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Brendan John Murphy
Bowling Green State University, murphbj@bgsu.edu

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Help! An Insight into Long Distance Romantic Relationship Advice Sought Online

Brendan Murphy

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Project Advisor

Dr. Emily Anzicek

Second Reader

Dr. Laura Stafford

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the long-distance romantic relationship (LDRR) advice sought online and see how it relates to previous literature. Reddit posts from the r/LongDistance subreddit were narrowed using an advanced search to find the most popular (upvoted) advice from users. Qualitative, contextual analysis research was used to search for reoccurring themes throughout the advice sought. Results revealed that feelings of uncertainty and anxiety were very common within LDRR, and advice was sought about how to maintain relationships whilst living apart.

Introduction

“Relationships are considered to be long distance when communication opportunities are restricted because of geographic parameters and the individuals within the relationship have expectations of a continued close connection.” (Stafford, 2005, p.7.)

Long distance romantic relationships (LDRR) can be self-defined, there is no concrete definition. However, Stafford’s (2005) guideline helps to establish that it is certainly situational on how communication is maintained through distance issues; the distance can vary. There are numerous reasons for individuals to find themselves in a LDRR. Researchers have suggested that the most common situation to be in a LDRR, is being in college (Stafford, Merolla & Castle, 2006). Relocating for work commitments and military duties are other reasons to move away from one’s partner.

All relationships require maintenance behaviors to survive, LDRR’s are no exception. However, it is an assumption that maintaining relationships is mainly done without the use of computer mediated communication (CMC), rather in face-to-face contexts (Stafford et al., 1999). Maintenance behaviours are defined as “actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions (Canary & Stafford, 1994, p. 5). A relational maintenance measure developed by Stafford and Canary (1991) explored maintenance behaviors to form a strategies measure that included 5 items: positivity, assurances, openness, sharing tasks and social networks. Research found that positivity, assurances and sharing tasks related intimately with commitment and relational satisfaction (Stafford & Canary 1991). Stafford (2011) revised and developed the RMSM and proposed the Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure (RMBM) which included: positivity, understanding, assurances, self-disclosure, relationship talk, sharing tasks, and involvement with social networks.

An aspect of LDRR's that can add to the maintenance of the relationship is the positive idealization of the partner. Idealization is the "tendency to describe the relationship in unrealistically positive terms" (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996, p. 7). A more recent definition of idealization, Stafford and Merolla (2006) describe romantic idealization as, "positive illusion, perceived superiority, idealistic distortion, positive sentiment override and romantic love, reminiscent thinking, and perceived agreement" (p. 39). They also found that some idealization is good; however, extreme levels can become problematic. Idealization can become extreme, the longer the individuals spend apart (Stafford & Merolla 2006). For some LDRR's, the absence can be years rather than months or days. Despite limited interaction, LDRR partners experience greater relational stability than individuals in geographically close romantic relationships (GCRR's). Although relational stability is mostly positive during LDRR's, reunions can be difficult and contribute to relational demise and termination (Stafford & Merolla, 2006).

An issue that is common in LDRR's is the uncertainty of the relationship (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). Knobloch and Solomon (1991) mentioned that there are two factors that affect relational uncertainty; outside factors such as geographical distance, and intrinsic factors including commitment, which can be at different levels for the individuals in the relationship. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) is prominent in LDRR's due to the more conversation and communication that takes place, the less uncertainty usually occurs. Uncertainty in relationships produces anxiety and stress, which ultimately leads to individuals second guessing their status within the relationship (Knobloch & Thesis, 2010). There are three types of uncertainty: self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty (Knobloch, 2007). Self-uncertainty refers to uncertainty about your own feelings towards the partner and relationship. Partner uncertainty is uncertainty about your partner's feelings and intentions. Relationship uncertainty

may be heightened in LDRR's due to distance separation and restricted physical interactions (Stafford, 2010). Relational uncertainty is also related to jealousy and LDRR individuals experience higher levels of jealousy when there is less physical contact such as face-to-face (FTF) communication (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). A recent study from Suwinyattichai et al., (2017) found that jealousy was one of the most dominant feelings in a LDRR.

It is important to explore the issues that arise for individuals who find comfort in confiding in anonymous posting, with others who may have lived similar experiences. Seeking advice from others who have also been through unique situations may give the individual confidence in the relationship and its maintenance. Understanding the types of advice that individuals in an LDRR seek, will provide a more cultivated direction for future research and also therapy professionals. It will allow professionals to have a grasp on the types of issues that people are enduring during their relationships. A better understanding will in turn allow for effective help in professional sessions. This present study intends to explore the advice sought from individuals in LDRR's through a qualitative content analysis of forum discussions through the popular online outlet, Reddit. Based on the previous literature discussed above, the following research question was asked:

Research Question: What type of advice is sought online from users in a LDRR?

Method

To conduct this particular study, the subreddit r/LongDistance was analysed for recurring themes, in advice users sought relating to their LDRR's. Reddit is a "source for what's new and popular on the web" (Reddit, 2018). Users can create an account which then allows them to post and reply to content on particular subjects. According to Statista (2017) there are 1,179,342 subreddits on the website. Subreddits are "a forum dedicated to a specific topic on the website

Reddit” (Oxforddictionaries, 2018). The subreddit r/LongDistance has 68,459 subscribers as of November 7th 2018 (Reddit, 2018). with various topics concerning to LDRR discussed. From the posts, no personal information is disclosed, users typically stated their age and gender, but no further details were included. For this study, no grammatical errors were corrected, including broken English. For some users, English is not their first language,.

Sampling

Data was retrieved by using the search flair ‘need advice’. A flair on Reddit is something that users can tag to their posts to allow readers to filter and specify exactly what they are looking for or posting about. Posts are then ‘upvoted’ or ‘downvoted’ by users; “If you think something contributes to conversation, upvote it. If you think it does not contribute to the subreddit it is posted in or is off-topic in a particular community, downvote it” (redtaboo, 2018). The data was sorted by the top number of upvotes displayed first, with the highest post having 213 upvotes (cite). Another parameter was used to scope the data; only content that was posted within the last 12 months (November 2017-2018) was analysed to remain relevant and up-to-date. Purposeful sampling was used to analyse the posts that had 10 upvotes or more. This initial sample was used due to time constraints and to seek saturation in thematic content. The final sample totalled 45 posts which were coded thoroughly for recurring themes.

Results

Findings were grouped in themes based on recurring questions and concerns from reddit users and are presented in this section. Through the thematic analysis, themes were categorized pertaining to the research question that was asked previously. Four themes quickly became prominent throughout the data, the overwhelming feeling of anxiety and uncertainty when moving from a GRR, uncertainty of closing the distance and moving geographically close,

maintaining the relationship (or *keeping the connection alive*), and meeting a long-distance partner for the first time.

Anxiety

The most common type of advice sought concerned ways of dealing with anxiety and uncertainty about the LDRR. However, from the six posts, not a lot of information was disclosed. For example, a 22-year-old female posted:

Fiance (m24) and I (f22) going long distance for the first time in 23 days for 8 months. How do you make the transition easier? (u/mowerykk, 2018)

The addition of a young, engaged couple on top of transitioning to a LDRR, may cause higher levels of anxiety. Transitioning from a dating relationship to an engagement carries relational stressors. A recent study from Farooq and Fatima (2018) found relational uncertainty is a positive predictor of relational turbulence in young married couples. The unexpected stressor of an LDRR, immediately following an engagement may heighten the levels of uncertainty and anxiety.

A similar post explained how a female is moving across the country to Portland and her partner needs advice on how to deal with “the next few months until I can move out there to be with her” (u/Jmom, 2018). The post with the highest amount of upvotes within the anxiety category discussed an interesting situation of being together for two years but living together for only one, “So I was used to see him everyday. Now my visa expired and have to go back to mex for 6 months. How do you deal w the anxiety and 7 hour difference?” (u/norttheastt, 2018).

Going from living together to living 4,195 km apart for 9 months. Been inseparable for 3.5 years and now shes going to do her Master’s across the country! I’m scared the distance will bring out my worst qualities but I’m optimistic to become a stronger couple through this. Any Advice? (u/caitlyntheresa, 2018)

These posts demonstrate the relational uncertainty that LDRR's incur. The consistency of regular physical interaction and moving suddenly to long distance, may have severe implications on the relationship and could ultimately lead to higher levels of uncertainty. It is important to mention that the most upvoted post on the data collected was in relation to infidelity. It did not occur regularly with a consistent theme; however, it received the most upvotes which demonstrates plenty of engagement with the post.

*He [21] cheated on me [23], and it's over. Please help.
I'm at a loss, guys. My self esteem feels destroyed and the grief feels unbearable.
I don't want to be a victim but I can't sleep, I can't eat, I feel like my world is crumbling around
me.
(u/ProfessorDinosaurrr, 2018)*

Being unfaithful in romantic relationships is an issue whether the distance is proximally close or geographically great. The levels of uncertainty and anxiety can greatly increase due to lack of physical interactions (Stafford, 2010). Uncertain behaviors are shown in this post with unusual everyday normalities, loss of appetite, lack of sleep etc.

Closing the distance

The second most prominent issue that arose within the data was somewhat opposite to the previous theme. Closing the distance and finally becoming geographically close can also lead to similar feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Within the data, there were several situations which were unique and interesting. For example, a 26-year-old female is preparing to move in with her boyfriend of 11 months. Plenty of questions are asked, "What if things don't work out? What if we break up? Do I stay, or do I move somewhere else? What if I can't find a job? What if we fall out of love?" (u/Grace091, 2018).

The idealization of partners in a LDRR can be healthy for the relationship and lead to greater relational stability (Stafford & Merolla 2007). A 21-year-old female discussed how she

and her boyfriend were planning to close the distance after one particular semester having met during a summer internship. “After 6 months of long distance, I’m so excited to see him more than every few weeks and be able to cuddle with him all the time” (u/msumanpan, 2018). The idealization of cuddling all the time and the excitement of seeing him allows for greater relational stability. However, she also mentions, “I’m very nervous about transitioning our relationship from long distance to living in the same (tiny) apartment. Is this normal?” (u/msumanpan, 2018).

We’re driving from her parents’ house on Saturday with her parents and sister and I’m kinda freaking out but so excited. (u/100GayFrogs, 2018).

From the above quotation, it is interesting to see the various emotions involved in the transition from GRRR to a LDRR. The added inclusion of teenagers moving into a family home could lead to strain on the relationship.

Keeping the connection alive

The third theme found in the data was related to maintaining the relationship after feelings started to lose some excitement and the distance was becoming an issue. Within these posts, there is more descriptive explanation and background information included.

“I [23F] sometimes forget my SO [24M] exists” (u/derloeffelface, 2018)

Long distance can be tough, the above statement is from the title from a young females’ post regarding her significant other (SO). She proceeds to mention that “he’s way to dedicated to his work, working 12+ hours a day” (u/derloeffelface, 2018). The difficulty of work schedules can also disrupt GRRR’s, however, the lack of physical interaction can quickly leave feelings of uncertainty, increasing the need for assurance on the relationship. “For the record, I don’t want to break up with him. I want to fix this. But he doesn’t recognise that there is a problem, and when I bring it up he gets upset and thinks im just trying to find a reason to argue. We have made plans

to close the distance in 2 years and were both working so hard towards it. But now I'm losing faith" (*u/derloeffelface*, 2018).

Due to the lack of willingness from her partner to reciprocate the assurance, the user's uncertainty about the relationship has increased. Assurance is considered a prosocial maintenance behavior (Afifi, Guerrero, & Eglund, 1994). "All I need is for him to keep calling me babe or whatever pet name he wants (which he stopped doing even before he left, not on purpose I don't think...I don't think I'm crazy for wanting the reassurance, because all I'm getting now is an 'I love you' before bed" (*u/mmilmed*, 2018).

Another user explained how he and his girlfriend are relatively new to long-distance, "we're been dating for 11 months, long distance of 1" (*u/fckevrythng*, 2018). However, he mentioned how he has been having trouble with his mental health and the long distance is contributing to that. "Currently she has left my messages on read, and I think she's gone to sleep as it's now late in the UK, so I'm currently just here anxious and contemplating whether I should've said anything at all. Did I do the right thing?" (*u/fckevrythng*, 2018).

One female user described how her relationship had entered an uncomfortable phase after 8 months, "I guess what I'm wondering is – what do you all do once the honeymoon stage is over? How do you keep affection and connection alive in your relationships?" (*u/EnoughConversation*, 2018). The self-proclaimed honeymoon stage is an interesting concept that is difficult to describe with a concrete definition.

Meeting for the first time

The fourth theme that arose was the initial meeting of LDRR couples. It was clear in the posts that the uncertainty of never having physically met, was causing anxious feelings.

I (F/23) am freaking. I meet him (M/26) in 30 days!!! (u/kirismatic, 2018)

“It’s setting in, finally. In 30 days the love of my life will finally be in my arms for the VERY FIRST TIME.” (u/kirismatic, 2018). Although the levels of uncertainty appeared to be heightened, the excitement and curiosity was extremely noticeable. Another user mentioned how a very recent relationship had blossomed and wanted to know when the right time is to meet face-to-face, “I think I’m worried that waiting a month would inevitably lead to a fizzle. :/” (u/goldensummer, 2018). Upholding an unknown physical appearance also seemed important, “Ideally I’d like to wait another month (would love to be able to get a good price on tickets, get an appointment in with my hairdresser and stuff like that beforehand, lol – hope that doesn’t sound ridiculous!)” (u/goldensummer, 2018).

Meeting my nevermet in 6 days after 7 years ☺ so nervous, yet excited! Anyone have a story or advice for first encounter? (u/inlisabeth, 2018)

For this female, it has been a long time in the relationship without meeting physically. “I am ready to risk it all and fly out to Europe to see if my nevermet could be everything I’ve been waiting for” (u/inlisabeth, 2018).

Discussion

This study extends the body of literature on LDRRs, by focusing on advice sought by individuals dealing with the difficulties of geographical distance. To aid future research on advice sought, the qualitative analysis of content posted by users on the popular website Reddit, found four prominent, recurring themes. The overwhelming feeling of anxiety when moving from a GCRR, meeting a long-distance partner for the first time, maintaining the relationship (or *keeping the connection alive*), and uncertainty of closing the distance and moving in together.

The research question asked what type of advice is sought online for users in a LDRR. From the results discussed above, the underlying theme is higher levels of uncertainty and

anxiety within the relationship. This makes sense and aligns well with previous literature, Knobloch and Solomon (1991) mentioned the outside factor of geographical distance that leads to uncertainty in the relationship. From all three of the uncertainties that is felt, relational uncertainty was the repetitive issue, not uncertainty over the other individual within the relationship. This indicates that the commitment and idealization isn't suffering, yet the relationship as a component may suffer with the uncertainty of the future direction due to geographical distance.

For some couples in LDRR's, they have never met physically. The relationship initiates online and is maintained through computer mediated communication (CMC). The anxiety and uncertainty that was present from the users on Reddit was certainly present, however the idealization that LDRR's experience allowed for heightened levels of excitement. Stafford and Merolla reported that idealization can become extreme, the longer the individuals spend apart. The example from (u/inlisabeth) displayed 7 years of idealization, a risk that individuals take for a successful relationship. The difficulty then becomes when the distance is closed and can contribute to relational demise and termination (Stafford & Merolla, 2006).

An interesting note that was unexpected prior to collecting data, the highest upvoted post in regard to cheating within the LDRR. u/ProfessorDinosaurrr, (2018) discussed her distress at her partner being unfaithful within the relationship. The lack of further posts regarding cheating may indicate a need for further research. There may be outside factors that affect this, individuals may feel less comfortable disclosing their uncertainties, and/or knowledge of their partner cheating, to an online audience. With the lack of physical interaction and geographical separation, individuals may be unaware of any other relationships that their partner could be involved in.

Limitations and Future Direction

It is very important to note that this study has certain implications and limitations. It is of course impossible to analyze all LDRR advice sought online, hence the narrowing to just one area of one particular website. A greater scope of data might have employed different themes with relation to advice that people look to ask. For the data collected, most posts seemed to be young, heterosexual relationships. A more diverse sample of age range and non-heterosexual relationships could incur different results and data.

The data used in this study to analyse just the initial post from individuals. The data was explored to understand the types of advice that users reactively sought, about their relational issues concerning long distance. Future research may look into the reasons for seeking advice on a forum. What is the individual expecting to receive after posting their issue? Is the advice that is given going to drastically change the situation for the better? There is a plethora of directions that future research can look to engage in. As the growth in technology continues to rise, more people are initiating romantic relationships online, future research into the advice that individuals seek whilst having never met their partner will allow for greater understandings when professional advice/help is sought.

In closing, this exploratory content analysis looked to investigate the types of advice that is sought by users online. The themes that arose most prominently can give a firm understanding of what is most popular among people involved in a LDRR. It provides a foundation for more expansive research into the reasons that LDRR individuals seek advice online the way they do, and what problems arise within their relationships.

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