

LONG-DISTANCE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS:
CONNECTIONS AMONG CONFLICT, UNCERTAINTY, MAINTENANCE,
AND MEDIATED COMMUNICATION USE

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Long-Distance Romantic Relationships: Connections Among Conflict,

Uncertainty, Maintenance, and Mediated Communication Use

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ABSTRACT

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Conflict, uncertainty, and relational maintenance have been frequent topics of study in long-distance relationships (LDRs); however, these concepts have not been studied concurrently. Interviews with 22 college students were used to study the influence of mediated versus face-to-face communication on conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs. Interview data indicate that distance, distrust, and frustration with mediated communication are significant sources of conflict in LDRs. Conflict is most often discussed via mediated communication, although couples overwhelmingly prefer face-to-face interaction. Uncertainty and subsequent conflict were highest when using text-based communication (i.e., text messaging and Facebook); the telephone was preferred to maintain LDRs.

Keywords: long-distance relationships, conflict, uncertainty, maintenance, uncertainty reduction theory, mediated communication

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INTRODUCTION

As an increasing number of dating couples strive to maintain their relationship while living apart due to career or academic commitments, the long-distance relationship has become an interpersonal phenomenon worthy of analysis. Romantic partners in long-distance relationships (LDRs) are forced to cope with infrequent face-to-face contact, a pleasure often taken for granted by those in geographically close relationships (GCRs). Although couples in LDRs have reported a greater sense of personal independence and ability to focus on personal goals as benefits of a long-distance union, feeling uncertain about the present and future and learning how to maintain the relationship from a distance are everyday challenges for LDR partners (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Meitzner & Lin, 2005; Sahlstein, 2006).

Uncertainty and maintenance research on LDRs has primarily focused on two elements that differentiate LDRs from GCRs: the uncertainty that stems from lack of face-to-face contact and the intrinsic challenges present in maintaining a relationship while living apart. While this study will include these same themes, it will also expand the concepts of uncertainty and maintenance in LDRs by including conflict and mediated communication. Specifically, the impact of mediated communication on conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs will be explored. This chapter will provide a brief background of LDR research, explain how uncertainty can fuel the use (or neglect) of maintenance practices and subsequently influence conflict, provide a preview of the current study, and present a theoretical and practical rationale for studying LDRs.

In recent years, the long-distance dating relationship has garnered significant attention because of its prevalence, particularly in young adult romantic relationships. As many as 75% of students will be involved in LDRs over the course of their college careers (Stafford, 2005). The majority of previous research has allowed participants to define whether or not they are in an LDR, gathering data from those who answered "yes" to a question similar to the following: "My partner lives far enough away from me that it would be very difficult or impossible to see him or her every day" (Guldner & Swensen, 1995, p. 316). Using this self-report measure, LDRs can exist for people who live only a few miles apart if they are unable to see one another each day.

Perceptions of negative outcomes surround LDRs, including higher rates of infidelity, lower levels of intimacy, and higher incidence of dissolution after partners transition from a GCR to LDR (Guldner, 2006). LDR dissolution, in particular, has gained significant attention (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Guldner, 2006; Helgeson, 1994; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006; Wilmot & Carbaugh, 1986). Wilmot and Carbaugh (1986) completed a longitudinal study on LDR couples. At the time of the Phase 1 survey, 89.7% of participants considered themselves in a serious relationship and saw a future with their partner. Phase 2 of the study, occurring 15 months after Phase 1, indicated that 55.6% of LDR couples had terminated their relationships. The authors note that while termination is not inevitable, "separation may have attendant hardships that produce slightly higher rates of dissolution" (p. 55).

In a similar study, 36% of couples in LDRs broke up over a three-month span (Helgeson, 1994). When compared to the dissolution rates of couples in GCRs, this number is high. In a longitudinal study of GCRs, 39% of couples ended their relationships over an 18-month period (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). In a similar study, 59% of couples dissolved their relationships over four years (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). A 36% dissolution rate over three months (Helgeson, 1994) and 55.6% dissolution rate over 15 months (Wilmot & Carbaugh, 1986) indicates couples in LDRs have higher rates of relational termination over shorter periods of time when compared to couples who are geographically close; those in LDRs have the tendency to break up sooner than those in GCRs.

LDR dissolution can be attributed to many factors, as the separation associated with LDRs creates a multitude of relational challenges. Uncertainty is a significant issue in many LDRs, as physical distance is a common source of uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). LDRs are “fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity” (Lydon, Pierce, & O’Regan, 1997, p. 105). Brashers (2001) explained the factors that influence uncertainty: “Uncertainty exists when the details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable, or probabilistic; when information is unavailable or inconsistent; and when people feel insecure in their own state of knowledge or the state of knowledge in general” (p. 478).

Using this definition, it is evident many of the conditions surrounding LDRs naturally foster uncertainty. Long-distance partners are unable to observe their partner’s behavior on a daily basis (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Guldner, 1996), have fewer romantic rituals due to infrequent face-to-face contact (Guldner, 2006;

Sahlstein, 2004), and are often unaware of a definite reunion date (Maguire, 2007). Most importantly, those in LDRs do not experience the face-to-face interaction that is the norm for GCRs (Guldner, 2006; Stafford, 2005). Uncertainty in LDRs can cause jealousy and decreased trust for partners (Dainton & Aylor, 2001), which can ultimately lead to relationship termination (Maguire, 2007).

Uncertainty in LDRs is inherently connected to maintenance in the relationship, as the level of uncertainty experienced by romantic partners may influence how – or if – they choose to maintain the relationship. Partners maintaining their relationship apart from one another have to adopt unconventional maintenance methods. For example, telephone calls and emails become necessary to maintain interpersonal contact in LDRs, while those in GCRs are able to depend on more frequent physical closeness (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Utz, 2007). Additionally, couples in LDRs may spend more time planning their visits whenever they are able to see each other, as careful planning ensures valuable time together will not be wasted (Sahlstein, 2006). Engaging in these maintenance practices can aid in reducing uncertainty in an LDR (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

LDRs are distinctive relationship types that can cultivate feelings of uncertainty and cause adjustments in relationship maintenance, and these unique and sometimes uncomfortable alterations in relationship habits can cause conflict (Guldner, 2006; Stafford, 2005). Being separated from a romantic partner can increase stress for both parties involved (Cameron & Ross, 2007). The financial resources needed to stay in touch, feelings of loneliness and insecurity, and slower

relationship progression can potentially cause conflict between LDR partners (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004).

When conflict does arise, LDR couples must decide whether they want to discuss the conflict through mediated communication (e.g., telephone, text messaging, e-mail, video chat, social networking websites) or wait until the next time they see one another; both options have advantages and disadvantages (Guldner, 2006; Sahlstein, 2004, 2006). Telephone conversations, the form of communication most frequently used by LDR couples, allow for instant feedback but can foster frustration due to lack of nonverbal communication (Guldner, 2006; Utz, 2007). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as video chat, however, permits valuable nonverbal cues. Text-based CMC (e.g., e-mail and instant messaging) may even be considered superior to face-to-face communication because the sender and receiver can control how they present themselves (Walther, 1996).

If a conflict must be discussed immediately, couples will likely choose to discuss the issue via mediated communication; however, couples may also value waiting to discuss certain conflicts until they are face-to-face (Sahlstein, 2006). Discussing conflict while together may be unpleasant, but face-to-face communication is recognized as the most candid form of communication (Sahlstein, 2006). While conflict has been frequently studied in face-to-face interpersonal contexts, the unique intricacies of LDR conflict due to couples' frequent separation have experienced little exploration. The challenges involved

with LDRs make this relationship type an apt model in which to study the interplay among conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance.

Rationale

Previous literature on LDRs has focused on conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance individually, neglecting to integrate these three potentially interrelated aspects of this distinct relationship type. This study will examine how these interpersonal factors function together in LDRs through interviews with those who are currently in an LDR or have been in the past three months. Examining the reasons why conflict is initiated in LDRs and whether conflict is initiated face-to-face or via mediated communication can provide insight into couples who continue to maintain their relationships while apart. Furthermore, exploring the connections among conflict, uncertainty, maintenance, and use of mediated communication within LDRs can illuminate the positive and negative effects of using technology to keep in touch.

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) will be the theoretical framework used in this study. Although URT has typically been used to analyze initial interactions, it can also be applied to established relationships (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). LDRs provide a particularly unique situation in which to study uncertainty, as partners are often forced to cope with uncertainty without seeing the nonverbal communication of their partner (Guldner, 2006). As underlying uncertainty can lead to several negative relational outcomes, couples may perform certain maintenance behaviors to reduce

uncertainty, indicating the potential connection among uncertainty, maintenance, and conflict (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

On a practical level, research on these three themes in LDRs can provide tools to aid students who are struggling to manage these relationships. Individuals distressed over their LDRs may seek professional help in coping with trust issues and managing the challenges associated with distance, and counselors must be equipped to assist these individuals (Meitzner & Lin, 2005; Roberts & Pistole, 2009). As an increasing number of couples choose to stay together while apart (Guldner, 2006), research is needed about the interpersonal implications of this choice.

Conclusion

Dealing with conflict, managing uncertainty, and maintaining the relationship as a whole are concerns of all romantic partners. These topics play an even larger role in LDRs, as couples strive to manage a relationship at a distance. Existing literature examines LDR conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance independently, while these relational issues may be interconnected. Furthermore, there is a need for further exploration on the role mediated communication plays in LDRs, as communicating via cell phone, text messaging, social networking sites, e-mail, or video chat may occur more frequently than face-to-face communication. Examining these factors in LDRs will provide additional knowledge about a rapidly growing relationship type and offer needed resources for those adapting to LDRs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LDRs are becoming increasingly common, especially for college students (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Cameron & Ross, 2007; Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, 2005). Understanding the relationship among conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs could aid in sustaining healthy relationships. This chapter provides an in-depth review of pertinent literature. First, the belongingness hypothesis is discussed. Second, the advantages and disadvantages of LDRs are provided. Third, insight into a variety of theoretical perspectives on LDRs will be offered. This theoretical review will emphasize uncertainty reduction theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese, 1975), the primary theoretical lens for this study. Fourth, uncertainty and maintenance literature provide rationale for the study of conflict within LDRs, as uncertainty can spark conflict and force couples to choose whether or not to maintain the relationship; therefore, uncertainty and maintenance literature will be discussed prior to conflict literature. The impact of face-to-face versus mediated communication in LDRs will be integrated throughout the chapter. The introduction of research questions will conclude this chapter.

Belongingness Hypothesis

One of the principal reasons LDRs are unique is the reduced frequency of face-to-face contact experienced by the people involved. LDRs often experience a negative bias because society believes romantic partners should maintain their relationship proximally and see each other frequently (Guldner, 2006; Stafford, 2005). LDR couples must cope with a deficiency in face-to-face interaction, which

goes against two key criteria for human relationships in the belongingness hypothesis. This hypothesis states, "Humans have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). More specifically, there are two criteria for relationships: first, people need regular, positive contact with their relational counterparts; second, people must recognize a union that is characterized by stability, care for the other, and extension of the relationship into the future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

LDRs have the potential to lack parts of both criteria in the belongingness hypothesis. Although interactions between LDR couples may be entirely positive, these interactions are often not regular. The frequency of face-to-face contact between LDR couples varies greatly. In a study of more than 200 LDRs, couples visited one another every 1.5 months on average, but the responses of 95% of the LDRs surveyed ranged from once a week to once every 4 months (Guldner, 2006). In addition to infrequent face-to-face interaction, LDR couples may be unsure about when they will reunite in the future. This uncertainty can have a profound effect on LDRs, and couples unable to designate a specific time for reuniting with their LDR partner were more distraught and less satisfied with their relationships (Maguire, 2007).

Although the belongingness hypothesis can be used as a historical framework denoting the distinctiveness of LDRs, today's long-distance couples have many forms of communication at their disposal that are not taken into account within this hypothesis. Face-to-face communication is the focus of the

belongingness hypothesis, and mediated communication is neglected. Various types of mediated communication are now used to maintain relationships while apart (Dainton & Aylor, 2002, Utz, 2007); the implications of using new technologies within LDRs deserves further study, as these findings could further define why LDRs are qualitatively different.

Advantages of LDRs

Although LDRs are considered an unorthodox relationship type, several studies have reported benefits associated with having a romantic relationship that involves separation. Having the freedom to put academic goals or career demands at the forefront, maintaining a sense of independence, and focusing on personal and professional goals were rated as benefits of LDRs (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). LDRs also provide a feeling of novelty and excitement for those involved and allow couples an opportunity to grow as separate individuals (Guldner, 2006). Apart from the personal benefits LDRs can afford, several relationship skills can be gained. Trust, patience, and stronger communication skills were reported by participants currently or previously in an LDR, along with non-physical intimacy and time management (Meitzner & Lin, 2005).

LDRs are generally considered more emotionally difficult than GCRs; however, LDRs and GCRs may be more similar than different. Studies have shown that those in LDRs enjoy the same levels of intimacy as those in GCRs (Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994). The levels of emotional, sexual, social, and intellectual intimacy were the same for both LDR and GCR couples (Dellmann-Jenkins et al., 1994). In a different study, ratings of satisfaction,

intimacy, trust, and commitment for those involved in LDRs were identical to those of their GCR counterparts (Guldner, 1995).

While couples may find benefits in their LDRs and have high ratings of personal satisfaction, some studies attribute these positive feelings to idealization (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Dainton & Aylor, 2001). Studies have consistently indicated identical levels of satisfaction in LDRs and GCRs (Guldner, 1995; Guldner, 2006), even though face-to-face contact is the primary indicator of satisfaction (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). High ratings of communication quality and overall relationship satisfaction may be due to idealization, as infrequent face-to-face contact facilitates unrealistic views of one's partner (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). When a person idealizes his or her partner, any faults the partner has are viewed positively rather than negatively in order to maintain a high level of confidence in the relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

Healthy levels of idealization may play a role in maintaining happy, lasting relationships (Murray et al., 1996); however, a couple transitioning from an LDR to a proximal relationship is twice as likely to dissolve their relationship than if they stay in a LDR (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). "Romanticized ideals dissipate with permanent proximity" (Stafford et al., 2006, p. 914).

Disadvantages of LDRs

Although several advantages are evident in LDRs, these relationships often entail higher levels of stress, loneliness, and other disadvantages (Stafford et al., 2006). LDR couples miss their partners significantly more than GCR couples (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Le et al., 2008). Le et al. (2008) found that the feeling of

missing a partner in an LDR was associated with loneliness. Other personal challenges can arise from missing a romantic partner, including threats to interpersonal security and minor depression (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Guldner, 2006). Additionally, romantic rituals are more difficult to create when living apart, which can make couples feel detached (Guldner, 2006). These feelings can be compounded by the financial anxiety imposed by LDRs, as the costs of travel and telephone bills may cause couples to see each other less frequently (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004).

Experiencing stress, negative feelings while apart, and financial hardship could cause couples to question their futures together. One of the greatest negative outcomes of LDRs is the high dissolution rate. Wilmot and Carbaugh (1986) found that 55.6% of LDR participants ended their relationships over a 15-month period. In a study by Stafford et al. (2006), 57.7% of participants dissolved their relationships while apart.

According to Lydon et al. (1997), the high dissolution rate in LDRs is based on a change in the level and type of commitment partners have for one another. *Enthusiastic commitment* is the “want to” form of commitment that exists when the partner feels optimistic and happy about the relationship (p. 105). *Moral commitment* exists when a person feels he or she simply should continue the relationship because of ethical reasons. Enthusiastic commitment is most often present when couples are proximal; moral commitment was predicted to occur in higher levels after college-age couples transition from a proximal to a long-distance relationship.

Transitioning from a GCR to LDR did increase relationship dissolution in this study, as 49% of LDR couples dissolved their relationships, compared to 14% of GCR couples. Enthusiastic commitment was present in GCRs to a much greater extent than in LDRs. Those who maintained their LDRs reported higher levels of moral commitment, signaling the importance of this type of commitment in maintaining LDRs. Those who stayed in LDRs, however, also associated moral commitment with burden, a negative mindset that increased the chance of dissolution.

Although LDRs can be difficult while separated, there are also interpersonal risks involved with coming together again. Couples who transitioned from LDRs to GCRs reported several disappointments involved with becoming proximal, including awareness of their partner's negative traits, a loss of independence, and higher levels of conflict (Stafford et al., 2006). Out of the couples who did stay together after becoming geographically close, 85% reported missing some facet of their LDRs (Stafford et al., 2006).

Theoretical Perspectives on LDRs

Although uncertainty reduction theory will be the primary theoretical lens for the current study, a variety of theories have been used to aid in understanding LDRs. Relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 1988) can be particularly helpful in understanding the joys and challenges LDR couples experience while together and apart. Relational dialectics theory examines the "pulling" that occurs in every interpersonal relationship due to the existence of conflicting needs. This theory recognizes the tensions that are evident in every interpersonal relationship on a

daily basis. Relational dialectics theory is appropriate in the study of LDRs because of the constant tension and negotiation that occurs from transitioning between together and apart (Sahlstein, 2004).

Sahlstein (2004) focused on three dialectics in LDRs: autonomy and connection, openness and closedness, and novelty and predictability. During their time together, couples reported several benefits that allowed them to accept their time apart, including a sense of interpersonal renewal, a reminder of their bond with their partners, and the formation of new memories. Additionally, couples experienced ways that “apart enables together.” Being able to appreciate their short time together, segmenting work and leisure activity, and feeling excited to see one another were all benefits of being apart that contributed to successful and enjoyable times together. Guldner (2006) also found that couples can enjoy aspects of being both together and apart, due to the varying emotions associated with coming together and separating again.

Disadvantages were also evident in time together and apart. For example, feeling let down after separating, missing face-to-face interaction after leaving one another, and experiencing an uncomfortable distinction between their lives apart and together were ways that “together constrains apart.” Similarly, “apart constrains together” as couples felt pressured to make their rare visits exciting, neglected other relationships when spending time with one another, and experienced uncertainty about future interactions (Sahlstein, 2004).

Previous research has also used high or low attachment as a theoretical lens for LDRs (Le et al., 2008; Roberts & Pistole, 2009). People with high attachment

and attachment anxiety are often co-dependent and want to be with their partner as much as possible; whereas, those with attachment avoidance and low attachment anxiety are autonomous and often emotionally distant. Low attachment avoidance equaled higher relationship satisfaction in LDRs, signaling that those who cope with the distance by becoming emotionally detached will have a more difficult time being separated from a romantic partner. “Indeed, impending separations from their romantic partner affect individuals’ psychological and behavioral responses depending on their specific attachment orientations” (Le et al., 2008). High attachment is impossible in LDRs, but those who are able to remain close through mediated communication and occasional visits have a higher chance of survival.

Examining LDRs through the lens of relational dialectics and attachment theory provides valuable insight into this relationship type. As this study will primarily examine the connections among conflict, uncertainty, maintenance, and mediated communication use in LDRs, uncertainty reduction theory will be used. The use of maintenance behaviors and the enactment of conflict can be influenced by the level of uncertainty in a relationship, so it is logical to use uncertainty reduction theory.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty is a significant issue that plagues LDRs. Uncertainty reduction theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) examines this phenomenon in interpersonal relationships. URT, which supposes that people try to reduce uncertainty as much as possible when first introduced to someone, lists three

stages of relationship development. The first stage is the *entry stage*, which is marked by guarded, polite questions. As individuals enter the second stage in relationship development, or the *personal stage*, questions about deeper issues surface. The personal stage usually does not occur until the individuals have experienced several entry-level interactions. The final stage, or the *exit stage*, occurs when both individuals determine whether or not the relationship merits continuation. Individuals weigh the benefits and costs of the relationship and choose if they want to end or continue the relationship.

URT posits that uncertainty can be present in three distinct interpersonal areas: the self, the partner, and the relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Brashers, 2001; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Questioning and doubting one's own behavior is considered *self uncertainty*. *Partner uncertainty* is present when it is impossible to foresee the other person's behavior when engaging in communication. Finally, *relationship uncertainty* exists when the present and future of the relationship is questioned (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). "In order for relationships to be maintained, relational partners must manage their uncertainty by constantly updating their knowledge of themselves, their partners, and their relationship" (Dainton & Aylor, 2001, p. 173).

Although URT has traditionally been applied to initial interactions, it has also been helpful in analyzing established relationships (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Those who have passed initial uncertainty phases in their relationships, however, are more likely to experience *relational uncertainty*, or "the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement

within close relationships” (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, p. 264). *Relational uncertainty* encompasses self, partner, and relationship uncertainty, distinguishing it from *relationship uncertainty*. When discussed under the umbrella of relational uncertainty, self uncertainty specifically pertains to one’s reservations about their contributions to the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). Relational uncertainty can stem from either *extrinsic factors*, such as distance between romantic partners or lack of support from shared social networks, or *intrinsic factors*, such as varying levels of commitment or trust (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). As distance is an extrinsic factor, some level of uncertainty is likely to occur in LDRs.

Several studies have used LDRs as a scope with which to view uncertainty (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Maguire, 2007; Sahlstein, 2006). LDR couples must often grapple with uncertainty, as relational uncertainty is present to a greater extent in LDRs than GCRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). While uncertainty can provide a sense of spontaneity (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), it can also be detrimental to a relationship by causing increased stress and lower levels of relational satisfaction (Maguire, 2007; Sahlstein, 2006).

Couples may engage in various behaviors to combat uncertainty. For instance, Sahlstein (2006) examined the relationship between LDR uncertainty and the tendency to make plans for future interactions. Becoming a long-distance couple is an event that increases uncertainty, and relational events that heighten uncertainty can affect whether or not the relationship continues in the future (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). The process of making plans can serve as a vehicle

for decreasing uncertainty in LDRs (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Sahlstein, 2006). For instance, LDR couples may make plans to discuss conflict during their time together to reduce uncertainty, as face-to-face contact allows for rapid input and nonverbal communication (Sahlstein, 2006). Couples may also consistently engage in everyday behaviors, such as calling their partner on the telephone, sending e-mail messages, and saying "I love you" in order to maintain the relationship and reduce uncertainty (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Guldner, 2006).

Uncertainty can also dictate overall satisfaction levels and the use of maintenance behaviors (Maguire, 2007; Sahlstein, 2006). Maguire (2007) compared the uncertainty levels of two different groups of individuals in LDRs; one group contained those who were certain about when and where they would reunite with their LDR partner, and the other contained those who were uncertain about reuniting. Those who were certain about reuniting with their partner in the same city expressed higher levels of satisfaction, lower levels of distress, and a greater emphasis on maintaining their relationship with their partner than those who were unsure about a reunion date, confirming the distinct role uncertainty plays in LDRs.

Maintenance

Relational maintenance is an important topic in all types of relationships. "All on-going relationships require maintenance" (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 220). Maintenance in LDRs is considered a challenge, as societal assumptions posit that close relationships can only be maintained with regular face-to-face contact and geographic proximity (Stafford, 2005). Uncertainty and maintenance in LDRs are

often related as uncertainty may make couples question whether or not to maintain the relationship (Maguire, 2007); the use of maintenance behaviors, however, can reduce uncertainty (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). LDR couples who were able to enjoy regular face-to-face contact were much more likely to employ several maintenance strategies when compared to other LDR couples who rarely saw one another, indicating a direct correlation between frequency of physical contact and maintenance behaviors (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

Relational maintenance can be defined in a variety of ways, including, “to keep a relationship in existence,” “to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition,” “to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition,” and “to keep a relationship in repair” (Dindia & Canary, 1993, p. 163). Five common maintenance behaviors are positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks (Stafford & Canary, 1991). These behaviors are “efforts expended to maintain the nature of the relationship to the actor’s satisfaction” (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 220).

Positivity involves seeing the relationship and partner optimistically. For example, communicating excitement about the future of the relationship is an expression of positivity. Openness is one’s willingness to share personal information with the other; freely divulging private details about oneself is an example of openness. Assurances are behaviors that emphasize love and loyalty, such as using affectionate phrases like “I love you.” Social networks are common friends who play a role in maintaining the relationship. Spending time with mutual acquaintances is an example of this behavior. Finally, couples share tasks

to maintain the relationship when work is distributed equitably, such as chores around the house.

LDR couples must adapt to maintaining their relationships differently from GCR couples, as those in LDRs may not be able to use key maintenance strategies, such as social networks and sharing tasks, on a daily basis (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Maintenance strategies, however, can be used to reduce uncertainty in LDRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). Relational uncertainty is positively associated with jealousy and decreased trust in LDRs. Conversely, uncertainty is negatively associated with maintenance behaviors (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). The use of assurances can be specifically helpful in reducing uncertainty and maintaining LDRs. "Assuring communication – saying things such as 'I love you' and emphasizing the future of the relationship – is both an uncertainty reduction strategy and a maintenance strategy" (Dainton & Aylor, 2001, p. 174).

Conflict

Uncertainty in LDRs can cause stress and subsequent conflict, which can affect whether the relationship is maintained in the future. Conflict strategies in interpersonal relationships have traditionally been separated into three categories. The *integrative* strategy emphasizes compromise and joint problem solving, *distributive* strategy privileges personal goals over the relationship, and *avoidance* ignores the presence of conflict (Canary & Cupach, 1988).

The successful management of conflict in interpersonal relationships has been related to trust, control, intimacy, and overall relational satisfaction (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Use of the integrative method has been linked to increased

communication satisfaction and higher levels of perceived communication competence (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001); however, partners often tend toward an avoidance response when facing relational conflict (Buysse et al., 2000). Use of the distributive approach has also been found to be dissatisfying in relationships (Canary et al., 2001).

The avoidance response to conflict, in particular, is an understudied and potentially fruitful topic within LDRs. Telephone calls, the most frequently used form of communication between LDR partners, offer an ideal opportunity for conflict avoidance when couples are apart. Nonverbal communication cannot be observed when speaking over the telephone, and this can make it difficult for couples to understand one another (Guldner, 2006). If a conflict must be discussed over the phone, one or both partners in an LDR could change the subject if the communication became confusing or emotionally charged; simply hanging up the phone to terminate the conversation is another method to avoid conflict or other negative conversations. Conflict avoidance can cause depression and relationship dissatisfaction in romantic partners (Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009; Londahl, Tverskoy, & D'Zurilla, 2005). Avoidance can also be bidirectional; avoidance may cause dissatisfaction, but people who are already dissatisfied in their relationships may also avoid talking about conflict-inducing topics (Afifi et al., 2009).

Conflict strategies and management in interpersonal relationships have been widely studied, but little literature has focused on conflict enacted and managed in a setting that is not face-to-face. Conflict that occurs in LDRs is

significantly different than that in GCRs, mainly because LDR couples are often forced to deal with conflict over mediated communication (Guldner, 2006). High volumes of conflict in LDRs were directly related to increased phone calls exchanged between the couple; however, partners had been found to automatically view their partners more negatively when speaking over the phone due to the lack of nonverbal cues, which often halts conflict resolution (Guldner, 2006). Telephone conversations, furthermore, were less likely to give partners a clear perception of the other's opinions and feelings and more likely to make partners feel misinterpreted (Guldner, 2006). While partners may choose to use the telephone as the main mode of communication because it is the richest, most immediate medium available when apart (Utz, 2007), there may be several problems involved with this type of communication. Conflict enacted via text messaging, instant messaging, and video chat has received little study and deserves further exploration.

Along with managing conflict when away from one another, LDR couples must also decide how to handle conflict in their limited time together. LDR couples may choose to avoid conflict while together in order to fill their visits with positive, quality time (Guldner, 2006; Sahlstein, 2004). Conversely, couples may also favor handling conflicts in the times they are together, as face-to-face communication is perceived as the most honest context (Sahlstein, 2006).

Research Questions

A discussion of previous research has identified the need for further exploration of conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance via mediated and face-to-face

communication in LDRs. First, the reasons for conflict in LDRs will be studied. Second, the occurrence of conflict initiation in face-to-face versus mediated communication settings will be examined. Third, the impact of mediated communication on conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs will be explored.

RQ1: Why is conflict initiated in LDRs?

RQ2: How is conflict in LDRs generally initiated, specifically in terms of face-to-face or mediated communication?

RQ3: How are conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs related to the use of mediated forms of communication?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design involving undergraduate participants was used to answer the three research questions. First, the participants will be explained in greater detail. Second, the research design will be described, following by an in-depth explanation of how the data was analyzed.

Participants

Twenty-four participants were recruited from an Interpersonal Communication course at a mid-sized Midwest university; however, 22 interviews were used for analysis, as two were discarded due to a language barrier. This convenience sample is appropriate for this study because 75% of college students will engage in an LDR over the course of their academic careers (Stafford, 2005). Participants were either currently involved in an LDR or had been in an LDR within the past three months. Those who recently exited an LDR were considered valuable as they had a clear memory of their LDR and insight into reasons for relationship dissolution. In accordance with Guldner and Swensen (1995), participants were able to self-determine whether their relationship qualified as an LDR.

All participants were heterosexual. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, and all participants were between the ages of 18 and 23. The majority of the participants were from the U.S.; the highest number of participants were from the Midwest, and two participants were international students from Asia.

This study did not gather perspectives from both partners currently or previously in an LDR; only one partner was interviewed. As the phenomenon to be studied is “long-distance” relationships, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to arrange an interview time with both partners in the relationship. Further, it is not uncommon to study one perspective in relationships, especially when examining subjective experiences (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Johnson & Rusbalt, 1989). As the goal of the study was to understand individual perspectives on LDRs, rather than comparing and contrasting perspectives within couples, it was appropriate to gather insight from one member of the relationship.

First and last names and e-mail addresses were gathered from the participants during in-class recruitment. Participants signed up for an interview time and were contacted by the researcher via e-mail with a reminder about their requested time. During interviews, participants were only identified by their first name; pseudonyms were assigned in all final transcripts and in the final write-up to protect anonymity. Interviews were conducted in a private room at the university the participants attend.

Research Design

In order to answer the three research questions regarding the interdependence of conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs, a thematic analysis of interviews with participants was conducted. A theme is “a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style; participants

were asked several open-ended questions with the possibility for follow-up questions. Interviews allow participants to describe their relationships in their own words and explain the role separation plays in their relationships (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Interviews generally ranged from 45-60 minutes in length.

During the semi-structured interview, participants were first asked several general questions about their LDR, including the duration of the relationship to date if they were currently engaged in an LDR or the duration of the entire LDR if the participant had dissolved their relationship within the past three months. All subsequent interview questions were asked in present or past tense based on whether the participant was still in an LDR or had recently ended an LDR. After learning the status of the participant's LDR, the participant was asked about other basic characteristics of the LDR, including how far away the partner lives, how often the couple sees one another, and what type of communication the couple typically uses to stay in touch (e.g., telephone, text messaging, e-mail, instant messaging, video chat, etc.).

After several background questions were asked, participants were asked to describe one conflict they had with their partner. Follow-up questions allowed the participant to discuss the mode of communication used to initiate the conflict, the impact the conflict had on relational maintenance, and the influence of uncertainty on the relationship. These questions were designed to let participants first talk in-depth about the individual impact of conflict, uncertainty, maintenance, and particular communication modes in their LDRs and then make connections between these aspects.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Recorded interviews yielded 226 pages of typed, single-spaced data. For the complete semi-structured interview protocol, please see the Appendix.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were transcribed, inductive analysis of the transcripts commenced. Several phases were involved in this analysis. First, all transcripts were read thoroughly in order to become familiar with the data. Next, *open coding* occurred. *Open coding* occurs when “data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102).

Line-by-line analysis was used during the open coding process. This type of analysis involves breaking down data by phrases or even single words (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Going through each transcript line-by-line is the first step in developing *concepts*, or noteworthy ideas that emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These concepts were labeled with identifying terms. If a concept appeared after several transcripts were read, previously read transcripts were re-read to explore whether this concept had occurred before, applying the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). A comprehensive list of concepts was generated after all transcripts were read.

After all concepts were labeled in the transcripts, these concepts were grouped into *categories*, or broad terms uniting concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When necessary, sub-categories were used. Sub-categories expand on categories by answering when, where, or why (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, a

potential category of “telephone conflict” might have a subcategory of “following a long separation,” providing the specific time telephone conflict occurs.

Determining overarching categories and sub-categories increases the number of concepts and organizes important information into a hierarchy of specific terms.

Following open coding, *axial coding* was performed. Axial coding is “the act of relating categories to sub-categories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Axial coding allows for relationships to be discovered among categories. Across categories and sub-categories, *phenomenon* were determined; phenomenon consist of ideas that are consistently repeated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Categories and sub-categories that are repeated or related were often merged into a singular theme that encompassed similar ideas.

Selective coding using *sensitizing concepts* was the third phase of data analysis. This study used conflict, uncertainty reduction theory, and relational maintenance as sensitizing concepts, or concepts that “draw attention to important features of social interaction” (Bowen, 2006, p. 3). Using sensitizing concepts to code allowed any categories or sub-categories that were not previously identified through open and axial coding to emerge.

The three coding processes – open, axial, and selective – occasionally overlapped, as new concepts emerged throughout each type of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcripts were analyzed until there were no new concepts or categories found in the data, or when theoretical saturation had been reached.

RESULTS

Interviews with 22 participants were used in this study; 11 participants were males and 11 were females. Fourteen participants were currently in an LDR, and 8 had been in an LDR in the past three months. One participant was engaged to her long-distance partner. As all participants were college students, the majority were separated from their partners because they attended different universities. The distance separating partners ranged from 60 miles to over 700 miles. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the distances separating participants from their LDR partners.

Table 1. Distance Separating Current or Former LDR Couples

<u>Distance</u>	<u>Number of Participants</u>
<u>< 100 miles</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>101-300 miles</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>301-500 miles</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>501-700 miles</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>>700 miles</u>	<u>7</u>

Research Question #1: Sources of Conflict

The first research question addressed why conflict is initiated in LDRs. Three major themes emerged in answer to this question. First, physical separation will be discussed as a source of conflict. Distrust due to relationships with members of the opposite sex will be described as a second source of conflict, and third, frustration with the mode of communication used in the relationship will conclude the discussion on conflict sources.

Physical Separation. Being separated from one another was a prominent source of conflict in participants' relationships. Being apart often caused

participants to argue about arbitrary topics before realizing the real cause for the conflict was their desire to see one another. Physical separation was also the catalyst for the other two primary sources of conflict in LDRs: distrust due to relationships with members of the opposite sex and frustration over mode of communication. Participants noted that if their relationship was proximal, distrust would decrease and conflict would not arise due to reliance on mediated communication; however, distance was an inescapable aspect of LDRs.

Distance was deemed a persistent, unavoidable cause for arguments between partners while apart, as referenced by Anna, Miranda, and Kristina. “We complain, most of the time we complain about the distance. It’s the biggest issue that we have” (Anna: 267-268). “There were lots of times we got in arguments about it. About the distance. And that didn’t help either, like, arguing about it. But it was almost inevitable” (Miranda: 174-175). “If you were to take a look at all the conflicts that we would have, and if you were to ... dissect all of the conflicts that we would have, it would probably relate to us being apart” (Kristina: 264-266).

In addition to the distance being a general annoyance, the separation made it impossible for couples to touch and console one another; this lack of contact eventually led to the dissolution of Daniel’s LDR. “It basically got to the point where she’s the kind of person that needs somebody there all the time, just for comfort and stuff, just to know that they’re there for her. And like, I couldn’t do that” (283-285). Savanna expressed similar frustration. “I’m kinda a girl that needs, like, reassurance a lot. [...] [It’s] kinda hard for me at times, to not like, be face-to-face and have him say the things he says” (130, 132-133).

Arguments often stemmed from dissatisfaction related to being apart, and participants noted that the overwhelming feeling of missing one another was an underlying source of conflict.

Sometimes when we argue I'm just like, I think it's 'cause we're so far apart. We don't get to see each other as much as we want, and we don't get to like, just be with each other, talk. You know, it's just not like the ideal situation, and so that frustrates us. I think that, like, stresses us out a little bit more. So then we just, like, argue. But I think that is like, the root of some of our arguments. (Rachel: 221-226)

Rachel continues by saying, "It was distance that kind of caused a lot of arguments ... like sometimes if we start arguing ... he'll just be like, well, I just really miss you. You know, he's frustrated that we can't be together or something" (530-534).

When one partner was unable to follow through with visiting the other, conflict ensued. Bethany and her long-distance fiancé had hoped to see one another during a long weekend, but her fiancé eventually decided against the visit due to the financial strain of buying a plane ticket.

I was very much struggling with the distance. [...] I found a ticket on some like college airfare website for like \$450. And I was like, you can come. We can book it today and I can see you in two days ... and he still said no. And that really hurt. And I wanted to see him and he didn't come. (277, 318-321)

Jesse related a similar situation, and referenced the conflict that ensued because of his separation from his girlfriend.

There have been times when she's gotten mad at me because I haven't come home for about three weeks, and it's because it came down to finals week. She's like, why couldn't you spend a day with me? It's basically being deprived of each other, I would say. (101-104)

In a similar situation, Miranda's former boyfriend became evasive when the two discussed his next visit.

I argued and said ... the topic about him coming home. Like, when are you coming home? And every time it was something different, like, oh, a couple more weeks. And like, a couple weeks would pass by. Oh, a couple more weeks. We just kept arguing about when he was gonna come home. (198-201)

Distrust Due to Relationships with Members of the Opposite Sex. Lack of trust was an issue that frequently caused conflict in the relationships of interview participants. "The distance kind of makes you lose trust, makes you a little paranoid, I would say" (Jesse: 199-200). The majority of participants mentioned a general sense of distrust in their current or former LDRs, but distrust due to their partner's relationships with members of the opposite sex was a specific source of recurring conflict.

Participants experienced a great deal of anxiety over the possibility their significant other was having a romantic relationship with another member of the opposite sex while the couple was apart. The lack of trust was often due, in part, to

the distance separating the couples. Each member in the relationship was unable to monitor the day-to-day activities of the other.

Participants yearned to be involved in their partner's life on a face-to-face basis, and noticed lower levels of trust when absent from their partner. For instance, "I was always wanting to know what he was doing" (Miranda: 399). Elly noted a change in trust from her boyfriend after the two became separated.

"Clearly something changed when we got farther apart. He didn't trust me as much, for some unknown reason. Probably just the distance" (323-325).

Miranda's former boyfriend had jealous tendencies when the two were face-to-face, and losing this luxury increased his jealousy. "He was a really jealous guy. At first he wasn't, but then, um...obviously he's not here to see what's going on. It just got worse" (360-362).

Additionally, Miranda's former boyfriend became agitated if a male voice was audible while the couple was talking over the phone. "He'd call me while I was with my friends all the time just to make sure I was just with girls ... if he heard a guy in the background, he would get mad" (353-356). Similarly, Miranda herself had a lack of trust about her boyfriend's actions while they were apart. "He usually did call and text, so when he didn't, I'd be like, what is he doing? Like, is he with another girl?" (362-363). Adam also felt trust issues arise whenever his former girlfriend socialized with others.

I was always thinking about it. You know, she'd say, I'm gonna go to a party.

It's like, well, who are you going to party with? Where are you guys going?

All that kinda stuff, you know, it was like a 20 question ordeal. (221-224)

The mere probability of their partner becoming involved in a romantic relationship caused participants to experience lower levels of trust. Even if one member in the relationship communicated with the other about his or her plans to socialize with members of the opposite sex, the other continued to feel distrust. "If he was like, I'm gonna go out with these girls, I'd be like, why? They don't need to be going out with you. That causes a lot of problems, me being jealous" (Renaë: 135-137). Adam experienced the same feelings as Renaë.

She could say she's going here, she could say she's going there with these people, but she really could be going right over to the guy she was with the other night. And I don't know that, and I can't prove it. So that was my biggest, you know, fear as far as instilling trust back in people. (243-246)

Jennifer worried about her boyfriend's interactions with other women, but placed her feelings of mistrust on the women themselves instead of on her boyfriend.

No matter how much you care about someone, like, you don't trust other people. [...] And like, I don't know what these girls looked like. I didn't know if they were wearing really low-cut shirts, or like, really tight pants. And it was just like, hard to trust them. (492, 500-502)

Lastly, participants transitioning from high school to college experienced additional feelings of mistrust due to the adjustment of new environments and meeting new people. Elly and Doug referenced mistrust from their partners as they began their college careers and moved from a GCR to an LDR. Elly's boyfriend questioned her modesty.

He went on this like, freak out mode or something like that when I left for school. That automatically I was going to turn into some, like, scandalous ... I don't know, stripper once I got to school. And I was just gonna go around flaunting myself everywhere or something like that. So the extra distance freaked him out a lot. (319-322)

After signing up for a salsa dance class during his first year of college, Doug's girlfriend subtly expressed distrust.

I could always sense when she didn't trust me. She didn't say that she thought I might be taking the class so I could meet girls. But as soon as she asked the question ... I knew what she meant by it. But yeah, trust was a huge issue. I could not deal with not being trusted. (220-224)

Kristina corroborated Doug's thoughts by summarizing the importance of trust in LDRs.

I would say that a long-distance relationship wouldn't work without trust. I mean, trust pretty much plays a huge part in any relationship, but maybe a little bit more emphasis on trust would be needed in a long-distance relationship, since you're lacking in like, face-to-face communication. (333-336)

Frustration with Mode of Communication. The third theme that emerged with regard to sources of conflict in LDRs was a sense of frustration with the mode of communication used by the couple. The lack of nonverbal communication was a major stressor in participants' relationships.

"Communication can kind of, uh, break down because so many misunderstandings

are blown out of proportion because all you have is, uh, words to describe things” (Doug: 71-72). Bethany shared Doug’s sentiment.

If he’s talking and he’s happy but let’s say something he’s doing is bothering me, he can’t see the disappointment in my face. So it’s like I have to find ways to like, verbally communicate to him that I’m upset with him. (158-161)

Daniel and Rachel also experienced frustration and subsequent conflict due to lack of nonverbal communication in their relationships while apart. “Keeping the relationship on good standards...that was really hard, because like, you know, whenever I talked to her and something was bothering her I could tell by her voice, but I couldn’t see what she was doing” (Daniel: 296-299). Rachel echoed,

You have no nonverbal stuff. Just like facial expressions, like how you look. So he can’t pick up on any of that, so I feel like you have to ... it’s easier to just look upset than to actually say you’re upset. ‘Cause if I tell him I’m upset, then I think he gets more mad. (388-391)

Texting, in particular, was a source of conflict in LDRs. Misinterpretations abounded while using this form of communication to stay in touch. For example, Andrew’s girlfriend misunderstood his neutral responses to her text messages: “Sometimes she thinks I’m upset when I’m really just sleeping. Or she would think, um, I’m like bothered by something when I really don’t care” (76-77). Rachel was unsure whether or not her boyfriend was being sarcastic in his text messages.

With like, texting ... he’s a sarcastic person, and sometimes when he says something ... if it was like in a text message, he doesn’t really show that he’s

being sarcastic, and then I might get upset. So I think that's a problem, like things get misinterpreted. (143-147)

When a conflict did arise, participants found it difficult to resolve the problem via mediated communication.

That's where it got really old, conversations over the phone, like when something wasn't going right and just talking about it over the phone and not being able to see them face-to-face. And that's where most of the trouble came from, and that's pretty much why it ended. (Daniel: 262-265)

There was a long process involved with conflict resolution via phone or text messaging; this was due, in part, to the lack of face-to-face contact and nonverbal communication. This process was referenced by both Jennifer and Adam.

It's really hard to resolve something on the phone when you can't see them. You can't like, hold them. Especially through texting, it's the worst. Like we could just like, not get it resolved and it wouldn't matter 'cause we can't see each other, so there was no way it would like, get fixed. (Jennifer: 101-104)

According to Adam, "When it was an argument, it wasn't fixed within the day, or the hour. It was a process. Like it was a week's long of instant messaging, and talking on the phone, and text messaging, and whatnot" (126-128).

Research Question #2: Conflict Initiation and Mode of Communication

Research question two addressed whether those in LDRs initiated conflict while face-to-face or via mediated communication. This question was partially answered by research question one, as participants often referenced the mode of communication used when talking about the cause of the conflict. Additionally,

frustration with mode of communication was a common cause for conflict, which offered insight into research question two.

The vast majority of participants chose to initiate conflict over some form of mediated communication. Overwhelmingly, the phone was the preferred mode of communication to initiate conflict. The lack of time spent face-to-face was the main factor that influenced participants' decision to initiate conflict via mediated communication; participants were not able to see one another frequently, and were not willing to carry the burden of conflict until the next time the couple could have a face-to-face conversation. "I talk to him way more than I see him ... I wouldn't let something bother me for two weeks until I saw him. I would wanna get it off my chest. I'm not gonna wait" (Rena: 177-179).

Ben and Sara referenced their choice to initiate conflict over the phone. "If it's something bad enough or something important enough to talk about ... well, at least during the school year, it's so long between each time we see each other, generally we call each other about it" (Ben: 264-266). The telephone was the favored mode of communication to initiate conflict due to the ability to hear the partner's tone of voice.

When he's on the phone, I mean, the whole, like, hearing what he's saying and being able to hear his voice and the emotion behind it. Like, you can tell if they're upset about something a lot quicker than if ... I mean, you can cover it up in a text or e-mail or something. (Sara: 118-121)

E-mail and instant messaging were occasionally used to initiate conflict, but participants generally expressed a feeling of distaste toward handling conflict via

text messaging. Andrew and his girlfriend even had a specific rule prohibiting conflict initiation through text messaging.

If we get in an argument, we call. Because texting is not good. That's like our little rule. If we argue about something, we have to talk. If we are in the same town, we have to see each other, 'cause she could say stuff over text she shouldn't say. (126-128)

Confusion surrounding the meaning of text messages often sparked conflict; therefore, partners chose not to initiate serious conversations over text messaging. "Things aren't as clearly, um, communicated through text messaging. [...] There's ways that texting can be misinterpreted or something through that, which, I mean, could potentially cause conflict" (Kristina: 82-84). Brady echoed Kristina's hesitation toward text messaging. "We've had fights over misinterpretation of texts, which led me not to use text messages much with her" (42-43).

Although participants most frequently initiated conflict over the phone, they preferred speaking face-to-face. "It's a lot easier to fix a problem like that when you're speaking to a person, I think" (Adam: 131-132). However, since speaking face-to-face wasn't often possible, many participants re-visited the conflict the next time they were able to see their partners.

If we have a conflict, I would feel more comfortable talking face to face, so ... we did talk about it [conflict] over the phone, but then when we actually got to see each other, I guess we talked more in depth about it. (Kristina: 113-115)

Research Question #3: Conflict, Uncertainty, Maintenance, and Mediated Communication

The third and final research question sought to discover how conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs is related to the use of mediated communication. These relationships will be discussed below. First, maintenance will be discussed, followed by uncertainty and conflict. Participants first understood their use of mediated communication in terms of maintenance; various types of mediated communication were needed to keep in touch with distant partners. Although the maintenance utility was evident in interviews with the vast majority of participants, they also referenced the uncertainty and subsequent conflict that resulted from using mediated communication.

Maintenance and Mediated Communication. Participants used several forms of mediated communication on a daily basis, including telephone calls, text messaging, instant messaging, e-mails, and video chat. Using these forms of communication as a method to stay in touch on a daily basis and maintain the relationship was consistently emphasized by participants. “Very rarely ... do we not talk to each other during the day, and if we didn’t, like, call each other at night, we’ve texted each other. There’s some sort of communication throughout the day every day” (Sara: 55-57). “I liked talking to her daily. It was very rare that we would go a day without talking. Just hearing her voice was, I don’t know, significant” (Brady: 87-88).

Participants appreciated the benefits of communicating via mediated communication while apart, as this contact allowed partners to get to know one another and maintain the relationship on a deeper level.

Our only way to spend time together is to communicate ... I've gotten to know him. When you're dating in person, you spend a lot of wasted time, like, at a movie, or hanging out with friends. Whereas, we've had so much time to get to know each other and talk about everything. (Bethany: 123-126)

Sara also felt a strong connection to her boyfriend during their conversations on the telephone.

You have to make the phone conversations as, like, deep and meaningful as you would if you were sitting beside each other. Sometimes it's almost more because when you're with him, you don't think about having the really big conversations, because you'll just do it later, tomorrow when you see him. Trying to think of something to talk about, usually those big topics come up pretty quick on the phone. (471-476)

The phone was the primary means of communication used to maintain participants' relationships. Although texting was also very popular among participants and their distant partners, the phone offered the vocal inflection and emotion that was absent from text. Ben expressed his desire to call his girlfriend more in order to reap the benefits of phone conversations.

I think I need to call her more. [She] and I need to talk on the phone more, just because it's nice to hear that person's voice, be able to actually laugh at each other instead of just writing 'LOL' on a text message or something, where you can actually get some emotion from them. (592-595)

He went on to say, “You need to talk to them more over the phone so that you can convey these feelings and you can hear them conveying feelings to you rather than just saying, ‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ on a text message” (599-601).

Bethany recognized her fiancé’s consistent phone calls as a sign of love and commitment to maintaining the relationship. “His phone calls are so dedicated. He never goes a day without calling me, and he’s always very sweet about that. I think even his dedication in his phone calls shows how much he loves me” (563-565). The positive phone calls shared between Renae and her boyfriend helped maintain their loving relationship. “There’s hardly ever that we hang up the phone not, like, happy. [...] Almost every night it’s like, good night, I love you. I mean ... I’m always like, am pretty happy, I guess” (398, 400-401).

Uncertainty and Mediated Communication. Uncertainty was mitigated by phone calls, as participants were able to hear their partner’s voice; however, uncertainty increased over text-based forms of communication. Specifically, the use of Facebook and text messaging increased uncertainty for partners in LDRs. Put simply, “Facebook ruins lives” (Jennifer: 507). The overall negative attitude toward Facebook was due to the uncertainty experienced by participants when they saw members of the opposite sex writing on their partner’s wall.

If there’s like a girl who writes on his Facebook wall, [...] I’m like, well, what is she talking about? Why is she saying that to you? Or, like, if I see pictures of him with like, other girls, I’m like, well, who’s she? Why is she hugging you like that? (Renae: 130-133)

Renaë's uncertainty about her partner's female acquaintances and the future of their relationship was a concern shared by Brian's girlfriend, who expressed uncertainty after seeing unknown women post messages to Brian's wall.

You know, people write on my [Facebook] wall and stuff. And like, she's not with me all the time. She's like, who is this and what are you doing? What's this, what's that? That was a problem, Facebook, I guess. (66-68)

The public messages posted on Facebook – often by members of the opposite sex that partners had never met – fostered uncertainty and worry within participants. Similarly, text messaging caused uncertainty, mainly because of the lack of emotion provided in this type of communication.

Even though you're in constant contact, you're not really saying much, or there's no real emotion behind it. I've always felt that even though texting is easy and I do it a lot with her, that it's not as good if a thing, like if you're trying to explain something. (Ben: 117-119)

Ben continued by mentioning his girlfriend's confusion over his text messages. "There've been a couple times every now and then where I've said something like, I've said too much in a text or didn't say enough and she gets confused or angry with something I said" (143-145).

Participants also became uncertain when the tools used to communicate emotion in text messaging – such as emoticons and the "LOL" (laughing out loud) acronym – were absent. Phone calls served to reduce uncertainty considerably, as naturally occurring vocal inflection easily and quickly communicated emotion.

It's pretty clear over the phone. A lot clearer than texting. Because one time I wouldn't 'LOL' and she would think I was being serious. But talking, we never have a problem talking over the phone. It's because she can hear my tone of voice and stuff like that, and I can hear her tone. (Andrew: 261-264)

Jesse voiced his uncertainty over his girlfriend's use (or lack thereof) of emoticons. "When she leaves out that little smiley face or if she puts it in every text, I kind of wonder what to think of that" (Jesse: 158-159).

Conflict and Mediated Communication. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to discuss conflict via phone or video chat, as these two means of mediated communication allowed partners to hear each other's tone of voice; additionally, video chat allows partners to see one another and communicate nonverbally.

Make sure you do it [resolve conflict] over the phone or Skype video chat or something, because text is cold. Misunderstandings happen ... and understand, too, that then the other person has longer to formulate an argument to completely destroy yours, and there's no emotion there. (Doug: 473-477)

Although participants recognized the need to communicate over the phone or video chat to maintain the relationship and reduce uncertainty in times of conflict, many participants resorted to a text-based form of communication after first discussing the conflict over the phone or video chat. Even though text messaging was related to uncertainty often caused conflicts, participants favored

the lack of emotion available in text after discussing an emotionally charged conflict.

After that [a conflict], we just started texting. I didn't really wanna talk on the phone with her like that, 'cause all she would do was talk about other girls. I don't have time for that, that's too much stress. (Brian: 141-143)

Miranda disliked the instant feedback provided through the phone in times of conflict, and favored text messaging as it gave her time to think.

We were more inclined to argue if we were talking on the phone. Whereas text, like I noticed in text we got along better. Just because, you know, you had time to think it through, to be like ... like you had more time to think about it and just calm down. Whereas, you know, on the phone, you're like going back and forth right away. (182-186)

Adam expressed similar feelings.

We would call each other, have a 2-minute conversation, one of us would blow up, and that'd be the end of it. And we wouldn't talk, you know, for the rest of the day, probably the next day, but we would talk online. You know, like, just because it was easier to not argue, you know, typing things out, I guess. (153- 157)

Additional Analysis

An unexpected trend emerged in the data regarding the way participants handled conflict in their LDRs. If partners discussed conflicts via mediated communication while apart, one partner would usually concede and let the other "win" the conflict in order to avoid further discussion.

A lot of times in the beginning I – and probably throughout the whole relationship – I was usually very apologetic because it was probably my fault. Or I, um, came to assume that most of the time it was my fault. [...] But I would have a general tendency to say I'm sorry even if it wasn't my fault. (Brady: 226-228, 236-237)

Renaë also conceded to her partner to avoid conflict.

Sometimes I'll hang up the phone, just like take a few minutes, and I'll call him back and be like, OK, I'm over it. I'm not mad. Even though I'm not really over it, but I'm just gonna drop it. (193-195)

Sara referenced her boyfriend's tendency to concede in conflict while they were apart. "That's [handling conflict] hard too because it's usually over the phone, and then it's like, he's like, 'Yeah, it's fine, I don't care.' I'm like, 'OK, I know you're lying...'" (164-166).

"Backing down" did not lead to eventual resolution and instead contributed to recurring conflicts. "If somebody apologizes, it just means you're tired to fighting, let's make up. And then, the same thing happens a month later" (Andrew: 163-165). Miranda expressed a similar trend between her and her former boyfriend.

We always seemed to get in arguments and then kind of like, resolve them. [...] We'd just be like, you know what, OK. We can do this. Like, you just gotta calm down. It'd be resolved. But then, you know, we knew it was gonna happen again. Like it was only temporary that we'd be OK with it again. (259-263)

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study on conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in LDRs yielded new and interesting insight into this unique relationship type, while also confirming and expanding upon previous research on this topic. This chapter will explore the themes discovered in interviews with participants who were currently in an LDR or had been in one in the past three months. Following a detailed examination of the results and a discussion of the implications of this study, the limitations of the study and areas for future research will be reviewed.

Sources of Conflict

Physical separation, distrust due to relationships with members of the opposite sex, and frustration with the mode of communication used were the three predominant sources of conflict in participants' LDRs. Distrust and frustration with the mode of communication used stemmed from being apart. Participants noted that missing their romantic partner was an underlying cause for the vast majority of conflicts within their relationships. For example, the couple may have started arguing about an obscure topic and eventually realized that the source of the argument was their desire to see the other. Failing to acknowledge that conflict could be due to the emotional toll imposed by being apart offers an important implication. Avoiding the true source of the conflict – missing one another – allowed partners to circumvent their feelings and place their anger about separation on an unrelated topic. Both partners knew that missing one another was a painful and ever-present struggle in their LDRs, but avoiding this topic prevented them from facing this reality. "Avoidance can shield people from

information that is overwhelming and distressing and can provide escape from distressing certainty by maintaining uncertainty” (Brashers, 2001, p. 483).

When plans were changed and participants’ partners were unable to visit, an increased feeling of “missing” was experienced by participants and conflict often ensued. Similar to initiating conflict because of missing one another, fighting about broken plans is rooted in uncertainty. Anticipating future visits can help partners cope with being apart (Sahlstein, 2004), and the collapse of plans means a future reunion is once again unknown. Making plans has been found to reduce uncertainty in LDRs (Sahlstein, 2006), and this finding explains the distress experienced by participants when planned visits did not occur.

Conflict was often initiated because of distrust due to the relationships one or both partners had with members of the opposite sex, and this distrust was a product of the physical separation. In previous research, trust has been frequently determined as a positive outcome of LDRs rather than a source of conflict (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Meitzner & Lin, 2005; Sahlstein, 2004); partners committed to maintaining a positive, healthy LDR experienced a growth in trust. For the participants in this study, trust decreased due to lack of face-to-face contact and subsequent uncertainty.

Participants were unable to see the men and women their romantic partners were socializing with; therefore, they expressed distrust and uncertainty about partners’ current or potential contact with members of the opposite sex. Even if partners communicated their intent to go to a party or other social event where members of the opposite sex would be present, uncertainty was

unavoidable because participants often knew nothing about these “friends”; their appearances, actions, and intentions were unknown. Distrust and uncertainty was also linked to the mere potential that participants’ partners could become involved in a romantic relationship with a member of the opposite sex. In support of these findings, Planalp & Honeycutt (1985) found “competing relationships” caused uncertainty and increased the possibility of negative relational consequences.

Although commitment and trust may ultimately become positive outcomes of LDRs, this outcome is dependent on partners’ ability to survive the natural uncertainty and possible distrust that results from being apart. Distrust had been a source of conflict throughout the LDRs of most participants; some relationships crumbled under the stress of distrust, while some emerged without injury.

Ultimately, distrust was linked to uncertainty, and whether or not partners could cope with this uncertainty determined the continuation of the relationship. This link between trust and uncertainty is not novel; Dainton and Aylor (2001) found the presence of trust was a powerful tool for uncertainty reduction in LDRs.

Participants’ preoccupation with lack of face-to-face contact and lack of trust, however, has been disputed: Stafford et al. (2006) found that partners experienced more distrust about their partners becoming romantically involved with others *after* moving closer together, as partners were able to see the phone calls and interactions the other had with members of the opposite sex. The brief time participants were able to spend with their partners was most often devoid of distrust and uncertainty, but these feelings could possibly occur when partners are face-to-face for longer periods of time.

The third source of LDR conflict as identified by participants was frustration with the mode of communication used to keep in touch. This frustration stemmed from the lack of nonverbal communication provided by most types of mediated communication. Although frustration with various types of mediated communication was cited, texting was specifically indicative of conflict. The impact of texting on LDRs has not been studied; telephone and e-mail use have been the main topics of study in previous research on LDRs and mediated communication (Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Utz, 2007). Although e-mail and text messaging are similar in that they are both text-based forms of communication devoid of vocal inflection and nonverbal communication, one could argue that they are quite different and illicit varying responses from recipients. Text messages are often very brief and do not contain the depth of information that is possible via e-mail. Additionally, word choice and overall meaning may not be thoughtfully considered in a response to a text message, whereas e-mails are valued due to the ability for individuals to carefully compose their responses (Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Utz, 2007).

Furthermore, e-mail is an asynchronous medium, so individuals can reply to the message at their convenience (Utz, 2007). While text messaging could be an asynchronous medium, as individuals are not required to immediately reply, it has become a synchronous medium that mimics the instant feedback available in telephone calls. The vast majority of participants were in contact with their partners via text messaging on a constant basis throughout the day; if one person would message, the other would reply almost immediately. This finding is

consistent with Pettigrew (2009), who found that receiving a text message piqued the curiosity of participants and made them want to reply. Participants in Pettigrew's study, however, only replied immediately if the text was urgent, while participants in this study usually replied immediately regardless of message urgency unless they were away from their cell phone. It is not surprising that this use of text messaging as a constant form of contact has a tendency to cause conflict. Participants admitted that they often neglected to consider the impact their language could have on their partner, and expressed frustration when their partner would send a cryptic or insensitive message.

Interestingly, only a small number of participants used video chat to communicate with their partners when apart. Participants who did use video chat experienced positive effects in their relationships, and mentioned that seeing one another over their computer screens was an effective way to reduce conflict and maintain the relationship. The principal complaint participants had about text messaging was the lack of nonverbal communication and subsequent confusion; the use of video chat could be a solution to this source of conflict.

Conflict Initiation via Mediated Communication

Participants were most likely to initiate and discuss conflicts via mediated communication; the phone was the mode most frequently employed in conflict situations. Due to the lack of time participants were able to see their partners face-to-face, it was often necessary for them to initiate conflict over the phone rather than waiting for the next time they would see their partner. Although most participants cited their need to unburden themselves with conflict as the reason

for discussing problems over mediated communication, segmentation may offer another explanation. It is not uncommon for those in LDRs to engage in segmentation by focusing on individual interests while apart and devoting their time together to “couple activities” (Sahlstein, 2006). In this study, segmentation was further employed in participants’ desire to handle conflicts in their time apart, which was difficult to begin with, so their time together could be savored. Participants consistently noted that their time together was pleasant and devoid of conflict, which could be due to their choice to handle conflict via mediated communication while apart.

The phone was the preferred form of communication to handle conflict; Chang (2002) and Guldner (2006) also found that couples in LDRs were most likely to use the telephone to discuss conflict. The telephone was considered the most honest, immediate context with which to initiate and discuss conflict while apart due to the ability to hear the other’s voice. Along with the presence of tonal cues, the telephone is also related to the presence of two maintenance behaviors that could be related to conflict: openness and assurances (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). The telephone provides an outlet for LDR partners to self-disclose about topics of concern and assure one another when (or if) the conflict is resolved.

Conflict, Uncertainty, Maintenance, and Mediated Communication

Conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance were found to be interrelated within LDRs, and the presence of these factors was often dependent upon the form of mediated communication chosen by couples. The telephone was the best means for maintaining the relationship, and uncertainty increased when couples used text

messaging or Facebook to communicate. Interestingly, after conflict had been initially discussed over the phone, participants often began using some kind of text-based form of communication to correspond to avoid potentially violent or emotional exchanges over the phone.

Although participants sometimes became frustrated with the lack of nonverbal communication and mundane conversations that were associated with the telephone, they admitted that this form of communication was essential to maintaining their relationship while apart. Telephone use has been consistently determined as a common method to stay in touch and a meaningful maintenance technique for LDRs (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Guldner, 2006; Stafford, 2005), so the positive feelings associated with telephone use in this study were not unexpected.

The telephone was also found to reduce uncertainty because of the presence of immediate verbal feedback; Facebook and text messaging, however, increased uncertainty. This uncertainty was due to posts by third parties on the walls of LDR partners; participants rarely mentioned uncertainty about the posts of their own partners, but consistently felt worried or jealous about the posts of others. The influence of Facebook on interpersonal relationships, both proximal and distant, is a new area of study. Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais (2009) found that Facebook contributes to jealousy in romantic relationships due to the vague information presented on the website. Participants interpreted posts to partners' walls as suggestive and worrisome, even if they weren't aware of the context surrounding the post. "Real or imagined negative situations invoke

feelings of jealousy, and participants felt the Facebook environment created these feelings and enhanced concerns about the quality of their relationship” (Muise et al., 2009, p. 443).

Participants did consistently express their jealousy about ambiguous posts on partners’ walls, and uncertainty was a product of this jealousy. In particular, partner and relationship uncertainty were related to Facebook. Reading posts left on partners’ walls by members of the opposite sex caused participants to feel uncertain about partners’ behavior when apart. Participants questioned how their partners communicated with and acted toward members of the opposite sex. This uncertainty was further compounded when participants had never met the men or women who were posting to partners’ walls. The future of the relationship was questioned because participants were uncertain about partners’ fidelity. Posts by members of the opposite sex, published in a very public, accessible forum, caused participants to experience uncertainty about partners’ commitment level.

Self, partner, and relationship uncertainty was present when text messaging was used in LDRs, signaling the presence of relational uncertainty that can often occur in established relationships. The lack of emotion in this type of communication, combined with participants’ confusion over the use of certain phrases and graphics that attempted to replicate emotion (e.g., emoticons and “LOL”), caused participants to experience a great deal of uncertainty. Participants questioned their own interpretation of their partners’ texts. They wondered if their partner was being serious or cracking a joke, and weren’t sure whether they should be concerned about a certain text or if they were just misinterpreting the

meaning. This self uncertainty carried over to partner uncertainty and overall relationship uncertainty. Participants were uncertain about the underlying meaning in partners' texts. Misunderstood text messages and the conflicts that resulted from this caused participants to question partners' commitment. Uncertainty about the relationship itself was also evident. When participants misunderstood partners' meaning in a text message, they began to question the relationship as a whole and wondered if their romantic bond would be carried into the future. Even though participants asserted their dependence on text messaging to stay in touch, the negative aspects of this form of communication often caused them to wonder about the future of their relationships.

Participants' choice to favor text and instant messaging after discussing conflicts over the phone relates directly to the findings of this study that emerged through additional analysis. The occurrence of one or both partners conceding in conflict was common in the LDRs of participants. This tendency to concede is evidence of an overlap between the distributive and avoidance conflict strategies (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Participants engaged in a strategic, creative conflict approach that was not fully distributive or fully avoidant, but instead a combination of the two. By conceding, participants achieved a personal goal: to avoid the conflict. The achievement of personal goals aligns with the distributive strategy, but participants also had the intent of avoiding the conflict. Phone conversations often resulted in an emotional exchange that caused one partner to concede and admit guilt. As both partners usually recognized that the conflict required more discussion before a resolution could occur, they resorted to text or

instant messenger in an effort to avoid further emotional conversations and, potentially, avoid further escalation of the conflict. Their method of avoidance was often successful, as participants mentioned that the conflict was usually dropped without resolution after resorting to text-based communication. The conflict was often re-visited later, however, because long-term resolution was not possible with the pattern of conceding and avoiding.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory. This study offers an interesting extension to the traditional assumptions of uncertainty reduction theory. Relational uncertainty was clearly present for couples in LDRs, and this uncertainty was most often due to text-based mediated communication. The accessibility of mediated communication for all romantic couples, whether in LDRs or GCRs, adds an entirely new angle to URT. Seeing the public posts of others on Facebook causes partners to question fidelity, and vague text messages incite worry and confusion. The uncertainty caused by mediated communication adds a new angle to the traditional parameters of URT.

Furthermore, partners recognized the uncertainty and subsequent conflict that could be caused by the use of Facebook and text messaging, but they continued to use both forms of communication on a regular basis. This choice was due to the ease of communication; it was often more convenient for participants to jot a note on Facebook or send a cursory text message. Their penchant for the ease of communication provided by Facebook and text messaging trumped the uncertainty and conflict that often occurred. Again, URT is extended by this unique

finding: Couples, especially those who have grown up with the technology of the 21st century, may choose to ignore uncertainty in favor of convenience.

Future Research and Limitations

There are three limitations of this study that can also be potential topics for future research. First, the sample consisted entirely of college students, neglecting LDRs occurring in other age demographics. Second, interviews were only conducted with one member of the current or former LDR, which only allowed for a perspective from one person in the relationship. Third, this study did not explore LDR conflict strategies in-depth; this information emerged in the data and could be studied in greater depth in the future.

All participants in this study were part of the traditional college-age demographic. Interviewing participants from this narrow age demographic disregards LDRs that may be occurring in other demographics. For example, commuter marriages provide a fruitful area of research, and this type of relationship was not included in this study. Future research could compare and contrast the presence of conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance techniques in long-distance dating relationships and commuter marriages.

Additionally, the young age of participants involved in this study may have influenced their responses about and feelings toward mediated communication. Participants in this study are “digital natives,” or individuals that have been influenced by technology for most of their lives (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). Participants who have used technologies such as cell phones and Facebook for

most of their lives have a different perspective on technology than those in an older age group.

Only one partner in the current or former LDR was involved in the interview process. Although the purpose of the study was to understand one's subjective experience in an LDR, interviewing both members of the relationship could provide interesting insight in future studies. Partners undoubtedly interpret conflict, uncertainty, and maintenance in varying ways, and interviewing both members of the relationship together or individually would be valuable.

Finally, this study did not specifically examine the conflict strategies used in LDRs. Information regarding conflict strategies was evident in additional analysis, but the research did not attempt to discover the strategies used by those in LDRs. This study provides an excellent starting point for future studies on the impact of mediated communication on conflict strategies in LDRs, but additional exploration is needed. As evidenced in this study, mediated communication can have a significant impact on the way LDR partners handle conflict, and additional research focusing on this topic could be extremely beneficial.

Conclusion

LDRs represent a unique relationship type that require romantic partners to maintain their relationships while apart from one another. Previous research has indicated a high rate of dissolution in LDRs due to the relational challenges faced by these couples. This study examines both the challenges and joys of maintaining a relationship via mediated communication. In today's society, couples in LDRs have a vast array of technologies at their disposal that can be used

to keep in touch, and these new communication methods provide a fresh perspective with which to study LDRs.

The satisfaction participants experienced in their LDRs was impacted by how the couple chose to use mediated communication in the relationship. Along with distrust of partners' relationships with members of the opposite sex and the strain of the distance itself, participants' frustration with the mode of communication used while apart was a significant source of conflict. Facebook and text messaging often increased uncertainty and caused conflict in LDRs, while speaking on the phone helped to maintain the relationship. Although text-based forms of communication were generally scorned by participants, text and instant messaging was preferred after first discussing a conflict over the phone, as these forms of communication were more emotionally neutral.

This study has many theoretical and practical implications for LDRs. Uncertainty reduction theory was applied to the use of mediated communication in established relationships; this application is certainly novel. Uncertainty increased when participants were unable to understand the mediated messages sent by their romantic partners. These misunderstandings influenced the level of uncertainty they experienced about themselves, their partners, and their relationship as a whole. The popularity of text messaging and Facebook in maintaining relationships offers a fruitful avenue of research for interpersonal scholars. The uncertainty these technologies foster in romantic relationships, whether distant or proximal, is a worthy area of study.

On a practical level, this study provides useful information for those who are currently in LDRs. Those in LDRs may use certain forms of communication due to ease; for example, partners may text message one another because it is simply the quickest, most efficient way to communicate. Although the efficiency of text messaging is certainly helpful to those in LDRs, texting may not be the most effective form of communication for every conversation. Considering the positive and negative implications of each form of mediated communication can help those in LDRs have more fulfilling, productive conversations. It is imperative for couples in LDRs to understand which form of communication works best for them when they are apart, as mediated communication provides a means for couples to stay in touch. Uncertainty and conflict that results from frustration and confusion about mediated communication does not have to signal the end of a relationship; understanding the impact of different forms of communication on each individual relationship can help couples have a higher level of satisfaction.

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APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

I. Greeting

- A. Go over consent form
- B. Discuss procedures (emphasize open atmosphere – questions about conflict)

II. Descriptive statistics

A. How long have you been in a long-distance relationship (LDR)? / How long was your LDR?

- 1. Length to date if participant is currently in an LDR
- 2. Length of entire LDR if participant has dissolved relationship within the past 3 months

B. How far away does your partner live?

C. How often, on average, do you get to see your partner?

D. What means of communication do you and your partner prefer when you're apart? (e.g., telephone calls, e-mail, Skype, video chat, instant messaging)?

III. Background

A. What do you like about your LDR? What don't you like?

B. What "works" about the form of communication you and your partner use when apart? What doesn't work?

C. Are there certain topics you and your partner frequently fight about?

IV. Tell me about the last big argument you had with your LDR partner.

A. What was the fight about?

B. Did the fight happen while you were together or while you were apart?

C. Did you or your partner start the fight?

D. How did you feel?

E. Was the issue resolved?

a. How?

b. Were you happy or disappointed with the outcome of the conflict?

F. How does your partner respond when you have a fight? Does he/she say anything after the fight to make you feel better or worse about what has happened?

G. Is conflict always a bad thing in your LDR, or are there sometimes positive outcomes?

H. In what ways, if any, has your relationship changed (positively or negatively) because of this fight?

I. Knowing what you do about your past arguments, do you think you will handle future arguments differently?

V. When you fight with your partner, do you feel uncertain about your relationship?

A. Do you feel scared about the future?

B. Do you feel less confident about your partner, yourself, or your relationship?

VI. Do you feel conflict is necessary in your relationship? Does conflict make you and your partner closer?

VII. Where do you see your relationship going? Have you talked with your partner about moving closer to one another?

VIII. Wrap-up

A. Reiterate key points raised by participant

B. Provide contact information

C. Thank participant for his/her time