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SUSTAINING LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH LOVE, TRUST, AND DEDICATION AMONG MARRIED COUPLES

¹JOKI PERDANI SAWAI

²REZKI PERDANI SAWAI

³MAHIRAH MASDIN

⁴ABDUL RASHID ABDUL AZIZ

^{1&3} *Fakulti Psikologi dan Pendidikan (Blok Psikologi),
Jalan UMS, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.*

^{2&4} *Fakulti Kepimpinan dan Pengurusan, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia,
Bandar Baru Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.*

^a*Corresponding author: joki@ums.edu.my*

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Abstract Today's socio-economic aspects often shape the diverse family dynamics in which couples opt for long-distance marriages that require them to live separately and apart to earn better incomes. Living separately and away is certainly a challenge that requires appropriate action between the long-distance marriage couples. This study examines how love, trust, and commitment help married couples maintain their long-distance relationships. The importance of those three feelings in determining the continuation of marriages was the focus of the long-distance relationship factor. A total of 110 married couples living apart were the subject of the study in which intimacy, passion, and commitment comprised the three love-related dimensions that were measured. While commitment included the intention to persist, a sense of attachment, and a long-term perspective, trust was scored on a single domain. The Triangular Love Scale measured the love variable, the Dyadic Trust Scale gauged trust, the Investment Model Scale (IMS) measured commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), and the Relationship Maintenance Scale evaluated marital maintenance. Passion ($r = .294^{**}$, $k.002$) and trust ($r = .249^{**}$, $k.001$) were found to have significant positive relationships with marital maintenance while only the commitment domain for long-term orientation had a similar relationship with marital maintenance ($r = .199^{*}$, $k.002$). Therefore, the findings suggest that long-term commitment orientation, passion, and trust are likely to promote distance-separated married couples preserve their marriages. The implication is that those three facets are key drivers in preserving and enhancing long-distance marriage bonds among such couples.

Keywords: Love, trust, commitment, marital maintenance, long-distance marriage couples.

INTRODUCTION

As a particular kind of intimate engagement, marriage is the first step in uniting partners in a way that creates a family and advances society (Kublay & Oktan, 2015). Despite the unique challenges that they pose, long-distance marriages are a reality for most couples today. Career requirements and family concerns are among the reasons spouses are forced to live apart. However, with the right amount of effort and communication, long-distance relationships can still succeed, especially those having strong foundations. Few studies were conducted on marriage preservation in the early part of this century (Perlman, 2001) though the emphasis on marital maintenance has increased due to the rise in divorce rates.

Currently, millions of married couples and families must live far apart. Mulder (2008) describes commuter marriages as male and female relationships in dual-career marriages where couples wish to get married but also choose to pursue their respective careers as well. They are so highly committed to their work that they do not mind being away from each other and living separately. Gerstel and Gross (1984) and Winfield (1985) emphasize that couples in commuter marriages only spend three or four nights a week apart from the main family residence and would have a second residence elsewhere. Generally, a commuter marriage has these two norms:

- 1) Both spouses live in different geographical locations; and
- 2) work is the main reason for living separately.

According to the National Population and Family Development Authority (LPPKN, 2014), a commuter marriage is where a couple is married but stays apart for work reasons and meets at least once a week. Using the term 'long distance relationship' in their study to describe commuter marriages, Richard and Anne (2007) found an increase in the number of such marriages. In Malaysia, over 500,000 spouses live separately due to employment demands (*Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Study-KPKM-5*, 2014). The KPKM-5 survey found that 6.9 per cent of married

working women live apart from their husbands, and that 32.6 per cent of them meet their husbands four times a month while 24.8 per cent did so twice or three times a month. Also, 16.1 per cent meet their husbands once a month, 13.7 per cent once in a few months, and about 2.6 per cent of couples only meet once a year. With less time spent together, there is potentially greater pressure among commuting couples in maintaining their relationships leading to frustration and disappointment.

The very nature of long-distance relationships is often the reason why couples find it difficult to sustain their marriages. Long-distance married couples' marriage relationships rely strongly on love, trust, and commitment. Jenny Ratna Suminar and Siti Murni Kaddi (2018) stress the importance of commitment, openness, mutual understanding, and trust between couples to achieve an enduring long-distance relationship. It is incumbent upon both partners to ensure that conflicts are settled amicably to preserve such a relationship.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Modern socioeconomic aspects of life have impacted the various family dynamics, changing the role of women from that of the stereotypical homemaker to that of a significant home provider. Financial Minister II, Datuk Seri Johari Abdul Ghani claimed at the Global Women's Trade Summit 2017 that there were more than 700,000 working women in the country as of 2017, which represents an increase of 54.3 per cent compared to 46 per cent in 2011. (*Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Blueprint*, 2015). In addition, women's participation in a variety of professions has raised the Gross Domestic Product by 0.3 per cent. (GDP). The rise in numbers is mostly caused by shifting societal standards and female-specific economic considerations. Women are expected to support and assist their spouses in generating income as well to prevent poverty (Gregory & Hunter, 1995). Additionally, the availability of jobs in the market that do not priorities gender but rather a strong educational foundation and competent labor has helped to increase the number of women participating in the workforce (Austen & Birch, 2002).

In addition, every marriage yearns to feel secure, content, and cherished. However, commuter married couples must take proper steps to overcome the challenges of living apart and remotely. This is due to the possibility that any poor tactics could create a psychological breakdown in the marriage. Considering this, managing the best strategy to reduce any unwarranted mistreatment in handling it is essential because not everyone could handle such a circumstance with the same actions or ideas (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006). Particularly, happiness is one of the primary reasons people get married. They can find connections and relief from loneliness through marriage.

Diener et al. (2000) found those who are married are happier than those who are not married, which supports this. However, no matter how content a couple is in their marriage, they still face obstacles at home. Unusual situations that married couples frequently must deal with include miscommunication, financial difficulties, job demands, and death. No commuter marital couple is exempt from this difficulty since, if it is not addressed and resolved properly, it could result in divorce, which lowers one's happiness (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009). To jointly have a happy and healthy marriage, it is crucial for every commuting marriage couple to grasp their individual duties, difficulties, and ambitions.

Such couples continue to maintain their long-distance relationship for a variety of reasons other than their job. These include serving in the military, being imprisoned, and pursuing education. Nevertheless, nothing has changed in Malaysia. Due to urban and economic elements that are growing quickly, there are more commuter families there (Zarinah et al., 2016). Such a scenario would have a significant negative impact on people, families, and communities (Sandow, 2014). Thus, open discussions are critical and commuting couples should be ready with a variety of strategies as commuter marriages are extremely difficult circumstances for husband-and-wife relationships. Inappropriate handling of this circumstance may result in an unwelcome divorce (Glotzer & Federlein, 2007). Accordingly, this study explores how love, trust, and commitment contribute towards preserving long-distance married-couple relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Dainton (1994), maintained relationships are those that have gone beyond the initial stage but have not yet reached the point of dissolution. In contrast, Duck (1994) defines them as “a shared meaning system” which is established between two people. According to Dindia and Canary (1993), marriage-relational maintenance consists of four components: (1) maintaining the existence of the relationship; (2) maintaining the relationship in a particular state or condition; (3) maintaining the relationship in a satisfactory condition; and (4) maintaining the relationship in repair.

Meanwhile, Dindia and Emmers-Sommer (2006) believe that love, affection, and commitment to the partnership are the keys to sustaining a relationship. Couples’ relationship satisfaction can also be achieved if these requirements are met. Marital relationships are strengthened over a longer period when couples are satisfied with one another. Alternatively, maintaining a marriage involves preserving the quality of a relationship, particularly regarding the level of satisfaction among couples.

According to Scott (2002), long-distance romances are distinct from long-distance marriage. According to Berscheid and Peplau (1983), love is the very basis of romantic involvement in general and marriage for the majority of individuals. According to Rubin (1970), love is an interpersonal attitude that causes a person to think, feel, and act in a particular way. According to Jurkane-Hobein (2015), love is not only more idealized but also more challenging to attain. Some couples may experience significant declines in their affection for one another to the point of wanting to end their end their marriage while others, according to Valngelisti and Huston (1994), can sustain relatively high levels of love and marital satisfaction. In Bauman’s (2000) view, love is a fluid and that we live in a form of fluid modernity. Relationships between people in such a fluid situation are unstable and unreliable and subject to being readily broken up. As a result, couples in long-distance relationships require constant communication with one another and show consideration for the wellbeing of each other.

In a study by McBride and Bergen (2014), respondents stated that they could show their love without having to be physically close to each other. Couples develop their relationships through a variety of means and to maintain feelings for one another (Dharmawijati, 2016). Daily conversations on the phone were a practice among such couples, demonstrating their devotion to one another and bringing them closer together. According to Scott (2002), intimacy among couples may ensue from the lack of daily communication and contact in maintaining the relationship.

Bente, Ruggenberg, Kramer, and Eschenburg (2008) found that trust is yet another important element for successful long-distance relationships. Amelia (2020) noted that while distance has its positive and negative aspects, what is important is how couples manage the distance through communication and constant trust to sustain the relationship and the intimacy between them. The relational bond or lack of it between couples may be a significant determinant of the quality of long-distance relationships. Circumstances restricting the physical, emotional, and sexual availability of partners may simply make it less easy to maintain trust between them. According to Kariuki (2014), the survival of a marriage relies critically on the element of mutual trust.

According to Dainton and Aylor (2001), distance increases uncertainty and may contribute to feelings of jealousy and reduced trust between partners thus compromising the marriage relationship. According to Pathan (2015), a major cause of marital difficulties is suspicion among spouses. The Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) posits that maintaining a sound relationship requires the ability to manage negative beliefs and doubts about their partners. Johnson and Moosath (2019) note that factors that undermine trust in a marriage include a sense of not being loved, having suspicions over the partner, not sharing and being supportive, not keeping promises, and low inclination towards forgiveness. According to them, mutual interaction, and constant information sharing (Dainton & Aylor, 2002) are strong bases for enhancing trust between couples. Meanwhile, Pistole and Roberts (2011) believe that mistrust and negative thoughts are the result of lack of contact or communication by a partner, especially in times when they are needed. Nevertheless, even without

communication, having positive thoughts among couples can contribute to a sound marriage.

The study by Le, Loving, Lewandowski, Feinberg, Johnson, Fiorentino, and Ing (2008) found commitment to be key in maintaining a marital relationship, particularly one that is sturdy. Distance-separated couples are forced by circumstances to be more independent. Too much independence, however, may make them neglect and reduce their sense of commitment to each other. When couples are in a long-distance relationship, they are physically separated from their families (spouses and children) for long periods of time (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). This affects their quality time together (Vincent & Neis, 2011) and could lead to psychological problems such as loneliness and depression. This could worsen to psychiatric issues if a partner has to take on additional roles in raising the children alone, while the other lives far away and feels lonely. This 'parental stress' will definitely have a significant impact on how couples live with their kin over the long-run (Leon et al., 2015).

Despite strongly trusting one another while leading separate lives, their commitment to each other needs consistent reinforcement. Meeting up regularly or consistently is one way to show such commitment. Due to their busy schedules, there is a high likelihood that couples who seldom meet up will face issues in their marriage. This is due to their heavy focus on their individual careers which dilutes their commitment to each other as well as partners being too comfortable living on their own (Stafford, 2005). Partners regain faith and trust in the relationship by spending time together (Sahlstein, 2004). According to Kariuki (2014), couples living far apart must remain honest, committed, faithful, and emotionally connected to one another for their marriage to survive. This reinforces the linkage between commitment and shared everyday decisions (SHARED) (Jimenez & Asendorpf, 2010). According to Rusbult (1983), shifts in commitment were strong signs indicating possible breakups in relationships.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate how long-distance married couples' love and marital support are linked.
2. to study the link between marital maintenance and trust among long-distance married couples; and
3. to investigate the link between marital maintenance and commitment in long-distance married couples.

Hypotheses of the Study

The hypotheses of the study were:

1. (Ho) Love and marital maintenance do not significantly correlate among long distance married couples.
2. (Ho) There is no significant link between marital maintenance and trust among couples living far apart; and
3. (Ho) In long-distance marriages, there is no significant correlation between commitment and marital maintenance.

METHODOLOGY

A. Study Design

The survey for this cross-sectional study employed quantitative research. The samples for this research were married respondents living apart from their spouses.

B. Respondents

These were couples in a long-distance marriage relationship comprising 110 male and female primary or secondary school teachers in Sabah.

C. Instruments

Each variable was measured using four sets of standard questionnaires. Sternberg's Triangular Love Scale (1988) (STLS), which has 19 items for measuring the three love domains of intimacy, passion, and commitment, was used to evaluate the love variables. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 =

strongly disagree to 5 = agree). The Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS) was used to measure the trust variables (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). The DTS research tool involved a short-form eight-item questionnaire using a one-factor model to measure trust. The Likert scale had 7 points, with 1 representing strong disagreement to 7 indicating agreement).

Commitment was measured using the Investment Model Scale (IMS) (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) comprising 15 items. A Likert scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 8 (agree) served as the basis for the measurement. The Relationship Maintenance Scale (RMS) was used to measure the dependent variable of marital strengthening (Chonody, Killian, Gabb, & Dunk-West, 2017). Eight items on the RMS measured an individual's effort level in maintaining the relationship.

D. Procedure

This study received the approval of the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the Sabah Education Department and was valid for six months. Following that the researchers sought the assistance of the principals of each school to identify married teachers living separately from their spouses. Questionnaires were distributed to the teachers for completion within a week.

E. Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis of the data was employed to identify the backgrounds of the respondents. The correlation method was used to test the study's hypotheses, and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used for data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 110 respondents to this study included 44 men (40 per cent) and 66 women (60 per cent), as shown in Table 1. 94 (85.5 per cent) of them were newlyweds while 16 (14.5 per cent) were in their second marriage. Of the respondents, 80 (72.7 per cent) and 30 (27.3 per cent) of their partners said it was their first or second marriage, respectively. Twenty-five (22.7 per cent each) reported being physically apart from their partners for less-than and a

year's duration, while 23 (20.9 per cent each) were apart for two and three years. Three of them (2.7 per cent) were separated the longest at 6 years. Of note is that despite living apart, only 18.4 per cent of the respondents said they had contemplated ending their marriage, while 92 (83.6 per cent) said they had no intention of doing so.

Of the respondents, 19 (17.3 per cent) had diplomas and the rest (82.7 per cent) were degree holders. For their partners, 35 (31.8 per cent) were diploma holders, 32 (29.1 per cent) had certificates, 17 (15.5 per cent) had degrees, 14 (12.7 per cent) had reached STPM level, and 12 (10.9 per cent) had SPM certificates. Jobwise, all respondents were in Grade 41 or higher. For their partners, 32 (29.1 per cent) reported working part time, 28 (25.5 per cent) were in the private sector, 17 (15.5 per cent) were unemployed, 10 each (9.1 per cent) were self-employed and in Support III Grades 1 through 16, 8 (7.3 per cent) in Grades 41 and over, 4 (3.6 per cent) in Support I Grades 27 to 38, and 1 (0.9 per cent) in Support II (Grades 17 to 26).

Wives and husbands managed the family's finances in 44 (40 per cent) and 23 (20.9 per cent) of the cases, respectively while 43 respondents (39.1 per cent) managed their own incomes or finances.

Table 1

Demographics of Long-Distance Marriage Couples in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

| | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 44 | 40 |
| Female | 66 | 60 |
| First Marriage | | |
| Respondent | | |
| Yes | 94 | 85.5 |
| No | 16 | 14.5 |
| Partner | | |
| Yes | 80 | 72.7 |
| No | 30 | 27.3 |
| In Long-Distance Marriage | | |
| Less than 1 year | 25 | 22.7 |
| 1 year | 25 | 22.7 |
| 2 years | 23 | 20.9 |
| 3 years | 23 | 20.9 |
| 4 years | 6 | 5.5 |
| 5 years | 5 | 4.5 |
| 6 years | 3 | 2.7 |
| Divorce Intention | | |
| Yes | 18 | 16.4 |
| No | 92 | 83.6 |
| Respondent's Academic Level | | |
| Diploma | 19 | 17.3 |
| Degree | 91 | 82.7 |
| Partner's Academic Level | | |
| SPM | 12 | 10.9 |
| STPM | 14 | 12.7 |
| Certificates | 32 | 29.1 |
| Diploma | 35 | 31.8 |
| Degree | 17 | 15.5 |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|----|-----|------|
| Work Position (Respondents) | | | |
| Grade 41 and above | | 110 | 100 |
| Work Position (Partners) | | | |
| Grade 41 and above | | 8 | 7.3 |
| Support I (Grade 27-38) | 4 | | 3.6 |
| Support II (Grade 17-26) | 1 | | 0.9 |
| Support III (Grade 1-16) | 10 | | 9.1 |
| Private Sector | | 28 | 25.5 |
| Part Time | | 32 | 29.1 |
| Not Working | | 17 | 15.5 |
| Self-Employed | 10 | | 9.1 |
| Family's Financial Manager | | | |
| Husband | 23 | | 20.9 |
| Wife | | 44 | 40 |
| Manage Own Finances | 43 | | 39.1 |

Passion is associated with maintaining a long-distance marriage (see Table 2); thus, the findings show that relationships such as these require strong feelings of passion to ensure an enduring marriage. As seen in the positive correlation, the deeper the partner's passion, the stronger the relationship. However, marital maintenance does not correlate with intimate love and commitment; as such, long-distance marriages are unaffected by love commitments and intimacy. This is because these relationships would require more of a sense of passion between couples to overcome the challenge of distance separation. According to Valngelisti and Huston (1994), couples who can sustain high levels of positive feelings for one another may have the edge in terms of remaining together over a longer period. Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2013) note that long-distance partners have a better-quality relationship in several aspects such as love for the partner, fun with the partner, and conversational quality compared to those who are close by.

In the meantime, the analysis revealed a correlation between marital maintenance and trust. Based on the characteristics of a healthy relationship, couples who live apart are more likely to improve and strengthen their relationship if they have a higher level of trust. Alternatively, securing the stability of long-distance marriages hinges heavily on levels of trust

among couples living far apart and rarely meeting in person. Respondents in a study by Kariuki (2014) listed trust as the foremost factor helping couples in maintaining their relationships. According to the National Population and Family Development Authority (LPPKN, 2014), loyalty is one of the issues usually raised by long-distance marriage couples who seek guidance and advice from LPPKN counsellors. Problems arose from the actions of one of the couples who took advantage of the situation by cheating their partners. This is caused by the lack of intimacy which leads them to feel left out and less appreciated. As such, if the couples embrace elements of trust, are faithful, and have mutual respect, being separated should not be an excuse for them to stray and instead contribute to preserving their family institution.

A strong marriage is built on a foundation of trust underlying the belief that neither partner will act in a way that could undermine that trust (Heller, 2000). Living far apart makes it necessary for married couples to allow their spouses some leeway in managing their lives. For instance, the husband relies on his wife to ensure her own safety and the wife, in turn, expects her husband to take over in catering for his own meals. According to Mietzner and Lin (2005), marital maintenance will be more stable among separate couples who have confidence in their partners' capacity to effectively handle such responsibilities.

In addition, the study found that marital maintenance in long-distance marriage couples is linked to commitment factors and such long-term orientation specifically defines that relationship. Couples tend to view their partnership as enduring forever owing to their commitment to that long-term relationship. They tend to visualise growing together into old age and to assume that if the relationship does not last long, their individual lives will be jeopardised. This makes them want to work at maintaining their marriages by taking such a long-term approach. They will strive to resolve issues that could undermine their relationship and erode its strength. Further, they will reaffirm their devotion to each other especially during times together (Jacobs & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Living apart, such couples experience loneliness, and lack affection and attention. According to Sandow (2014), lower-quality marital relationships characterize separated couples who feel a lack of

spousal devotion and emotional support. This makes them neglect or give up on the emotional side resulting in an unhappy marriage.

Table 2
Results of Correlation Testing

| Love | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------|----------------------|------|------------|------|
| Commitment | | Intimacy | | Passion | |
| | | r | Sig. | r | Sig. |
| r. | Sig. | | | | |
| Marital | | .059 | .542 | .294** | .002 |
| .037 | .703 | | | | |
| Maintenance | | | | | |
| Trust | | | | | |
| Marital | | | | | |
| r. | Sig. | | | | |
| Maintenance | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| .249** | .009 | | | | |
| Commitment | | | | | |
| Long-Term Orientation | | Intention to Persist | | Attachment | |
| | | r | Sig. | r | Sig. |
| r | Sig. | | | | |
| Marital | | .166 | .084 | .152 | .113 |
| .199* | .037 | | | | |
| Maintenance | | | | | |
| r<.001**, <.05* | | | | | |

CONCLUSION

Couples face daunting challenges when they must live apart as various issues and disagreements tend to arise which could weaken their marriage. Maintaining a healthy and long-lasting marriage despite the distance revolves heavily around keeping their feelings of passion and trust in one another strong. The passion for each other and the relationship must remain of primary importance despite being separated. Such passion will be a protection against straying or developing an interest in other people. The same applies to having confidence in a partner and avoiding unnecessary suspicions. Being separated can easily undermine or compromise good marital relationships. Ultimately, ensuring undivided commitment and wholehearted devotion to a relationship is the strongest determinant of a stable marriage among couples separated by distance.

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ABDUL RASHID ABDUL AZIZ ialah Pensyarah Kanan dalam Program Kaunseling, di Fakulti Kepimpinan dan Pengurusan, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Bidang pengkhususan beliau adalah Psikologi Positif (Kesejahteraan Manusia), Kaunseling Psikologi, Psikospiritual dan Kaedah Penyelidikan.

JOKI PERDANI SAWAI ialah Pensyarah Kanan dalam Program Pembangunan Belia dan Komuniti, Fakulti Psikologi dan Pendidikan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Bidang pengkhususan beliau adalah Psikologi, Psikologi Industri dan Organisasi dan Ekologi Keluarga.

REZKI PERDANI SAWAI ialah Pensyarah Kanan dalam Program Kaunseling, di Fakulti Kepimpinan dan Pengurusan, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Bidang pengkhususan beliau adalah Psikologi, Psikologi Pendidikan dan Sains Sosial (Pengajian Belia).

MAHIRAH BINTI MASDIN (Ph.D) ialah Pembantu Penyelidik di Unit Penyelidikan Psikologi dan Kesihatan Sosial (UPPSiKS), Fakulti Psikologi dan Pendidikan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Bidang pengkhususan beliau adalah Psikologi Perkembangan dan Psikologi Positif.