

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

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ABSTRACT

Long-distance romantic relationships have been around for quite a long time and technological advancements have made it easier to survive one. But, there is still a huge difference between LDRRs and GCR (geographically close relationships) i.e the ‘visiting’ factor. Interpersonal trust is the want of being vulnerable to one’s actions and relying on them with confidence. Having said that, the lack of physical intimacy/in-person contact may play a factor in having increased interpersonal trust in their partners. Relationship satisfaction is the overall happiness and satisfaction one has in their relationship. The present study aimed to assess and compare trust and relationship satisfaction in both Long-Distance Romantic relationships and Geographically Close relationships. The study was conducted on 50 LDRR couples and 50 GCR couples. Standardized measures of Trust and Relationship satisfaction were administered on the participants. The results showed that there is a significant difference in the trust levels between both kinds of relationships. Relationship satisfaction was not significantly different but was higher in LDRR. Further research revolving around different kinds of relationships can help us get a deeper insight to getting to know about the variables and their interdependence.

Keywords: *Long-distance romantic relationships, Geographically-close relationships, Trust, Relationship Satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

“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

Trust is an essential part of any relationship. Romantic relationships serve a significant role in one’s life in bringing happiness & comfort but every so often they give a hard time when there are issues with trust, jealousy, etc. involved. Long-distance romantic relationships have been around for a long time- be it writing letters to a loved one in the 17th century or video chatting in

the 21st century. Usually, it takes a lot of commitment from both partners before getting into LDRR (long-distance romantic relationship) than a geographically close relationship because people have to accept the fact that they will not be able to meet their partners for long periods and in some cases, not at all. The perception of a geographically close relationship working out is much higher in people than LDRR solely because of the 'visiting' factor. According to a survey done by KIRROO (2018), Long-distance romantic relationships have a 58% success rate and it also revealed that 27% of them never lived close to each other. This comes as a surprise to the majority of the population because many believe that LDRRs have little or no chance of being successful. Being away from each other for long periods may act as a factor for trusting the partner a little bit more in LDRRs as they have a sense of helplessness in them which they cannot escape. Even though jealousy exists in both kinds of relationships, the difference of miles between 2 partners is when we see jealousy taking over and if the person lacks trust in their partner, it sometimes becomes a reason for the relationship to end, unfortunately. In comparison, the regular meets/visits in a relationship of close proximity often (but not always) suffices for any kind of discrepancy or issue in the relationship.

Koranyi and Rothermund (2012) conducted a study to know whether increased interpersonal trust becomes a coping mechanism as a result of relationship stressors. 3 experiments were conducted with totally different populations in each of them and half of the participants were asked to imagine a relationship stressor/threat (exp 1 and 2: long-distance relationship, exp 3: any other stressor for the relationship). In experiments 1 and 2 participants were made to play a one-shot trust game anonymously and in experiment 3 trustworthiness of unknown faces was rated. Results revealed that people having relationship stressors showed higher trusting levels in the trust game than that of people who were in control of their conditions. So increased trust level came out as an automatic response to the stressors/threat.

This paper focuses on drawing a comparison between the two types of relationships (LDRRs and relationships of close proximity) to study whether couples in LDRRs have a higher level of trust between them than a relationship in close proximity along with assessing and comparing the level of relationship satisfaction in both kinds of relationships. Even though long-distance romantic relationships have been researched upon in the past, a little emphasis has been laid upon the component of trust and determining and comparing its levels when it comes to LDRR. When talking about trust, it is important to note Sternberg's triangular theory of love (2003) where trust fits the two components of Commitment (the want to be with someone and move towards a mutual goal) and Intimacy (involves a sense of closeness). Trust in romantic

relationships includes creating a sense of mutual understanding, closeness, and being able to commit to your partner & count on them. All relationships which are successful have these 3 components (intimacy, passion & commitment) in them which makes them last longer. These three components are connected to each other in a way like if intimacy increases, passion also increases. The importance of each component in this triangle may vary in different relationships, or even over time (Sternberg, 1986).

People in successful LDRRs often are confident enough in their partner for their loyalty which may lead to increased amounts of trust levels in them when compared to a GCR (geographically close relationship). In a long-term LDRR where the couples have been together for a larger period of time have experienced a lot of ups and downs in their relationship which might make it easier for them to trust their partners' overtime. This may or may not apply to a GCR because there may not exist a blind trust between the two individuals as they are not in a state of helplessness to stay apart. Also, it is important to note that trust is not something that is present in full capacity before any relationship but is something that grows with a relationship.

Trust

Trust is the belief that a partner is, and will remain, reliable or dependable (Cook, 2003).

Trust is a component that makes up a huge part of any relationship; specifically romantic relationships. According to Rempel & Holmes (1989) Trust in close relationships is determined by the willingness of an individual to be responsive to their partners' needs and their partners' confidence in them regarding it. An article by Campbell and Staton (2019) explained trust that exists in romantic relationships. They summarized how and why a person trusts their partner in two components- first being the 'Attachment Theory' which according to Bowlby (1958) referred to the attachment between a child and a caregiver throughout the lifetime and how it shaped a person's behavior in the future. The attachment theory in simple words explained why a person may or may not trust their partner in the relationship. The second component was 'dyadic trust' which explains the question of why a person may trust their partner, specifically in relation to how the partner treats them. So, how a person trusts in general along with the level of trust in regards to the partner's behavior determines the overall level of trust in any romantic relationship. They further explained how certain relationships in a person's lifetime build their expectations of future relationships i.e if relationships in the past were unproblematic, the person is more likely to build trust in future relationships and vice-versa. If the individual has had negative expectations from their previous relationships they might develop - attachment

avoidance (discomfort in relying on a partner or vice-versa) and attachment anxiety (worrying about being abandoned or rejected).

For a relationship to be a successful one, it is crucial that both partners trust each other equally and research shows that if one partner has low trust levels it might affect conflict resolution in many cases. Kim et al. (2015) conducted a study to understand whether high-trust partners can lessen low-trust partners' reactions during a conflict to build a more positive post-conflict outcome, or if low-trust partners can influence high-trust partners behavior to get a more negative post-conflict outcome. A sample of 95 married couples was taken and they were made to discuss a conflict. Results revealed that partners of low-trust were more influential over high-trust partners. They felt less close to each other after conflict discussions. On the other hand, couples, where both individuals had high-trust levels, felt an increased closeness to one another post-conflict discussions.

Long-Distance Romantic Relationships

A long-distance relationship (or LDR for short) is considered long distance when communication opportunities are restricted because of geographic distance and the partners in the relationship desire a continued, close connection (PennState University). According to Mary Holmes (2005) "Distance relationships as ones in which couples spend at least two nights a week apart, or are separated for longer periods on a regular basis". LDRRs refer to a shared intimate relationship or bond between 2 individuals in a romantic sense who are geographically separated from each other. It reduces or nullifies the frequency of seeing each other. Most of the long-distance relationships are found among college students which constitute 25% - 50% of all relationships (Maguire et al. 2010). This type of relationship exists among people who have met online and have never lived close to each other, along with people who have lived close but had to move away due to certain circumstances (study, jobs, etc.). Even though LDRRs are very challenging due to many factors i.e lack of in-person visits, lack of physical intimacy, a difference of time zones (if in different countries), etc., many people manage to be in successful LDRRs. Individuals in LDRRs consider technology a very necessary tool for keeping in touch with their partners and video-chatting plays a key role in compensating the distance between them. Greenberg et al. (2013) conducted interviews with 14 individuals in LDR who mainly communicate with their partner through video chat to understand the usage and importance of it. The main areas studied included the question of how couples spent time together over video chat and how it provides intimacy. Results showed a positive impact of video chat on LDR couples as

it helped in sharing presence between the partners over distance. It provided a lot of intimacy and helped in building trust and helped them be a part of each other's life when far.

People usually assume the distance in LDRRs to be very problematic and a cause for a decreased quality of the relationship since individuals are not able to see each other, but research says otherwise. Dargie et al. (2014) studied the differences between long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships to investigate the relationship quality in both. The sample included 474 women and 243 men for long-distance relationships and 314 women and 111 men for geographically close relationships. It was found out that differences existed between the two were very few and individual and relationship characteristics predicted the relationship quality for both. Results said that long-distance couples were in no way at any disadvantage as the quality of relationships in both types of relationships was measured by the same characteristics.

Relationship satisfaction

“Satisfaction in close relationships is defined as the subjective attitude (satisfaction) and affective experience (happiness) in the evaluation of one's relationship” - Clements et al., (1957).

It basically refers to the overall satisfaction of an individual with their relationship. Assessment of relationship satisfaction is used to know a person's state and happiness in that particular relationship. The multidimensional analysis says that relationship satisfaction is different for both men and women. Specifically for men, relationship satisfaction is determined by the lack of regret of marrying their partner, the amount of disagreement they may have over sex and affection, and basically overall happiness. For women, it is determined by two factors i.e. their overall happiness in the relationship and how their spouse behaves with family and friends. Research by Cowan & Cowan (2000) 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. The purpose of this study is to assess and compare the levels of trust and relationship satisfaction in both Long-Distance romantic relationships and geographically close relationships in adults. **We hypothesize:** Couples in Long-distance romantic relationships of 6 months or more will report significant differences in their level of trust as compared to geographically close couples. Couples in Long-distance romantic relationships of 6 months or more will report significant differences in their relationship satisfaction as compared to geographically close couples. There will be a significant positive correlation between Trust and Relationship Satisfaction.

A total of 100 Young adults (50 in LDRRs and 50 in GCRs) from all across India and their partners participated in this study. The age range of participants was 18-25 years.

Measures

The following standardized scales were used for assessment : **Trust in Close Relationships Scale:** It is a 17-item scale made to measure the level of trust in a relationship partner and was designed by Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna in 1985. It is divided into three subscales- Dependability, Faith & Predictability. Participants were asked to answer each question based on a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 being 'Strongly Disagree' and 7 being 'Strongly Agree'. **Relationship Assessment Scale:** It is a 7-item scale developed by Hendrick in 1988 to measure general relationship satisfaction in couples. Participants were asked to answer each question based on a 5-point scale which ranged from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

The participants were informed of the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms. Participants were assured confidentiality and thanked for their cooperation. Standardized tests were administered to participants.

Results

The responses of the participants were analyzed using a T-test to assess differences in trust (dependability, faith, and predictability) and relationship satisfaction in both long-distance couples and geographically close couples. Mean and Standard Deviation is depicted in Table 1. Table 2 shows the difference in Trust and relationship satisfaction in both kinds of relationships. Table 3 shows the correlation between Trust and relationship satisfaction.

Table 1 showing N, Mean and Standard Deviation.

| | Trust | Dependability | Faith | Predictability | Relationship Satisfaction |
|---|-------|---------------|-------|----------------|---------------------------|
| N | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

| | | | | | |
|-------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Mean | 28.45 | 7.99 | 15.68 | 4.90 | 29.4 |
| SD | 15.665 | 5.535 | 6.821 | 6.820 | 4.600 |

Table 2 showing the difference in Trust and Relationship Satisfaction.

| | Group | N | Mean | SD | F score | df | p |
|----------------------------------|-------|----|-------|-------|---------|------|------|
| Trust | LDRR | 60 | 9.56 | 3.620 | .707 | 98.0 | <.01 |
| | BCR | 60 | 17.34 | 7.542 | | | |
| Dependability | LDRR | 60 | 1.82 | 1.797 | .509 | 98.0 | <.01 |
| | BCR | 60 | 1.16 | 1.122 | | | |
| Faith | LDRR | 60 | 6.42 | 1.047 | .086 | 98.0 | <.01 |
| | BCR | 60 | 4.94 | 1.210 | | | |
| Predictability | LDRR | 60 | 1.54 | 1.404 | .526 | 98.0 | <.01 |
| | BCR | 60 | 1.26 | 1.236 | | | |
| Relationship Satisfaction | LDRR | 60 | 9.54 | 1.329 | .238 | 98.0 | <.01 |
| | BCR | 60 | 9.32 | 1.897 | | | |

Table 3: showing the correlations between trust and relationship satisfaction.

| | Trust | Dependability | Faith | Predictability | Relationship Satisfaction |
|----------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Trust | — | | | | |
| Dependability | 0.817** | — | | | |
| Faith | 0.870** | 0.712** | — | | |
| Predictability | 0.760** | 0.364** | 0.433** | — | |
| Relationship Satisfaction | 0.674** | 0.508** | 0.617** | 0.511** | — |

** : $p < 0.01$

Discussion

The results show that there stands a significant positive correlation between trust and relationship satisfaction ($r = 0.663$, $p < 0.01$), the three subscales of trust- dependability ("the dispositional qualities of the partner, which warrant confidence in the face of risk and potential hurt (e.g., honesty, reliability, etc.)"), faith ("feelings of confidence in the relationship and the responsiveness and caring expected from the partner in the face of an uncertain future."), and predictability ("predictability emphasize the consistency and stability of a partner's specific behaviors, based on past experience.") also, show a significant correlation with relationship satisfaction. According to Anderson & Sommer (2006), Trust, Intimacy, and communication are the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction. Based on their research, along with these predictors, the duration of relationships and the time spent communicating are also great factors in determining relationship satisfaction in individuals who are involved in online relationships. When there is an increased amount of trust in a relationship, the overall satisfaction with the

relationship does increase in couples, especially those who are in a long-distance romantic relationship. Along with this, proper communication plays a very important role. Research done by Greenberg et al. (2013) showed a positive impact of video chat and online communication for Long-distance couples which suggests that there can be effective communication irrespective of the distance between the individuals.

Table 2 shows that there is an increased amount of trust in long-distance couples ($t = 0.707$) in comparison with geographically close couples. Gonzalez (2011) studied relationship satisfaction, personal commitment and trust, and Perceived Partner Commitment and Trust among long-distance and proximally close dating relationships of graduate students. A comparison of both LDR couples and GCR couples was done and it was indicated that relationship satisfaction was significantly predicted by personal commitment and personal trust. Even though there is not a large difference existing between the relationship satisfaction score of LDRR and GCR couples, the higher level of trust score in long-distance couples indicates that there lies a higher level of relationship satisfaction in them. Another study was done by England (2018) to assess and compare the predictors of relationship satisfaction in extremely distant couples, moderately distant and geographically close couples. It was found that trust, love, and online communication were significantly higher in long-distance couples than geographically close couples. It can be said that trust plays a huge role in determining the satisfaction and quality of a relationship. These studies show that Long-distance demands for both the partners to be equally trusting in themselves as well as in each other. Kerstin et al., (2017) attempted to understand the successful LDRRs of college students and how these couples tackled the issues that came with long-distance i.e., jealousy, uncertainty, etc. Results showed that high trusting self and partner, effective communication practices, and setting mutual goals were the main aspects of successful LDRRs. So, Hypothesis 1 stands true.

Table 2 also shows that dependability ($t = 1.509$) and faith ($t = 1.086$) are higher in LDRR than GCR, however, Predictability ($t = -.524$) comes to be lower in LDRR than GCR. According to Rempel & Holmes (1985), the predictability of a partner's behavior depends on a number of factors i.e the consistency of behavior that is recurring, the ability to forecast someone's behavior, and how stable the social environment is. A study done by Sheldon and Pecchioni (2014) aimed to understand the trust, predictability, and self-disclosure in relationships- both face to face and through Facebook. Results showed that individuals showed more trust and better predictability in face-to-face relationships than through Facebook.

Conclusion

Even though all kinds of relationships hold their own importance, these findings make us understand that long-distance romantic relationships possess a higher level of trust in them due to the distance between the individuals. LDRRs have been around for a really long period of time, but in ancient times individuals didn't have a choice but to bear the distance. Now, due to advancements in technology and the regular virtual face-to-face interactions between distant couples have made it easier for the LDRRs to survive. Although physical intimacy is a very important aspect of any romantic relationship, the amount of passion and love between distant individuals compensates for the miles between them. Satisfaction with the relationship is also another important aspect in both LDRRs and GCRs, the findings suggested that LDRRs have a little higher satisfaction in them which implies that the higher the trust, the higher the satisfaction. Trust and all its three subscales have been shown to correlate positively with relationship satisfaction. Further, it is crucial to note that relationship satisfaction is also affected by the attachment style of the person. It is important to understand the relation between these scales so as to further gain knowledge regarding relationships and tackling issues arising with them and these findings are crucial if one wants to improve upon relationships. Trust and satisfaction are also determined by what expectations one individual has from their partner. If the partner meets one's needs correctly and efficiently, it will definitely result in a higher level of trust and satisfaction. Since the survey was online, there was no rapport formation and lack of it could hinder as a limitation of this experiment. Moreover, the experiment being online can act as a reason for some people not being as truthful. Some studies have been done to identify the relationship between these variables but we do need in-depth studies to find out more about how these variables affect each other.

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