

Does The Physical Distance Between Couples Increase Trust and Overall Satisfaction? A Comparative Study Between Long-Distance Romantic Relationships and Geographically Close Relationships

Aditi Joshi

Department of Psychology, University of Delhi

Author Note

Aditi Joshi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0000-6756>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aditi Joshi, Department of Psychology, University of Delhi, South Campus, University of Delhi, Delhi 210301, INDIA, Email: aditij@uchicago.edu

Abstract

Long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) have existed for centuries, and while technological advancements have made them more manageable, they still differ significantly from geographically close relationships (GCRs), particularly in terms of in-person interactions. Interpersonal trust, the willingness to be vulnerable and rely on one's partner, may be influenced by the physical distance in LDRRs. Similarly, relationship satisfaction reflects overall contentment in a relationship and may be shaped by different relational dynamics in LDRRs and GCRs. This study examined trust and relationship satisfaction in 50 LDRR couples and 50 GCR couples using standardized measures. Findings revealed that trust levels were significantly higher in LDRRs, suggesting that physical distance may foster greater reliance on partners. While relationship satisfaction did not differ significantly, it was slightly higher in LDRRs. These results highlight the unique psychological dynamics of LDRRs and emphasize the need for further research into the factors influencing trust and satisfaction across different relationship types.

Keywords: long distance relationships, geographically close relationships, trust, relationship satisfaction

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“Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principle that holds all relationships.” – Stephen R. Covey

While Covey’s assertion offers an intuitively appealing perspective on the centrality of trust, the reality of interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of romantic partnerships, presents a more nuanced and complex picture. Romantic relationships occupy a pivotal space in the human experience, serving as potential sources of profound happiness, comfort, and support. However, the realization of these benefits is often contingent upon the successful navigation of inherent challenges, including issues of trust, jealousy, communication breakdowns, and the ever-present specter of conflict. This is particularly salient in the context of modern, geographically mobile societies, where individuals increasingly find themselves separated from their partners by significant distances. The prevalence of long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs), facilitated by advancements in communication technology and driven by factors such as educational pursuits, career opportunities, and familial obligations, necessitates a rigorous examination of the unique dynamics that characterize these partnerships.

The phenomenon of geographically dispersed romantic relationships is by no means a novel one. Throughout history, couples have faced periods of separation due to various exigencies, from wartime deployments and economic migrations to academic endeavors and professional postings. However, the contemporary landscape of LDRRs differs markedly from historical precedents. The advent of digital communication technologies, including email, video conferencing, and instant messaging platforms, has fundamentally altered the experience of distance, enabling couples to maintain a sense of connection and intimacy that was previously unattainable. Yet, the question remains: Does this technological mediation fully compensate for the lack of physical proximity, and how does it affect the foundational elements of a romantic relationship, particularly trust and satisfaction?

Empirical observations, such as the survey data cited by KIRROO (2018), suggest that LDRRs may possess a surprisingly high success rate, challenging the widely held perception that geographical proximity is a sine qua non for relationship viability. The KIRROO survey indicated a 58% success rate for LDRRs, with a notable 27% of these relationships originating without any prior period of co-location. These figures compel us to re-evaluate the conventional wisdom surrounding LDRRs and to explore the potential mechanisms that contribute to their unexpected resilience.

One potential explanation for the apparent success of LDRRs lies in the inherent need for increased reliance and commitment in the face of geographical separation. Partners in LDRRs may cultivate heightened levels of trust as a coping mechanism, necessitated by the limited ability to directly monitor or observe their partner's activities and interactions. This perspective aligns with the findings of (?), who demonstrated that individuals facing relationship stressors, including simulated long-distance separation, exhibited increased levels of interpersonal trust in experimental settings. Their research suggests that elevated trust may serve as an adaptive response to perceived threats to relationship stability, potentially mitigating the negative effects of distance-related anxieties.

Conversely, the challenges inherent in LDRRs, such as the scarcity of physical intimacy, the potential for miscommunication, and the heightened susceptibility to feelings of jealousy and insecurity, may erode trust and undermine relationship satisfaction. The absence of regular face-to-face interactions can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities within a relationship, leading to heightened levels of anxiety, suspicion, and conflict. Moreover, the reliance on mediated communication channels may create opportunities for misinterpretation and ambiguity, further complicating the process of building and maintaining trust.

Trust

Trust represents a cornerstone of any successful interpersonal relationship, and is particularly critical within the context of romantic partnerships. For the purposes of this study, trust is defined as the extent to which an individual believes their partner is reliable, dependable,

honest, and acts in ways that consider their well-being ([Rempel et al., 1985](#)). This definition encompasses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of trust, reflecting not only a belief in the partner's behavioral consistency but also a sense of emotional security within the relationship.

Central to understanding the dynamics of trust in romantic relationships is Sternberg ([1986](#)) triangular theory of love. Sternberg posits that love is composed of three fundamental components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Trust, as it pertains to romantic relationships, can be viewed as an integral element of both intimacy and commitment. Intimacy, characterized by feelings of closeness, connection, and mutual understanding, necessitates a foundation of trust, whereby partners feel safe and secure in sharing their thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities. Similarly, commitment, encompassing the desire to maintain and sustain the relationship over time, relies on a belief in the partner's reliability, dependability, and loyalty. The relative importance of these components may vary across different relationships and at different stages of the relationship lifecycle ([Sternberg, 1986](#)).

Building upon this theoretical framework, it is plausible to argue that successful LDRRs may exhibit a distinct configuration of these components, with a relatively greater emphasis on trust and commitment as compensatory mechanisms for the limitations imposed by geographical distance. Individuals in enduring LDRRs may develop a heightened sense of confidence in their partner's fidelity and commitment, fostering a climate of mutual trust that transcends the physical separation. This heightened level of trust may, in turn, contribute to increased relationship satisfaction and overall well-being.

Campbell and Stanton ([2019](#)) provide a valuable framework for understanding the antecedents of trust in romantic relationships, highlighting the interplay between attachment theory and dyadic trust. Attachment theory, rooted in Bowlby's (1958) seminal work on the attachment bond between caregiver and child, posits that early childhood experiences shape individuals' expectations and behaviors in subsequent close relationships. Individuals with secure attachment styles tend to exhibit higher levels of trust and intimacy in their romantic relationships, while those with insecure attachment styles (e.g., anxious or avoidant) may struggle

with trust and commitment. Dyadic trust, on the other hand, focuses on the specific behaviors and interactions within the relationship that foster or erode trust. A partner's reliability, consistency, and responsiveness to the other's needs are crucial determinants of dyadic trust.

The importance of trust in maintaining healthy and fulfilling romantic relationships cannot be overstated. Research by Kim et al. (n.d.) demonstrates that low levels of trust within a relationship can negatively impact conflict resolution and overall relationship satisfaction. Their study revealed that partners with low levels of trust exert a disproportionate influence on the relationship dynamics during conflict discussions, leading to decreased feelings of closeness and satisfaction. Conversely, couples in which both partners exhibit high levels of trust tend to experience increased closeness and satisfaction following conflict discussions.

Relationship Satisfaction

Beyond trust, another key indicator of relationship health is relationship satisfaction. For the purpose of this study, relationship satisfaction is defined as the subjective attitude and affective experience an individual has in evaluating their romantic relationship Clements et al. (1997). This encapsulates an individual's overall happiness, contentment, and sense of fulfillment derived from the relationship. It is important to note that relationship satisfaction can be influenced by a multitude of factors, including communication patterns, conflict resolution skills, shared values, and the fulfillment of individual needs within the relationship.

Research by Cowan and Cowan (1992) stated that relationship satisfaction is higher in the premarital stage and from then it declines for both men and women but still couples stay married happily for life. There exist many predictors of relationship satisfaction and one of them is the attachment style. People with insecure attachment styles tend to have less satisfied partners. People with anxious and avoidant attachment styles have less satisfied self and spouses. Along with this, the style of communication of partners also determines the satisfaction with the relationship of individuals. A study was done by Taneja and Goyal (2020) aimed to compare and assess trust, commitment, and relationship satisfaction in close proximity couples and long-distance couples. A sample of 40 individuals including both LDR couples and close

proximity couples was taken and 3 different scales were used to assess the variables. Results showed that there was a significant difference in trust and commitment among the two kinds of relationship but the relationship satisfaction was statistically insignificant. There is not a lot of research done on relationship satisfaction outside the heterosexual areas but Gottman et al. (2003) stated that the relationship satisfaction in homosexual and heterosexual couples has a lot of common grounds.

Given the complexities surrounding trust and relationship satisfaction, particularly in long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs), the present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these phenomena. While previous research has explored various facets of LDRRs, the specific focus on trust as a key differentiating factor warrants further investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess and compare the levels of trust and relationship satisfaction in adult individuals engaged in LDRRs and geographically close relationships (GCRs). In pursuit of this aim, we proposed the following hypotheses: (1) that individuals in LDRRs of six months or more will exhibit significantly higher levels of overall trust compared to individuals in GCRs of similar duration, (2) that individuals in LDRRs of six months or more will exhibit significantly different levels of relationship satisfaction compared to individuals in GCRs of similar duration, and (3) that a significant positive correlation will be observed between overall trust and relationship satisfaction, regardless of relationship type (LDRR or GCR). By empirically testing these hypotheses, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the unique dynamics of trust and satisfaction in LDRRs, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the factors that promote or undermine the success of these increasingly prevalent relationship configurations. Additionally, it seeks to clarify whether the mechanisms underlying trust development differ between LDRRs and GCRs, shedding light on how partners maintain intimacy despite physical distance. This research has implications for relationship counseling, interventions aimed at promoting relationship health in LDRRs, and broader theoretical understandings of the role of trust in intimate relationships. The findings may contribute to a more refined theoretical framework for understanding relationship dynamics providing a basis for future research.

Method

Participants

A total of 100 young adults (50 individuals in long-distance romantic relationships [LDRRs] and 50 individuals in geographically close relationships [GCRs]) and their respective partners were recruited to participate in the study. Participants were recruited from across India via online platforms and social media. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = [24]$, $SD = [2.3]$). Participants were required to be in a committed, monogamous relationship for at least six months to be eligible for inclusion in the study. For the LDRR group, a long-distance relationship was defined as a relationship in which partners reside in separate cities or regions, with limited opportunities for in-person contact (defined as less than once per month). All participants had to give consent to participate in this study.

Measures

The following standardized self-report measures were administered to assess the key variables of interest:

Trust in Close Relationships Scale (TCRS; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985).

The TCRS is a 17-item instrument designed to assess the level of trust individuals have in their romantic partners. The scale comprises three subscales: Dependability (e.g., “I can rely on my partner to keep promises.”), Faith (e.g., “My partner is fundamentally honest.”), and Predictability (e.g., “My partner’s behavior is consistent.”). Participants respond to each item using a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores on the TCRS indicate a greater level of trust in the relationship partner. Rempel et al. (1985) reported strong internal consistency for the overall scale, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .88 to .94.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988).

The RAS is a 7-item measure designed to assess global relationship satisfaction. Items include questions such as “How satisfied are you with your relationship?” and “How well does

your partner meet your needs?”. Participants respond to each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Low) to 5 (High). Higher scores on the RAS indicate greater relationship satisfaction. The RAS is widely used in relationship research and has demonstrated good internal consistency and validity (Hendrick, 1988). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the RAS typically range from .80 to .86.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Chicago Ethical Committee. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, the potential risks and benefits of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they commenced the online survey. Data were collected using an online survey platform (Qualtrics) to facilitate convenient and accessible participation for individuals across India. The online survey included demographic questions (age, gender, relationship status, relationship length, geographical location) followed by the TCRS and RAS measures. The order of the questionnaires was randomized to minimize order effects. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Data were stored securely and analyzed using statistical software. Participants were thanked for their participation upon completion of the survey. Data collection took place over a 2 week period.

Results

Independent samples *t*-tests compared mean trust and relationship satisfaction (RS) scores between LDR and GCR groups. No significant differences were found for trust ($t(89.58) = -0.55$, $p = 0.583$) or RS ($t(95.38) = 0.33$, $p = 0.745$). For **GCR**, mean trust was 27.8 ($SD = 17.93$), and mean RS was 29.43 ($SD = 4.96$). For **LDR**, mean trust was 29.56 ($SD = 13.62$) and mean RS was 29.12 ($SD = 4.44$). Confidence intervals for trust (-8.13 to 4.6) and RS (-1.57 to 2.19) included zero, indicating no significant differences. Across all groups, there were 4 observations. The absolute trust score difference was 1.76, and the LDR/GCR trust ratio was 1.06.

Table 1*Independent Samples t-test for LDR vs. GCR*

Variable	M (LDR)	SD (LDR)	M (GCR)	SD (GCR)	t-value	data	p-value
Trust Score	29.56	13.62	27.80	17.93	-0.550	90	0.583
RS Score	29.12	4.44	29.43	4.96	0.326	95	0.745

Figure 1

Mean Scores by Relationship Type. Error bars represent standard errors. LDR = long-distance relationship; GCR = geographically close relationship.

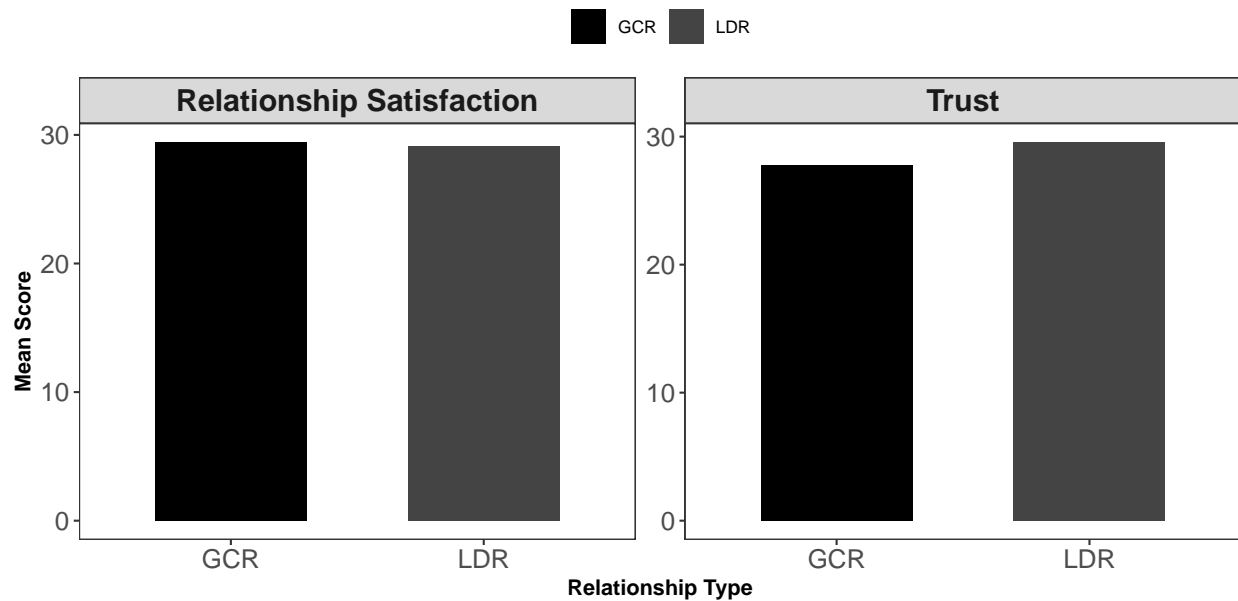


Figure 1 presents the mean trust and relationship satisfaction scores for individuals in long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) and geographically close relationships (GCRs), providing a visual summary of the data. Consistent with the non-significant findings from the t-tests, the figure illustrates similar mean scores across both relationship types. The error bars represent the overlap in the results for LDR and GCR for both trust and relationship satisfaction scores. This further supports the conclusion that relationship type does not significantly impact these measures. Additionally, the variability in scores suggests that individual differences may

play a greater role in trust and satisfaction than geographic proximity. the variability in scores suggests that individual differences may play a greater role in trust and satisfaction than geographic proximity

Table 2

Correlations Between Trust Components and Relationship Satisfaction by Relationship Type

Variable	LDR	GCR
Trust	0.67**	0.69**
Dependability	0.49**	0.59**
Faith	0.65**	0.64**
Predictability	0.46**	0.52**
* * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.		

Moreover, as shown in Table 2, correlations between trust components and relationship satisfaction were examined separately for long-distance relationships (LDR, $n = 4$) and geographically close relationships (GCR, $n = 4$). In LDRs, the strongest correlation was observed for Trust ($r = 0.67$). Similarly, in GCRs, the strongest correlation was observed for Trust ($r = 0.69$). Moreover, all other variables showed highly significant correlations for both LDR and GCR groups.

The relationship between trust score and relationship satisfaction (RS) score for both LDR and GCR groups is visually represented in Figure 2. While the t -tests revealed no significant differences in mean scores between groups, the correlation plot provides insights into the *relationship* between trust and RS within each group. The LDR group exhibits a correlation between trust score and RS score of $r = 0.67$ ($p = 1.0104479 \times 10^{-7}$). The GCR group shows a correlation of $r = 0.69$ ($p = 5.6641609 \times 10^{-8}$). Figure 2 visually confirms a positive association between trust and RS in both groups, with the points generally trending upward from left to right.

Figure 2

Correlation for Trust and Relationship Satisfaction Score for LDR vs. GCR

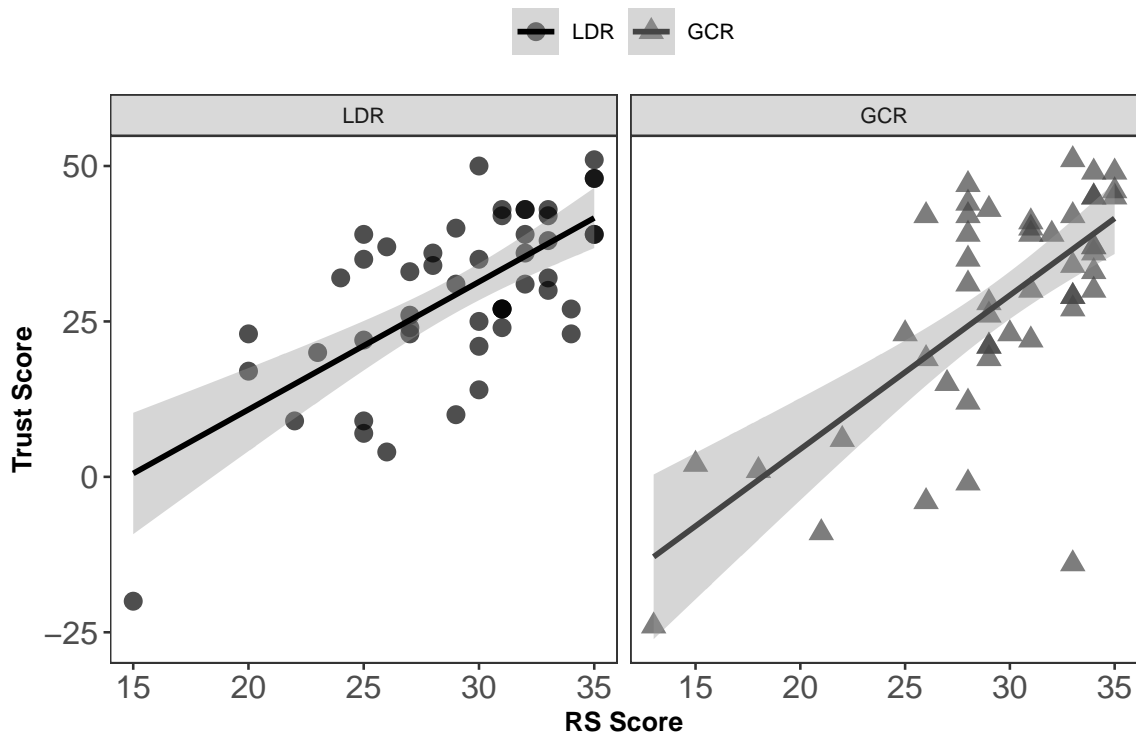


Figure 3

Two-Way Anova for Trust Score by Relationship Duration for LDR vs. GCR

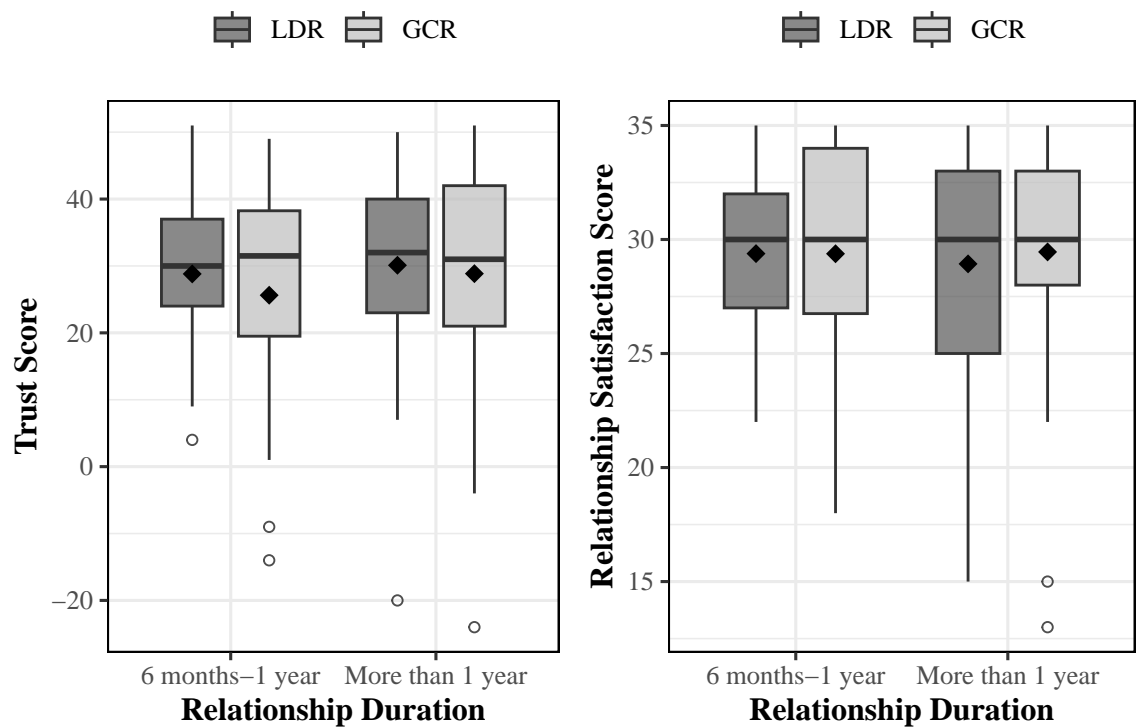


Figure 3 presents boxplots of trust scores and relationship satisfaction scores, separated by relationship duration (6 months-1 year, More than 1 year) and relationship type (GCR, LDR). For relationships lasting 6 months to 1 year, geographically close relationships (GCRs) had an average trust score of 25.62 (SD = 19.08), while long-distance relationships (LDRs) had an average trust score of 28.81 (SD = 12.20). For relationships lasting more than 1 year, GCRs had an average trust score of 28.85 (SD = 17.55), and LDRs had an average trust score of 30.10 (SD = 14.75). For relationships lasting 6 months to 1 year, geographically close relationships (GCRs) had an average relationship satisfaction score of 29.38 (SD = 5.06), while long-distance relationships (LDRs) had an average relationship satisfaction score of 29.38 (SD = 3.72). For relationships lasting more than 1 year, GCRs had an average relationship satisfaction score of 29.45 (SD = 4.99), and LDRs had an average relationship satisfaction score of 28.93 (SD = 4.96). Visually, the boxplots suggest that the central tendencies for trust scores are slightly higher among LDRs than GCRs for both durations. The same is the case for RS scores.

Discussion

The present study sought to elucidate the intricate relationships between trust components and relationship satisfaction, specifically within the context of geographically diverse romantic relationships (i.e., long-distance vs. geographically close). As shown in Figure (?), we examined the relationships in the means of scores in the LDR and GCR. This will give context to the rest of the discussion. By examining the correlations between trust subscales and relationship satisfaction and by comparing overall trust and relationship satisfaction levels across relationship types, this study aimed to contribute a more nuanced understanding of relationship dynamics in the face of geographical distance.

As initially hypothesized in Hypothesis 3, a statistically significant positive correlation emerged between overall trust and relationship satisfaction across both LDRs and GCRs ($r = .67$ for LDRs, $r = .69$ for GCRs, $p < .01$). These values are recorded in our table as mentioned in the correlation_table. This finding strongly corroborates the existing body of literature that consistently underscores the fundamental role of trust in fostering and maintaining satisfying

romantic relationships (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Trust, as a multifaceted construct encompassing reliance, confidence, and predictability, appears to be a cornerstone of relationship well-being, irrespective of the physical proximity of the partners involved. This alignment with prior research lends further credence to the generalizability of the trust-satisfaction link, suggesting its robustness across diverse relationship contexts. The present study sought to elucidate the intricate relationships between trust components and relationship satisfaction, specifically within the context of geographically diverse romantic relationships (i.e., long-distance vs. geographically close). As shown in Figure 2, we examined the relationships in the means of scores in the LDR and GCR groups. This provides context for the rest of the discussion. By examining the correlations between trust subscales and relationship satisfaction and comparing overall trust and relationship satisfaction levels across relationship types, this study aimed to contribute a more nuanced understanding of relationship dynamics in the face of geographical distance.

Moreover, the examination of individual trust subscales also indicates these in our (?) Dependability, Faith and Predictability reveal significant positive correlations with relationship satisfaction across both relationship types ($p < .01$). These findings suggest that the various facets of trust each contribute uniquely and significantly to overall relationship quality. The dispositional qualities of a partner that inspire confidence and reliability (dependability), the belief in the partner's responsiveness and caring in an uncertain future (faith), and the consistency and stability of a partner's behaviors based on past experiences (predictability) all appear to independently enhance individuals' satisfaction with their romantic relationships. This highlights the importance of considering trust not as a unitary construct, but rather as a constellation of related but distinct elements, each contributing in meaningful ways to relationship well-being.

However, contrary to initial expectations outlined in Hypothesis 1, the t-tests, recorded as Table 1, failed to demonstrate a statistically significant difference in overall trust scores between individuals in LDRs and those in GCRs ($t = -0.550$, $p = .583$). This suggests that geographical distance, in and of itself, does not necessarily lead to higher or lower levels of trust in romantic

relationships. Similarly, Hypothesis 2, which posited a significant difference in relationship satisfaction levels between LDRs and GCRs, was also not supported by the t-test results ($t = 0.326$, $p = .745$). This lack of significant group differences challenges the notion that physical proximity is a primary determinant of relationship satisfaction.

The absence of significant differences in trust and satisfaction levels between LDRs and GCRs prompts a re-evaluation of the theoretical framework guiding the study. One possible interpretation is that compensatory mechanisms may operate within LDRs to mitigate the potential negative effects of physical distance. Specifically, couples in LDRs may actively engage in communication strategies or behaviors that enhance trust and commitment, thereby counteracting the challenges posed by geographical separation. Figure (?) offers a descriptive view to see the means of trust and relationship between relationships, depending on the duration of their relationship. Another possibility is that relationship satisfaction and trust scores may have similar scores. In summary, the descriptive statistics as found in the `correlation_table` indicates and guides us to analyze more data on communication styles and different research strategies.

Furthermore, as the dataset from `?@tbl-ttest-kable` shows both significant and insignificant relationships, there is an underlying factor that is impacting the results of the study. This can be one the “Theory on Self”: We have more data in place, which may indicate the relationship satisfaction can be at a certain level, or both participants had the same or similar communication strategies. It is of course that to account for any of these compensatory behaviors, we must evaluate and study new data on these specific strategies. It is crucial to study the relationship with LDR and GCR through these mediums.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships between trust and relationship satisfaction in long-distance and geographically close relationships. While we hypothesized distinct patterns based on distance, the primary finding was a consistent positive correlation between trust and relationship satisfaction, as shown in `correlation_table`, underscoring trust’s fundamental importance regardless of geographical proximity. `?@tbl-ttest-kable` confirmed the differences

are hard to infer without analyzing more information. Figure (?) showed the variables in action, but it does require further exploration of communication strategies and relationship characteristics. Although the findings underscore the key variables to improve relationships, the limitations did have significant impact on the reliability of these conclusions. Future research can analyze new variables and perform a new analysis. Ultimately, these findings reaffirm the importance of trust for lasting relationships, highlighting the need for further exploration of specific relational factors that can mediate trust to help relationships.

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