

Understanding Gender Perceptions of Long-Distance Romantic Relationships

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Abstract. Lon-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) were often seen as challenging and unfeasible before the advent of the Internet. Communication was limited to the traditional medium, such as expensive phone calls, letters, and occasional visits, which made it difficult to maintain a relationship. However, with the emergence of new media, communication has become simpler and more accessible, making it easier for people to maintain close connections with their partners, even when separated by distance. To maintain a successful LDRR, it is essential to understand how men and women perceive such relationships. Unfortunately, there are limited studies on gender perceptions and acceptance towards LDRRs. Therefore, this study aims to determine how Malaysian male and female between the age of 20 to 30 years old perceive LDRRs and investigate gender differences in their perception of LDRRs. The data was collected through online semi-structured interviews with six male and six female, and a thematic analysis method was used to analyse the data collected. The study discovered that female participants believed that LDRRs should be independent and that gender characteristics influence the coping mechanisms of couples. On the other hand, male participants believed that physical presence is essential for a relationship and that the coping mechanism is based on personal personality. Nonetheless, both genders acknowledge that communication and sincerity are vital components of LDRRs, and both genders share similar strategies for sustaining the relationship.

Keywords: long-distance relationship, gender perspectives, long-distance romantic relationship, love relationship

INTRODUCTION

Long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) refer to romantic connections where individuals are separated by physical distance for various reasons. LDRs generally have limited contact due to geographical constraints and the need to maintain a strong connection (Holmes, 2004; Rabe, 2001; Stafford, 2005).

In recent times, LDRRs have become more prevalent, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many countries globally have closed their borders to contain the spread of infectious diseases, leading to less frequent meetings between couples. Kwan (2020) notes that an international alliance of couples has formally petitioned the government to permit travel exemptions, enabling them to reunite with their partners amid the pandemic. The couples contend that the inability to see their loved ones has had adverse impacts on their mental health, resulting in instability. LDRRs have become increasingly common among young adults due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and as a regular occurrence. According to Jiang and Hancock (2013), between 25% and 50% of college students are involved in a romantic relationship with a physically distant partner, and 75% of college students have had this experience during their academic years. Maintaining such relationships can be challenging since in-person interactions are limited, and couples must plan their physical interactions around their respective schedules. Young couples with scholastic responsibilities have limited time to spend with their partners, adding to the difficulty of maintaining an LDRR. Additionally, misunderstandings can arise, posing a further challenge for couples in these relationships.

Numerous studies have been conducted to comprehend the various aspects associated with college life and maintaining long-distance relationships. According to Mosko (2010, cited by

Suwinyattichaiorn, T. (2021), there is a strong correlation between the level of commitment between couples and the length of time required for these relationships to thrive. Studies have also shown that couples who are in close proximity do not allocate additional time and effort to meet each other, which leads to lower levels of contentment and dedication. More research has consistently demonstrated that the level of commitment to a relationship is a highly reliable indicator of its stability, regardless of the specific nature of the connection.

Besides that, literature demonstrated that there is a difference in the levels of dedication exhibited by males and females towards their relationships. Amelia, F. R. (2020) revealed that females tend to exert more effort in sustaining their relationships than males do. Gender disparities have also been observed in the level of exertion exerted by individuals in the context of dating. Females exhibit greater proactive behaviour in maintaining relationships, such as taking the initiative to make phone calls (Dellman-Jenkins et al., 1994 cited by Joshi, A., 2022). Previous research on long-distance and non-long-distance studies shows that females tend to display a higher degree of commitment and invest more effort to sustain their romantic connections.

Extensive research has also been conducted to comprehend various aspects of long-distance relationships. Yet sustaining such relationships remains a challenge for many. Based on Suwinyattichaiorn(2021), gender could significantly contribute to this difficulty and failure. Nevertheless, there needs to be more research on how males and females perceive these long-distance relationships. Gaining insights into their perceptions can be crucial in understanding long-distance relationships better. Understanding the unique perspectives of different genders when it comes to long-distance relationships is crucial for fostering healthy connections and adjusting to evolving forms of communication.

The number of studies available on gender perceptions towards LDRRs is limited, particularly in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover Malaysian male and female university students' perceptions of long-distance relationships., as well as if both genders have a similar perception towards the LDRRs.

METHODS

A qualitative research method was employed in this study to investigate how both genders perceive LDRRs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain further insight into their perspectives. This allows the researchers to probe deeper into intriguing points and allows for some adaptability throughout the process.

Research Participants

To better understand the perceptions of Malaysian male and female university students towards long-distance relationships, this study has endeavoured to recruit an equal number of participants from both genders. This study has approached an equal number of male and female participants to mitigate any potential bias and produce findings that are relevant to both sexes.

The study was conducted with a total of 12 participants, consisting of an equal number of six male and six female university students from Malaysia. The age range of the participants was 20 to 30 years old. A linear snowball sampling technique was applied to select the participants. This approach involves designating one member to supply information on a different subject, and the chain

is then extended by another participant's referral from a different subject.

Data Analysis Method

The researchers utilized the thematic analysis method to evaluate qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews. The guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke were followed when conducting the analysis. First, the researchers transcribed the interview data with care. Subsequently, the transcripts were read again to ensure they were familiar with the data, and preliminary ideas were generated. The transcripts were reviewed in detail to identify themes, and each theme was carefully examined for consistency. The researchers also ensured that each theme captured a particular aspect of the data before naming, defining, and presenting them along with interview quotes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Expectations of Independence versus Physical Presence

Based on the study's findings, both genders seem to share a common perspective on the key factors that play a role in cultivating a healthy relationship. The study highlights three critical elements that are fundamental to a successful relationship: commitment, trust, and loyalty. It is vital for both partners to be willing to work through any obstacles and challenges that may arise to sustain a healthy and lasting relationship. Trust plays a crucial role in creating a sense of security and safety within the relationship. Lastly, remaining faithful to one another can help overcome difficult situations and resist any external temptations that may arise.

Although both genders have a similar perspective on key factors that lead to a healthy relationship, they have different perceptions regarding LDRRs. The female participants in the study had a positive outlook and perception of LDRRs. They noted that maintaining an LDRR requires a certain degree of sacrifice and effort, but the relationship can be successfully sustained if both partners are independent. The participants further explained that being overly dependent on one's partner could lead to trust issues and insecurity, ultimately resulting in the relationship's failure. Trust is an important aspect of any relationship, and this is particularly true in LDRRs. One of the key contributors to trust is independence. When both partners are independent, they will trust each other to make decisions and respect their boundaries, ultimately strengthening the relationship and contributing to its overall health. Therefore, if both partners are independent, it could help to sustain their LDRR. Participant F4 mentioned that:

F4: For it to work, both partners can't be interdependent. They have to be more independent. ... Over-reliance can lead to trust and insecurity issues that can harm the relationship.

F3: For couples who are in LDRR, they have to make time to call, or make plans to meet each other... as in a LDRR, it's going to be a virtual thing and you can't touch each other. There is no physical touch and there is no partner's presence around you. Hence, you have to learn how to not rely on your partner so much.

On the other hand, research shows that male participants tend to hold a less positive view of LDRRs. Despite both genders sharing a similar understanding of LDRRs in terms of commitment and trust, male participants feel that physical presence is crucial for a healthy relationship. They believe it is necessary to be present for each other in times of need and to be aware of each other's daily lives to maintain a strong bond. Moreover, male participants emphasized that intimacy plays an

essential role in strengthening the connection with their partner, which is often lacking in LDRRs. Consequently, they perceive maintaining an LDRR as a significant challenge due to the absence of physical presence and intimacy. As a result, both partners in an LDRR must invest significant time, effort, and trust to make the relationship successful.

M1: Couples need to make an effort to maintain the relationship. Especially when they are not able to meet up physically, which is a big challenge.

M2: LDRR takes extra effort to maintain the relationship, spending time to share your life and need more understanding.

Overall, female participants tend to express a more positive outlook than male participants during interviews. Specifically, the study found female participants expressed confidence in the success of a relationship when both partners maintained a sense of independence. Conversely, male participants reported that the limited physical presence and intimacy in LDRRs present significant challenges to the relationships. Male participants emphasized the importance of regular in-person interaction and shared experiences to maintain intimacy. These methods provide different forms of closeness to compensate for the lack of physical presence in the relationship.

Communication and Sincerity

Based on the study's findings, both female and male participants have a common perception that a healthy relationship requires communication and sincerity between the partners. They believed that a relationship that lacks communication and effort could lead to failure, especially LDRRs. Participants pointed out that if one partner cannot make time for the other, it can cause a lack of commitment from the neglected partner towards the relationship. As a result, the partner who is neglected may be susceptible to external temptations and seek comfort from someone else, which ultimately leads to the relationship's failure. The data demonstrated that communication plays a pivotal role in maintaining the relationship.

M3: LDRR failed because there is a lack of communication and they do not make time for each other. When one person does not make time for each other... This leads to their partner cheating because they do not receive enough attention.

M5: I think the failure of LDRR is not spending time together, not putting in effort to make development to make the relationship work out well.

F1: Communication is the key to successful LDR, but action is the lock to it. When you communicate your feelings to your partner, they will know how you really feel or think. After communicating, try to talk everything out and solve the arguments before that day ends.

Besides communication, male participants stressed that it is also important to be sincere in demonstrating commitment, which leads to successful relationships.

M2: A successful LDR is when there is sincerity. This factor defines whether you want this relationship or not. It shows how willing you are to make the relationship work even when both partners are not in the same state.

M3: Lack of communication and do not make time for each other leads to failure of any relationships, long-distance or not. So I think when one person did not make time for each other, when one of them is a workaholic, this leads to cheating.

Kokab and Ajmal (2012) also highlighted that sincerity is significant in attaining happiness in romantic relationships. It is believed that sincerity can cultivate trust between partners, reinforcing their emotional connection and care for each other, ultimately resulting in a more fulfilling and joyful relationship. This is why male study participants deemed sincerity a vital aspect of a relationship.

Overall, female and male study participants share a similar perception regarding the constituents of ideal and successful LDRRs. The study indicates that communication is the most crucial factor determining an LDRR's success, and both genders unanimously agree on this. Male participants also emphasized the importance of sincerity in the context of LDRRs.

Gender Characteristics versus Personality

Based on the gathered information, observing the contrasting viewpoints of males and females regarding coping mechanisms in LDRRs is interesting. Female participants tend to associate the coping mechanisms with gender, whereas male participants place more emphasis on individual personality traits.

According to female participants, gender characteristics are perceived as a significant factor that impacts couples' coping mechanisms in LDRRs. They opine that men tend to be more rational, while women tend to be more emotional. Participants believe these gender characteristics lead the males and females to cope with the LDRRs differently. Consequently, female participants indicated that they would invest time and effort in maintaining their relationship with their partner as they placed a higher value on emotional connection. As stated by the participants:

F1: Men are usually taught how to manage their emotions and how to not have any emotions, so they purposely distance themselves from problems.

F3: Yeah. When it comes to LDRRs, male and females expect different things from their partners. For example, women expect emotional things, but men expect physical things.

F6: I do think they perform differently. For females, we are more emotional, we need affection, care, and acts of service. In terms of male, they prioritise work more, they expect us to be considerate.

On the other hand, male participants indicated that personality has a significant impact on how an individual handles LDRR, irrespective of gender.

M2: I think it has nothing to do with genders. Male or female all have different ways of maintaining LDR. It's more on personality. There are female friends who do not want daily communication. Whereas male would want daily communication.

M4: I think they behave quite the same. They don't behave differently.

M5: I guess yes but maybe not in terms of gender, it depends on individuals. But men may prioritise work whereas women may need to reach societal expectations.

In this study, female participants perceived males as logical, while females were emotional; therefore, the way both genders cope with the relationship would be different. Female participants' perception underscores the significant impact of cultural and societal norms on perceptions of gender roles. Traditionally, males have been conventionally associated with authoritative positions, which are deemed to require logical thinking. Conversely, females have predominantly been associated with nurturing and caregiving roles that are viewed as emotionally oriented and less rational in nature. Thus, this explains why female and male participants have a contrasting perception of coping mechanisms in LDRRs.

Shared Sustainability Strategies

According to the research findings, there is a noticeable difference in the perception of coping mechanisms among male and female participants in LDRRs. Nevertheless, the data collected indicates that both genders share similar beliefs about the strategies that are effective in maintaining such relationships.

In the study, participants conveyed their conviction that a variety of practices can foster and contribute to the triumph of LDRRs. These approaches encompass staying in touch regularly, exhibiting empathy towards one another, scheduling visits, and enjoying meaningful virtual experiences. As per the female participants, the primary objective of employing these techniques is to demonstrate affection and dedication to one another, thereby fortifying the bond even in the absence of physical proximity.

F4: Always plan visits whenever both parties are free, talk your problems out, and face time more often... if you talk out your problems or thoughts, it can strengthen your communication.

F5: ...couples can also spend more time with each other. During nighttime, they can have online dates with each other, like watching movies together online.

Male participants expressed their disbelief in the longevity of LDRRs. Still, they also acknowledged that there is a chance for these relationships to last if both partners can establish a sense of security with each other. For instance, male participant M1 stated that it is possible to sustain an LDRR if partners are able to provide sufficient security to each other. This is in line with their perception of the trust factors that contribute to a successful relationship. He stated:

“Consistent physical meetups, having frequent calls, taking pictures to let your partner know what you are doing...to let your partner feel safe and know that you are there.”

Overall, the results show that both genders perceived spending time with each other, planning visits and constantly updating life to their partner plays a significant role in maintaining LDRRs. They believe it is important for couples to strengthen their communication through these activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Building a successful LDRR necessitates mutual dedication and communication from each partner. Females and males acknowledge the significance of shared commitment and communication in surmounting the challenges posed by physical distance. However, they have a slight difference in perceptions towards LDRRs. Female perceptions of relationships are affected by their emotions. Thus, they are more likely to invest their time and effort in sustaining the relationship. They perceived commitment and trustworthiness as giving a person confidence that their spouse is committed to the relationship. It is greatly esteemed and seen as a crucial element of romantic relationships in most cultures. Female participants may assimilate these cultural values and place loyalty at the forefront of their ideal long-distance relationship.

Meanwhile, the males may approach the relationship, including long-distance partnerships, pragmatically, focusing on practical solutions and activities rather than emotional responses. They may see effort as critical for overcoming the physical distance between couples and maintaining the connection despite its challenges. Other than that, males may adopt a problem-solving mindset in relationships, looking for real solutions to solve concerns and overcome obstacles. In the context of LDRRs, they may emphasize proactive activities, such as regular contact, visit planning, and

inventive methods to stay connected, as a way of sustaining the relationship.

The study found that communication is the most important aspect determining the effectiveness of an LDRR, and both genders agree on this. Both genders think that communication is the aspect of LDRRs because it serves as the primary means for bridging the physical gap between partners in LDRRs. It enables them to stay connected, share their experiences, and maintain emotional intimacy despite being geographically separated. Effective communication promotes emotional connection and understanding between partners. Both genders are shaped to think that individuals in LDRRs can develop trust, empathy, and intimacy by openly and honestly expressing their views, feelings, and needs, all of which are necessary for relationship pleasure and longevity.

Females relate coping mechanisms based on gender due to societal norms that men are rational while females are emotional. This shapes the idea that men would behave a certain way while dealing with relationships while females would behave a certain way while dealing with relationships. On the other hand, male participants suggested that tailored coping mechanisms based on an individual's personality are more effective in rejecting gender stereotypes. This perception may be developed and influenced by societal norms, as male participants may have been raised to value personal resilience and adaptability. Consequently, when dealing with LDRRs, male participants perceived the individual's personality to play a greater role. Hence, they tend to think that genders have no relation to how female and male deal with relationships.

Ultimately, the research illuminates the complex viewpoints of the female and male participants with respect to the fundamental components of fruitful LDRRs. Although they share some opinions, such as recognising the critical need for communication, they also disagree significantly in how they regard effort and loyalty. As the cornerstone of LDRRs, female participants typically value loyalty more, stressing emotional ties and dedication to the partnership. This viewpoint reflects their engagement in the relationship and their cultural beliefs that emphasise loyalty as an essential component of romantic relationships. Male participants, on the other hand, approach relationships with a practical, problem-solving perspective and see effort as the cornerstone of LDRRs. By emphasizing doable strategies to get around the obstacles presented by geographical distance, such as consistent communication and scheduling visits, and demonstrating proactive in maintaining their connection.

Despite these distinctions, both genders concur that communication is crucial in LDRRs. A partner's physical distance can be bridged with effective communication, which promotes trust, understanding, and an emotional bond. Both females and males agree that honest and open communication is necessary to develop and sustain intimacy, which is necessary for relationship longevity and happiness. The study also emphasises how gender stereotypes and societal standards may influence participants' opinions of coping methods in LDRRs. Female participants might link coping techniques to gender-based norms, considering men to be emotionally invested in relationships and women to be logical. On the other hand, male participants are more likely to focus on their unique personality qualities, which is indicative of their rejection of traditional gender roles and their emphasis on resilience.

The results highlight that females and males do have slight differences in their perceptions towards LDRRs. It is crucial to take gender dynamics and cultural factors into account when analysing how LDRRs are perceived. Researchers and practitioners can better assist people in managing the

difficulties and complexities of long-distance romantic relationships by having a greater knowledge of these subtleties.

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