameters and the individuals within the relationship have expectations of a continued close connection" (p. 7). Johnson et al. (2008) took a more numerical approach, stating that LDRRs are defined by a distance between partners greater than 50 miles because this is associated with decreased daily face-to-face communication. Generally, LDRRs are characterized by a decrease in face-to-face communication, time together, and shared activities, which challenges western ideals for romantic success and satisfaction (Stafford, 2005; Stafford, 2010; Stafford & Merolla, 2007).

LDRR couples have unique communication patterns. Although they are often separated, LDRR couples believe their communication is of higher quality than geographically close distance relationships (GCDR) (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). They also narrow the types of communication they utilize, engage in more intimate and positive talk on a daily basis, and report higher quality face-to-face interactions and less conflict (Stafford, 2010; Stafford et al., 2006). Practices and topics that would normally be considered taboo to GCDR couples such as frequent relationship talk can be important and transformational for LDRR couples due to a lack of physical intimacy and closeness (Stafford, 2010). Due to a lack of physical proximity, these couples heavily depend on verbal and mediated communication (Stafford, 2005). This dependence on verbal and mediated cues impacts how LDRR partners interact when they are together, leading to altered communication styles when they are reunited compared to when they are separated (Stafford, 2010). Overall, Suwinyattichaiorn et al. (2017) found that open and intentional communication is key to the longevity of a LDRR.

Besides geographical distance, there are also a variety of other relational issues that impact LDRRs. Common relational issues in LDRR couples include idealization, relational uncertainty, and jealousy (Suwinyattichaiorn et al., 2017). The increase in idealization, or idealistic distortion, in LDRR partners is due to a lack of face-to-face communication (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford et al., 2006). Stafford (2010) found that LDRR couples also have a higher rate of conflict avoidance and selective positive self-presentation as compared to GCDR. This could be in part because LDRR pairs have fewer opportunities for conflict to arise, leading to the perception of better intimacy which can be problematic (Stafford, 2010). The inherent nature of LDRRs can also cause relational problems for couples because individuals in LDRRs generally have more stress (Maguire & Kinney, 2010).

However, communication is a great tool for combating relational issues in long-distance romantic relationships. According to Suwinyattichaiorn et al. (2017), college students in LDRRs report utilizing "a great amount of prosocial maintenance behaviors, trusting self and partner, and setting relational goals together" to cope with relationship problems (p. 77). Other positive communicative practices for couples in a LDRR are frequent verbal assurances, intentional openness and honesty, positivity and optimism, constructive conflict management, trust in the self and partner, and commitment to mutual goals (Suwinyattichaiorn et al., 2017). Maguire and Kinney (2010) also found that the stress associated with LDRRs can be mediated through communication coping strategies, which help to promote important themes such as relationship satisfaction, openness, and positivity. Although these studies focus on communication in long-distance romantic relationships, they do not focus on the means with which they are done, which is also crucial to a modern LDRR.

Long-distance romantic relationships and social media. One medium LDRR couples use to communicate is

social media. Social media is a fairly new and ill-defined concept. Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social media as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

Social media websites are also called social network(ing) sites (SNS) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It is important to study social media in LDRRs because their social media behaviors are more apparent, and the sites allow them to experience normal relationship processes that are otherwise challenging (Billedo et al., 2015). Processes could include things such as frequent relationship talk or defining relationships. Although, due to a lack of face-to-face time, LDRR couples can come to rely on social media for relational maintenance and intimacy, impacting their patterns of communicating on social media (Billedo et al., 2015; Taylor and Bazarova, 2018). This is likely because media use carries relational meaning and can operate as a substitute for other types of communication to satisfy communication goals with romantic partners (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Social media as a frequent communication medium can be especially prevalent in LDRRs due to distance.

Taylor and Bazarova (2018) studied how people in romantic relationships use multiple media in daily communication. They found that media is used for both intimate and non-intimate disclosure. The study also found that GCDRs use multiple media more often than LDRRs, however, LDRR pairs disclose more often and intimately across various media forms (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). This is why it is important to study the media uses of LDRR couples across multiple media forms. It is also crucial to study romantic relationships specifically concerning social media because close romantic couples use media differently regarding content, type, frequency, and general uses (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). There is also a positive relationship between relational closeness and the number of social medias used and how much they disclose regardless of geographical distance (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Therefore, it is important to study the uses of specific multiple social media in LDRRs, which has not been done before.

Initiation. Many studies have examined initiating relationships through social media (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Ellison et al., 2007; Urista et al., 2009). Although this is not a focus of the current study, a brief summary of the literature is offered here because the nature of social media sites encourages the maintenance of prior relationships and the initiation of new ones, oftentimes at a geographical distance (Ellison et al., 2007). Social media is a useful tool for relationship initiation because the sites afford users to develop intimate relationships by getting more information about potential relationship partners more quickly (Urista et al., 2009). Users can also strategically present themselves to social networks in an attempt to create or maintain connections (Ellison et al., 2007). Social media also allows greater participation from people who would otherwise avoid initiating conversation, making social media sites like Facebook useful for relationship creation (Ellison et al., 2007).

One popular type of social media for relationship initiation is online dating websites. Bryant and Sheldon (2017) found that the second strongest motivation for online dating sites was relationship initiation, which is not surprising since that is the reason for their existence. The study also concluded that people are more comfortable initiating relationships behind a screen and disclose more information at a deeper level, leading to deeper connections and uncertainty reduction (Bryant & Sheldon, 2007). However, Ellison et al. (2007) found that although social media sites like Facebook can be useful tools in relationship initiation, they are used more frequently to maintain existing relationships. This will be the current study's focus.

Maintenance. Social media is a helpful tool for staying connected and strengthening relationships with those at a distance (Ellison et al., 2007; Urista et al., 2009). Most college students use social media sites specifically to maintain preexisting relationships (Sheldon, 2008). Billedo et al., (2015) found that social media is especially helpful for maintaining LDRRs because it "provides social and public contexts for relationship processes that are typically limited in LDRR" (p. 155). Brody (2013) found that LDRR couples who only occasionally see each other face-to-face have greater relational satisfaction and commitment when they regularly use social media to communicate while apart. The applicability of social media in the lives of LDRR couples makes them an important area of study.

LDRR partners use media to disclose intimate information in order to maintain their relationships, allowing for compensation for the lack of face-to-face (FtF) interactions (Stafford, 2010). One way in which LDRR couples maintain their relationships through social media is by sharing their daily events (Johnson et al., 2008). This differs from GCDR partners because they use mediated communication for assurances and face-to-face communication for daily events (Johnson et al., 2008). Couples in a LDRR also use social media to assess their partner's attitudes about them and the relationship, and as a form of partner surveillance (Billedo et al., 2015; Urista et al., 2009). Mediated communication is also used for openness, positivity, and to reinforce the importance of the relationship in romantic partners (Johnson et al., 2008). By looking at the mediated communication patterns between LDRR partners,

Johnson et al. (2008) found that the positives of mediated communication outweigh the negatives of decreased face-to-face communication in LDRRs.

Not only do LDRR couples use social media more for maintenance than geographically close couples, but they have been found to use social media sites more frequently (Billedo et al., 2015). It has been found that romantic partners use multiple media forms for similar types of communication because they work interdependently in the maintenance of the relationship (Taylor et al., 2018). Although, the specific type and frequency of maintenance behaviors are different for LDRR partners due to decreased face-to-face contact (Johnson et al., 2008). The differences in motivations for and frequencies of social media use in LDRR pairs makes them a demographic worthy of study. Although there has been limited research on how LDRR couples use social media to maintain their relationships, the current study will analyze how various social media sites are used differently in the maintenance of LDRRs.

Relational Maintenance

Relational maintenance is a concept that explains how interpersonal relationships are managed through strategic behaviors so individuals will be satisfied with their relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Stafford (2011) discussed how these behaviors look different for different couples based on their relationship norms, the stage of their relationship, and their definition of satisfaction. Although usually thought of as a process, relational maintenance can also be a state of satisfaction for those in relationships (Stafford, 2005). The idea of satisfaction is a crucial focus of relational maintenance, not the longevity of a relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Satisfaction is when a couple decides on important relationship qualities and maintains them communicatively and behaviorally (Dindia & Canary, 1993).

Dindia and Canary (1993) developed four common definitions of relational maintenance that may overlap. These include keeping a relationship from ending, keeping a relationship in a specific state, keeping the relationship satisfactory, and repairing a relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993). There are many scales for measuring relational maintenance. Using previous scales, Stafford (2011) developed a more reliable scale to measure relational maintenance behaviors and their outcomes including openness/disclosure, relational talk, positivity, networks, assurances, and task sharing. Dainton and Stokes (2015) found assurances and positivity to be most important regardless of the communication channel. According to Stafford (2011), these behaviors serve “to sustain partners’ desired relational features, such as satisfaction, commitment, liking, and love” (p. 280). However, Stafford (2011) stated that “maintenance is not limited to behaviors” (p. 299). This means that other actions in relationships that are not usually considered behaviors would constitute relational maintenance, such as physical touch or social media use. Stafford (2011) stated this is an area of future study; therefore, this study will examine how social media actions relate to LDRR relational maintenance due to its importance in romance.

Relational maintenance and social media. One medium for communicating relational maintenance is social media. Mediated communication has been found to be important for the maintenance of college students’ interpersonal relationships (Johnson et al., 2008). Billedo et al. (2015) studied relational maintenance regarding long-distance and geographically close romantic relationships and found that social networking sites are important for relational maintenance, especially in LDRR couples. Social media affords for both routine and strategic maintenance behaviors in a social context, making it a useful tool in all types of relationships to express and gauge commitment and satisfaction, especially in LDRRs when the opportunity is limited by distance (Billedo et al., 2015). The success of social media as a relational maintenance tool can also be attributed to the fact that the content of relational maintenance behaviors communicated over media is much like those in person (Johnson et al., 2008). In this way, social media is a successful supplement for in-person relational maintenance.

Mediated communication works well for communicating positivity, openness, assurances, and shared social networks (Johnson et al., 2008). However, relational maintenance through mediated communication can also contribute to relational problems, such as jealousy (Dainton & Stokes, 2015). Although there is research on relational maintenance and social media, the scope of mediums has been limited to a few types including email and Facebook (Billedo et al., 2015; Dainton & Stokes, 2015; Johnson et al., 2008). Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by expanding social media’s usefulness for relational maintenance and distance to multiple social media sites in the specific context of college-age LDRR couples.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

At the time of its creation, uses and gratifications (U&G) theory was unique. Before U&G theory, mass media theories purported that all audiences passively reacted to media the same way and were unable to resist the power and ideas of media (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Urista et al., 2009). Instead, U&G theory is concerned more with

what people do with their media instead of how they are influenced by it and thus focuses on an active audience (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Blumer and Katz (1974) explained that U&G theory is “an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them” (p. 21). In other words, U&G theory examines the various reasons people use certain media channels over others based on their perceived ability to satisfy their psychological and social needs to achieve their desired outcomes (Katz et al., 1973; Sheldon, 2008). U&G theory also clearly defines gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. Quan-Haase and Young (2010) explained that

gratifications obtained refer to those gratifications that audience members actually experience through the use of a particular medium. By contrast, gratifications sought (also often referred to as “needs” or “motives”) refer to those gratifications that audience members expect to obtain from a medium before they have actually come into contact with it. (p. 352)

In general, U&G theory focuses on three things: motivations for using media, factors impacting motivations, and the outcomes of media use (Sheldon, 2008). U&G theory also has five main elements. The first is the assumption of an active audience, which means people are active consumers and they make conscious choices about the media sources and content they consume (Katz et al., 1973). The second assumption is that the audience member determines the link between media choice and gratification (Blumler & Katz, 1974). This means that the user of the media decides what gratification the chosen media fulfills, and it is not inherent in the media itself. Third, media sources compete with other media sources and other sources of need satisfaction because humans have a wide array of needs, so the media source that provides the most satisfaction for a need will be chosen (Katz et al., 1973). The fourth element is that audience members are aware and able to recognize their motivations accurately when asked (Katz et al., 1973). This is why U&G theory depends on participant recall. Lastly, Blumler and Katz (1974) said, “value judgements about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms” (p. 22). These five assumptions are the basis of U&G theory.

Since its creation, U&G theory has become a successful framework to understand how and why people use media for need satisfaction (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). It was originally developed for more traditional, one-way forms of media like newspapers, television, film, and radio (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Dainton & Stokes, 2015). However, in more recent years U&G theory has proved helpful in understanding the uses and gratifications of social media. Its focus on an active audience with varying needs and uses makes U&G theory a useful framework with which to examine the social media patterns of LDRR partners.

Uses and gratifications theory and social media. Recently, scholars have updated their thinking on U&G theory by considering it in social media contexts (Dainton & Stokes, 2015). However, U&G theory is both important and useful for understanding why people use social media, prompting scholars to encourage U&G theory use in social media studies more often (Whiting & Williams, 2013). U&G theory also works well for studying social media due to its belief in an active audience and the interactivity of social media (Urista et al., 2009). With regard to social media interactivity, Quan-Haase and Young (2010) explained that “even though all social media are characterized as ‘interactive,’ there are differences between them in terms of the nature of interactions they support, which then leads to different types of gratifications” (p. 353). These differences in gratifications for different social media are based on their features and uses (Urista et al., 2009).

Because social media platforms are chosen based on wants and gratifications obtained, U&G theory is crucial for analyzing them (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Social media is also easy to use, convenient, cheap, accessible, and allows for instant and frequent connection in a variety of contexts, making it an intriguing area of study for U&G theory research (Billedo et al., 2015). It is also instantly gratifying, quick, informal, and can be used at the user’s pace for a variety of different reasons such as getting attention, maintaining or creating relationships, obtaining approval and support, crafting personas for self-esteem, and becoming popular, which makes social media an important area of study for this theory (Urista et al., 2009). Social media is unique because users can produce and consume content in a way that satisfies a specific gratification, whether that is for personal or interpersonal reasons (Urista et al., 2009).

Uses and gratifications theory has proved useful for analyzing why people use social media. Urista et al. (2009) expanded on U&G theory by finding five reasons why people use social media to gratify their needs: efficiency, convenience, curiosity about others, popularity, and relationship formation and reinforcement. Urista et al. (2009) also found that social media makes it easier to stay in touch with people, which increases the motivation to do so, and young people are especially motivated to use social media due to immediacy. Another study by Whiting and Williams (2013) used U&G theory to determine ten uses and gratifications themes satisfied by the media. The list

included themes such as social interaction, entertainment, basis for conversation topics, two-way information sharing, and surveillance (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Bryant and Sheldon (2017) looked at what motivates people to use dating social media sites and found the three motives were hooking up, relationship formation, and fun. They also found that each platform has different levels of entertainment and gratifications, leading to different motivations for apps and websites (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017).

Facebook has been a prominent area of study for U&G theory. Quan-Haase and Young (2010) looked at Facebook specifically and found that the gratifications obtained included pastime, affection, fashion, problem sharing, sociability, and social information. Social connectivity is an especially important gratification for college students (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Sheldon (2008) also focused on Facebook, determining the motives as relationship maintenance with existing relationships, pastime, virtual community, entertainment, coolness, and companionship. Ellison et al. (2007) looked at Facebook using U&G theory and found that Facebook use is motivated by social gratifications, especially for those with low self-esteem. Relational maintenance is also a key motivation for Facebook use (Dainton & Stokes, 2015). As can be seen in previous studies, U&G theory is particularly useful and important for examining social media motivations, gratifications, and behaviors in young populations, which is why it will be used as the theoretical framework for this study. The current study will add to the existing literature by examining U&G theory in the specific context of college-age long-distance romantic relationships.

Research Questions

Taylor and Bazarova (2018) suggested that future research should examine the motives for multimedia use, especially “in cases where digital media complement or compensate for the lack of (in case of long-distance couples) FtF communication” (p. 1119). However, much of the current research has been focused on how LDRR couples use social media generally and not why they use specific media sites (Billedo et al., 2015; Stafford, 2010; Urista et al., 2009). Thus, the first research question for this study states:

RQ1: Why do college students use specific media over others for the maintenance of long-distance romantic relationships?

Previous studies have determined that social media is a helpful tool for the relational maintenance of LDRRs because it aids in the communication of relational maintenance strategies (Johnson et al., 2008; Stafford, 2010). These studies fail to understand the intentional behaviors college students use on social media sites to maintain their LDRRs. Stafford (2011) encouraged the future study of how non-behavior strategies, such as media use, contribute to relational maintenance. For these reasons, the second research question asks:

RQ2: How do college students use social media to help maintain their long-distance romantic relationships?

METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative research method in an interpretivist paradigm. These concepts are discussed in relation to the current study. Then a description of participants, recruitment, and an overview of the interview procedure is provided.

Qualitative research investigates how individuals construct their realities, interpret the world, and the meanings they assign to social events (Esterberg, 2002). This type of research values participants' subjective experiences and seeks to understand them in a specific context (Esterberg, 2002). A qualitative method allowed this study to capture each participant's individual experience using social media in their LDRR. The interpretive paradigm focuses on the social construction of reality by people and emphasizes multiple realities (Esterberg, 2002). This study utilized an interpretivist paradigm to understand LDRR individuals' thought processes, motivations, and communication behaviors from their perspective and analyze them for similarities while still acknowledging that each participant is unique.

Participants

This study involved college students age 18 or older in a LDRR for a minimum of six months. Participants were also required to actively use social media with their LDRR partner at least once a week. This included sites such as, but not limited to, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Pinterest, and Spotify. Network or snowball sampling was utilized to secure 12 participants. Participants who met the criteria were contacted to ensure their eligibility and request an interview. Once the interview was completed, participants were asked to reach out if they knew any other eligible and willing participants. The communication studies research pool was also used by posting information and contact sheets in the communication lab. Social media was also used to recruit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to

23 years old (average 20.3 years old). Of the 12 participants, 10 were female and two were male. The length of participant relationships ranged from one to six years (average 2.85 years), and the time the relationship had been long-distance ranged from six months to 3.75 years (average 1.5 years).

Interviews

This study conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews using an interview protocol and follow-up questions, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participant's individual experiences and elaboration on those experiences. Interview questions focused on preferences for and uses of social media platforms in LDRRs, and the impact of social media on the relationship. Twelve interviews were conducted and lasted between 28 and 50 minutes (average 38.5 minutes) depending on the depth of the interviewee's responses and the follow-up questions that were asked.

Procedure

This study was approved by IRB. To collect data, in-person interviews were conducted in closed rooms to avoid distractions and interruptions, and to maintain confidentiality. Online interviews were conducted via Facebook video chat in closed private rooms for the same reasons. Each participant read and signed the IRB approval form and was asked if they had any questions. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed soon after. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes, participant names were changed and identifying information was altered or eliminated. All data was kept secured at all times, and audio recordings were deleted once the study was completed. After all interviews had been transcribed, a modified thematic analysis was used to systematically review and group data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

The 12 interviews contained eight themes, four per research question, and 11 subthemes. Themes for RQ1 were private communication, public content, usability, and site stereotypes. Subthemes included face-to-face abilities, type of content, interests, quick and easy, and technical issues. Themes for RQ2 were sending external content to start conversations, personal content/updates, public posts, and interacting with partner's public content. Subthemes included humorous content, stimulating content, future-oriented content, music, respecting partner's preferences, and synchronous interaction.

The purpose of RQ1 was to explore the reasons why couples in LDRRs use certain social media sites to communicate. RQ1 asked: Why do college students use specific media over others for the maintenance of long-distance romantic relationships? Four themes and five subthemes emerged from the interviews.

Private Communication

The ability to communicate privately through social media was the most common theme for RQ1. This meant that others could not see the interaction between partners, whether through sending pictures, videos, and/or messages. This included social media sites like Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter. Privately communicating provided LDRR couples the opportunity to keep in contact with each other about things going on in their lives. One participant, Elizabeth, discussed her use of private messaging in her LDRR:

“My roommate's cat, he's obsessed with it. But I'll send him videos of the cat a lot. And if I see something super quick, like if I'm out somewhere and I see something that reminds me of him, I am able to quickly send it to him and it's easier than trying to send a picture through text.”

Private communication also allowed participants to feel more connected to their partner at a distance. Another participant, Nora, explained why she prefers Snapchat for her LDRR:

“I can see what you're seeing. And I can see you. Unless you Skype and show each other around, you just see what environment they're in. And I think it paints a clear picture of what that person is doing. So, you can picture I'm in this class, and I kind of know what it looks like and where you sit, and I feel more connected to you and your life than I would otherwise.”

“Being able to see each other's faces”. The ability to see their partner's face was also a very common theme. LDRRs lend themselves to less time together, so participants found it important to be able to see their partner's face through pictures or videos to maintain contact and connection. The main social media site mentioned for this was Snapchat. Stephanie explained why the ability to see her partner's face was so important by stating:

“I would say definitely something where I can see them face to face. I mean whether that is some sort of video call or I guess sort of a Snapchat where you can just sort of instantly get a picture or

a message from them. I think that face-to-face aspect is huge, especially in today's world where we are using technology so much. And we can and we do have access to being able to call someone face-to-face and making it as close as possible to actually being together."

Participants also noted that face-to-face abilities are important to simulate time together because actual face-to-face time in college-age LDRRs is limited due to distance and busy schedules. Emma explained:

"It's really nice because you can have these short bursts of being able to see each other's face in between our very busy schedules in the day....So it's another way that it feels like I'm with him because 1) I see his face and 2) we're joking as if we were next to each other."

Public Content

Another major reason participants cited for using certain social media sites was the content found on the sites and how they could use it to interact with their partner. Specifically, participants discussed two major subthemes for this theme which were the type of content on the social media site and how it aligned with their interests.

Type of content. Participants discussed how the content on social media sites impacted whether they used it to communicate with their partner. Facebook was used by some for having a wide variety of content on it to share with partners from recipe videos to events, while others felt Facebook was too political and wordy. One participant explained how they identified with the LGBTQ content on Tumblr. Twitter was used due to the comedic nature of its content, as Emma explained:

"We have a very similar sense of humor and there's a lot of stuff on Twitter that just really hits in the right part of the funny bone. Although it's just nice because we have a very joking relationship.... So, it's always very joking, which again kind of feels like we're together because that's what most of our time together is."

Interests. Whether the content on social media sites matched up with participants' interest also impacted whether they used it with their significant other. If couples were interested in different things on a site, they would not use it to communicate as Iris explained, "I guess Twitter kind of depends on who you follow like musicians, and we don't really listen to the same music." However, if partners were interested in the same topics, they would use the site to communicate, as Elizabeth stated:

"Bachelor in Paradise and The Bachelorette and stuff we like to watch together when we would both be living in the same city. But for Bachelor right now we're not together. So, he still watches it and then we can talk about the show through sending each other Instagram posts usually because there is always a ton of memes and just weird things that people point out about the show."

Usability

Although not as common, some participants mentioned the importance of usability when deciding which social media sites to use with their LDRR partner. If sites were too complicated, inconsistent, or difficult to use, the couple switched to another platform. Subthemes of quick and easy, and technical issues emerged from this theme.

Quick and easy. Participants preferred social media sites that were quick and easy to use, like Snapchat. Many participants discussed that although they valued communicating with their partner, they did not want to spend all their time on social media communicating with them. Therefore, they were more apt to use apps that were quick and easy to pick up on. Stephanie clarified this stating:

"Snapchat is so quick and it's just like, 'Oh, I want to show her the outfit I'm wearing' or something I will snap her a pic real quick. Or there's something funny happening and I'll just send her the picture real quick and just say like, 'Oh my God look at this'."

Participants discussed that as college students, they have a lot going on in their lives, so sites like Snapchat that are built for instant communication are more useful.

Technical issues. Some social media sites have more technical issues than others. Some participants noted that sites with fewer technical issues not only lead to easier communication but also less miscommunication for LDRR couples. Therefore, participants explained they use sites with fewer technical issues. Emma stated that:

"Connection issues always really suck, especially if we're having a serious conversation. If I'm venting to him, or he's consoling me about something, it can be really frustrating when you're trying to get a message through to someone, and they think that you should have been able to respond. And then they're offended by you not answering, so those kinds of things can really hurt

the person. And granted when they clear up you can say 'I'm sorry, this is what happened', but that moment of hurt is still just as bad."

If technical issues continue to occur, LDRR couples will switch to another site to make communicating at a distance much easier.

Site Stereotypes

A few participants explained that they do not use certain social media sites in their LDRRs because of the social stereotypes associated with the site, mostly concerning TikTok and VSCO. One participant, Jason, stated, "I mean, she did have me get a VSCO, but I don't really use it. It's more of a girl's thing. I mean I posted a couple times on it. ...it's more of an artsy type of thing." Similarly, Stephanie explained that although her partner uses TikTok, she does not because "I think it's just not super appealing to me and I think especially because it's a much younger platform of people who are younger on it."

Overall, RQ1 demonstrated the importance of both private and public aspects of social media for LDRRs. The themes for RQ1 also stressed the importance of attractiveness for usage, whether that is the ease of the app, the content and interests, or the stereotypes of the site.

The purpose of RQ2 was to explore the strategies couples in LDRRs use on social media to maintain their relationships. RQ2 asked: How do college students use social media to help maintain their long-distance romantic relationships? Four themes and six subthemes emerged.

Sending External Content to Start Conversations

The most common theme for RQ2 was sending a variety of content from other's social media sites to encourage conversations with their partner. Participants mentioned that this would happen either privately using messaging features or publicly by tagging the partner in the intended content. This strategy occurred across many social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and Spotify. The strategy was most common on sites that had a news feed, or more public apps. Participants cited numerous motives for sending content, with the ultimate goal being conversation starters. Travis explained why sharing content is important to his LDRR:

"It's a way that we can have conversations; it gives us conversation starters. Because if I'm not with her, it's hard for me to just straight-up talk to her. I need something to spur it a little bit. I'm sure that's how everyone is; they need a little nudge. We can't just talk about our days every single day."

Participants noted that sharing content keeps long-distance conversations from becoming stagnant and focused on mundane daily events. The ability to send external content allows them to jointly share an experience as they would in person. Paige elaborated, stating:

"I like to send him interesting facts that I find out. I'm a nerd and follow [National Geographic] and things like that. So, I'm like, 'Oh my god, did you know this animal has so many eyes?' And that's something that kind of strikes up a little conversation in the messenger chat on Instagram.... So, I like it because it's another way to communicate and that's not just texting all day."

Humorous content. The most common type of external content sent between LDRR couples was content aimed at humor. Many participants noted that humor was a big part of their relationship in person and long-distance, so sending funny things such as memes, videos, pictures, or GIFs allowed them to maintain that specific aspect as well as connection. Anna explained how sharing funny content with her partner on many social media sites impacts their LDRR positively:

"Sometimes it feels like it can get serious like, 'Oh, sorry, I have a test right now' or 'I have a two-hour class coming up, so talk to you later'. But in person, it would be something goofy; if we ever see each other, we're always just goofing off. So those memes kind of help lighten the mood sometimes or just keep that goofiness alive in the relationship."

"Something that I saw sparked you being on my mind". Another very common type of external content that LDRR couples sent was things that made them think of their partner or things they thought their partner would enjoy. This type of content could also be found on any number of social media sites, but participants explained that it was a way to show affection for their partner and maintain a connection through sharing something they are experiencing. Stephanie detailed her strategy for sharing this type of content:

"I think a lot of it is just 'Hey, I'm thinking of you. Hey, I saw this, and I thought of you.' It's kind

of like, ‘Oh, I saw that this is really funny, and I want to share it with someone and I'm sharing it with you’ sort of thing. I think a lot of it is, oh my God, this is so funny I want Andrea to see this because she's the person that I share it with, and I think using social media kind of reminds us of that.”

Future-oriented content. Couples in LDRRs also made it a strategy to send external content to their significant other that reiterated commitment. This could be in the form of plans for traditional commitment ceremonies such as weddings, future home décor, or potential pets they wanted to have together. Participants explained that sending this type of content on sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest helped to let their partner know that they saw a future together. Mary explained:

“The other week I sent him a picture of wedding centerpieces and was like, ‘Oh, look they have car parts in them’. Then he said, ‘I really like the ones with Pistons’, and I'm like, ‘Oh, don't really know what Pistons are but, yeah I think that's that one!’”

Music. Sharing music with one another was also a common theme for LDRR couples, mostly on music sharing sites like Spotify. This might be in the form of a shared playlist that both people collaborate on or sending music to the other person. Participants discussed how this helped them show affection and feel connected by listening to the same music, which is something they often do in person as well. Paige emphasized her goals for sending music to her partner by stating:

“I think the goal is to send songs that 1) we just heard and really like and need to share 2) remind us of one another; a form of romance or intimacy 3) communicate in a way we can't always put into words.”

Personal Content/Updates

Instead of sending external content, another common theme for RQ2 was privately sending personal content to their partner. Participants mentioned that they would send this type of content consistently throughout the day to stay connected with the day-to-day activities of their partner that they wouldn't normally think to share with others. Jessie explained that “Throughout the day we always will send a Snapchat of the little things we do, whether it's what we had for lunch that day or who we hung out with or what we did at the gym.” This normally occurred in the form of pictures, videos, or messages on apps that supported private communication such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, or Twitter. One participant, Margo, discussed how she uses personal content to keep her partner updated:

“I really like that I can share photos. And I really like to vlog my day; kind of like, ‘Oh, this happened’. And kind of just give more meaning to my words than just describing it over the phone....because describing is one thing but sending him a video or description or some type of vlog is another. It just kind of makes him feel more a part of here.”

Public Posts

Publicly posting content, such as videos or pictures, was another common theme for RQ2. These posts occurred on more public platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat feeds or stories. Participants noted many occasions why they would post pictures of their significant other, such as commemorating special days like anniversaries or birthdays, showing when the couple is visiting one another, or just randomly when they miss their partner. Often these strategies were twofold: to show affection or longing for their partner, but also to show the public that they are committed to one another. Margo explained how she specifically uses public posts in her LDRR:

“I think doing more public recognition on Instagram. He's a very sensitive guy when you get to know him. For Christmas, we decided not to get anything of monetary value. So, he learned how to knit, and this guy knit me a wool scarf; it took him 12 hours. And so of course, I'm going to wear it. I'm all bundled up and I wanted to show like, ‘Hey, I am wearing this to work’. Because that's just an act of ‘Hey, I appreciate you’, but it's public. So, it's almost a little bit more.”

Respecting partner's preferences. However, some participants mentioned that one way they show affection is to not post pictures of their partner if that is what their partner prefers. This helps them maintain their relationship by showing respect for their partner. Emma stated, “He doesn't post. Period. And he really doesn't like it. He's very camera shy, so he really doesn't like being posted anywhere.... So just out of respect for him, I normally don't embarrass him.” Nora elaborated further, explaining:

“I think he would care way more if I sent him a meme than posted a picture of us, which makes

sense to me.... I have to be careful about not posting about us too much because I think it would just piss him off.”

Interacting with Partner’s Public Content

A less common theme was for individuals in LDRRs to respond to their significant other’s public posts on more public social media platforms. Commenting or reacting to their partner’s content not only indicated that they saw it, but that they enjoyed it. Interacting with each other’s content also assisted in keeping in contact with each other and feeling connected, especially if the post was about something they did not privately share with their partner as Anna explained:

“I think just keeping in touch. Because sometimes we do communicate and we’re like, ‘Oh my gosh, this big thing is happening’. And then sometimes you forget to mention it and it’s not the big things, but sometimes the small things. Like I’ve never hiked the bluffs before, so something like that. So, if I posted a Snapchat of me on the bluffs and the view, he’ll be like, ‘Oh, you went to the bluffs and you saw it!’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah!’”

Synchronous interaction. A theme that was less common but still important to RQ2 was interacting with partners when they were available on social media. This was especially prevalent for partners that lived more than a few hours away, or in different time zones. Communicating when the partner was available helped the LDRR couples feel as though they were communicating in person and not long-distance, simulating togetherness, whether through pictures, video, audio, or messaging on various applications. Jason, a participant in an international LDRR, discussed this theme:

“It’s kind of interesting because it’s a seven-hour time difference. So right now, after this, she’s going to be going to bed. So, I’m probably going to call her and say ‘Goodnight’. And then at around 11:30, because now it’s actually six hours because they don’t have daylight savings time until April, I think. So, at 11:30 she’ll be waking up.”

Overall, the results for RQ2 described a variety of strategies couples use when maintaining LDRRs, both public and private, all while considering their partner’s needs.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand why college couples in LDRRs use certain social media sites over others and how they use those sites to maintain their LDRRs. This section will analyze the meaning and importance of the themes discovered during this study, which include private communication, public content, usability, site stereotypes, sending external content to start conversations, personal content/updates, public posts, and interacting with partner’s public content, along with relevant subthemes. This section will conclude with a discussion of the study’s limitations and implications for future research.

RQ1: Why do college students use specific media over others for the maintenance of long-distance romantic relationships?

The themes that emerged for RQ1 were private communication, public content, usability, and site stereotypes. These themes made it clear that both public and private social media features are important for communication in LDRRs; it is not just about one or the other, but about the ability to choose between them. This is consistent with the findings by Billeto et al. (2015) that social media sites are helpful for LDRRs because they support private and public relationship processes. Participants liked the ability to choose how they communicated with their partner, publicly or privately, so they were more likely to use sites that allowed them to make this distinction themselves. Therefore, LDRR couples in college use social media sites that have both private and public aspects like Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook.

The themes of face-to-face communication and usability also make it clear that LDRR couples not only enjoy social media sites that are easier to use, but ones that also simulate relationship process that would otherwise be impossible to experience at a distance. Experiences like these include having in-person conversations, sharing personal content, and synchronous communication without the interference of technical difficulties. This includes social media sites like Snapchat, Discord, and WhatsApp. This also supports the work of Billeto et al. (2015) that indicates social media is helpful for relationship processes. The results of this study also highlighted the importance of using sites that have content and interests in line with the LDRR couple in order to substitute and supplement the couples’ communication and satisfy their needs for connection. This is consistent with the findings of Taylor and Bazarova (2018) regarding how the meaning carried by social media satisfies romantic goals. Therefore, LDRR

couples like to use sites like Twitter, Tumblr, Spotify, and Pinterest depending on the interests of them, their partner, and the relationship.

Using U&G theory also helps to interpret the meaning of this study's results. This study found that LDRR couples use social media sites that are more convenient and user friendly. These findings extend the work of Billedo et al. (2015) and Urista et al. (2009) to college-age LDRRs; these studies found that users choose social media sites based on how quick, easy, and convenient they are to use. The idea of the couple's interests and the content on the sites also emerged, indicating that LDRR pairs use social media sites that satisfy the needs of their unique relationship. This supports the idea that individuals will choose the media that best fits the uses and gratifications sought from them as found by Katz et al. (1973), Sheldon (2008), and Quan-Haase and Young (2010). In summary, U&G theory aids in the conclusion that LDRR couples use sites that have features, functions, and uses that make communicating with their partner easier and work better for the needs and interests of their relationship. This study extended the current literature about U&G theory and social media choices to a new context: LDRRs in college. Responses to RQ1 did not address the actions and strategies utilized by LDRR couples on those sites, however, this was addressed by RQ2.

RQ2: How do college students use social media to help maintain their long-distance romantic relationships?

The themes that emerged for RQ2 were sending external content, personal content/updates, public posts, and interacting with their partner's public content. Sharing external content and personal content with one's partner were two of the most prevalent themes, which demonstrated that personal communication as well as less personal communication are both important strategies for maintaining LDRRs. Both types of communication were important for maintaining the connection with LDRR partners at a distance, whether that was sending a picture of what an individual had for lunch or a picture of a cat they may want to have together one day. This finding is consistent with the results from Taylor and Bazarova (2018) indicating multiple media are important for intimate and non-intimate disclosure.

However, privately sending content and sharing personal updates like pictures, videos, and messages for maintenance were big focuses of RQ2. Stafford (2010) also found intimate information disclosure to be important because it allows couples to compensate for decreased face-to-face contact. Many participants in this study discussed the importance of sharing daily events to maintain their relationship, which echoes the findings of Johnson et al. (2008). This study reiterates the importance of private social media communication for the maintenance of LDRRs while also extending the literature by providing specific actions or strategies that are used to portray the maintenance behaviors on social media.

These themes also indicate the need for both routine, everyday updates as well as more strategic behaviors such as posting pictures to allow couples to express connection and commitment, especially when distance typically limits these actions. This study, therefore, supports the work of Billedo et al. (2015). Targeted and consistent positive social media interactions were also found to be important for LDRR maintenance in the form of funny videos and social recognition through posting about their significant other on social media. The idea of frequent positive media interaction has also been studied by Stafford (2010), Stafford et al. (2006), and Johnson et al. (2008).

U&G theory offers a special lens with which to understand the social media strategies used by LDRR couples because it is concerned with what people do with their media. The themes that emerged for RQ2 represent strategies that participants cite as being most important for the maintenance of their relationship. The most important themes for RQ2 were sending external content to start conversations and two-way information sharing because these strategies allowed for more communication, connection, and relational maintenance. This is consistent with the work of Whiting and Williams (2013) which emphasized social media's ability for social interaction, igniting conversation, and sharing information back and forth. Producing content was also found to be an important strategy for relational maintenance because it allowed for more intimate communication to maintain the relationship, which echoes the findings of Urista et al. (2009). Ultimately, U&G theory helps to understand that LDRR couples engage in content sharing to start conversations, sending personal content, publicly posting about their partner, and interacting with their partner's social media content because they best gratify the needs of their relationship and the ultimate goal of relationship maintenance. The findings of this study extend previous research about the importance of consistent communication using various media forms for relational maintenance by understanding specific social media strategies used by LDRR couples to best accomplish the goal of maintaining the relationship.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the time constraints of the senior project, only 12 college students were interviewed. The condensed time frame also lent itself to a convenience sampling. The ability to interview more participants within a larger time frame would have allowed for a more diverse perspective on the topic of college LDRRs and social media use. The

themes explained here are also not generalizable beyond the sampled population due to the variance of individual experiences with social media and in romantic relationships. A more experienced researcher would have also contributed to the gathering and analysis of interview data.

Future research could explore the impact of certain social media strategies on college-age LDRRs, both positively and negatively. This study focused on the reasons for using certain social media sites and the strategies used on those sites, but not on how those sites and strategies influenced the LDRRs. A study like this could assist LDRR couples with relationship maintenance. Future studies could also include the usage of popular platforms in LDRRs that do not meet the definition of social media, such as texting, video chatting, or online gaming as these platforms were not discussed in this study but are often used for LDRR communication.

Although this study did not designate between couples who had been in geographically close distance relationships (GCDR) prior to their LDRR, future research could study how relational maintenance strategies on social media change before and after the geographical separation occurs. Another area for future research is how social media strategies in LDRRs compare to in-person communication strategies. Because many participants discussed the importance of using humor while together and apart, a future study could investigate the similarities and differences between in-person and mediated communication topics and strategies in LDRR couples.

This research utilized interviews to study how and why college students use social media sites to maintain their long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs). The results of the study indicate that the ability to share content with partners both publicly and privately is important to the maintenance of LDRRs. The ability of a social media site to simulate synchronous communication is also preferred and helpful for LDRR maintenance. Overall, couples in LDRRs will choose social media sites and strategies that make them feel more connected and better maintain their relationship. The findings of this study extend the current literature by indicating social media features that are helpful to LDRRs in college and the strategies that allow LDRR couples to stay connected and maintain their relationship. Future research should focus on how various social media strategies impact LDRRs in college and how social media strategies and preferences change.

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