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Extreme Long-Distance Relationships and the Role of Idealisation: A Mixed Methods  
Study Exploring the Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in Extreme Long-Distance  
Relationships

By

Michelle England

Canterbury Christ Church University

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Supervisors: Dr Dennis Nigbur & Anke Franz

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I can confirm that I have read, understood and adhered to the BPS ethical guidelines. This Study was approved by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee: PREC ref 094/016.

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### **Abstract**

Long distance relationships are becoming an increasingly regular occurrence in recent years, as advances in online communication have enabled streamlined day-to-day communication between couples residing in separate geographical locations. Mixed methods approach investigates “extreme long distance relationships” and aims to assess the role that distance plays on long distance relationships in regards to Relationship-Satisfaction, Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication. An online survey recorded 304 participants from three separate distance groups (Extreme, Moderate & Geographically Close) to compare scores between groups and investigate the predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in each group. Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication were found to be significantly higher in the Extreme distance group compared to the Geographically Close group. Love and Trust were found to be significantly higher in the Moderate distance group compared to the Geographically Close group. Idealisation and Love were found to predict Relationship Satisfaction in the Extreme Distance Group. Love was found to predict Relationship Satisfaction in the Moderate Distance Group. Idealisation and Love were found to predict Relationship Satisfaction in Geographically Close Relationships. 4 Participants were interviewed using IPA, and four main themes were found; ‘Preventing Solutions / Causing Conflict’, ‘Adjusting to the Distance’, ‘Virtual Presence’ and ‘Hopes and Fears about Cohabitation’. Results are discussed and attempts are made to integrate the quantitative and qualitative results.

Keywords: Long Distance Relationships, Extreme, IPA, Relationship Satisfaction

### **Extreme Long-Distance Relationships and the Role of Idealisation**

Romantic relationships are a key aspect of human experience. From early adolescence romance plays a defining feature in most people's lives (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). It is hypothesised that the need to form and maintain stable interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Bowlby's (1969,1973) attachment theory also suggested the need to form and maintain relationships, along with Maslow (1968) ranking "love and belongingness needs" in the middle of his motivational hierarchy. Cultural expectations in modern occidental society based on traditions, law, economic stability and physiological instincts to reproduce, pressure individuals to find a partner and marry (Cherlin, 2004). However, societal norms of romantic relationships have evolved over the last few decades. Medieval European writings discuss the tradition of chivalric romance, which perhaps influenced modern western cultures obsession with romance. Currently however, computer mediated romantic relationships have changed the way researchers look at certain aspects of romantic relationships (Merkle, & Richardson, 2000) as more individuals interact with their romantic partners online and may find that their knight in shining armor lives far far away.

Romantic relationship can be defined as the relationship of any two people who are in close, intimate relationship with sexual attraction. Sternberg (1986) says that intimacy refers to "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships". In this definition "closeness" is not regarded in a geographical sense, but instead refers to an emotional and psychological connection. Therefore, is it feasible that one could conduct a romantic relationship whilst at a distance from their romantic partner?

Two decades ago Long Distance Relationships (LDRs) were an understudied phenomenon (Stafford, 2004), despite their apparent increasing occurrence. Over the last 20 years a rich literature surrounding LDRs has flourished, ranging from academic studies to published "self-help" books (Bell & Brauer-Bell, 2006) and online support communities. For the purpose of this research, LDRs are defined as an interpersonal relationship between two romantic partners, in which their relationship is conducted whilst separated by a considerable geographic distance. Previous research into LDRs nearly three decades ago suggested that as many as one-third of all college dating relationships may be long distance (Stafford & Reske, 1990). More recent estimates suggest that over 3 million Americans live apart from their

spouses (Bergen, Kirby, & McBride, 2007). Additionally, online dating ranks as the third most popular method of finding a romantic partner, behind meeting partners through social networks, or at drinking establishments (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). LDRs occur for a variety of other reasons, such as due to educational or career pursuits, military deployment, incarceration, or simply moving away (Stafford, 2004, p1).

Research into LDRs began in the 1990s and early 2000s, and technological advancements in remote communication over the last 15 years have rendered some of this research outdated. Research 20 years ago suggested that e-mail is used for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships with focus on its inexpensiveness, simplicity and speed of conversation with no geographic boundaries (Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999). However, only 112 adults out of 881 reported that they even used e-mail. In comparison, as of September 2017, Facebook reported 2.13 billion active users; WhatsApp reported 1.5 billion and Facebook Messenger with 1.3 billion (Cohen, 2017). As it is now easier than ever to communicate with a partner remotely, it is important to reevaluate the very dynamics of an LDR, as what an individual feels is important for an LDR to function may differ from what was important 20 years ago. More recent research has suggested that individuals in LDRs integrate video calls as a core part of their communication routine, and these take place over an extended period of time in order to enhance intimacy (Greenberg & Neustaedter, 2013).

LDRs and their perceived success rates experience almost exclusively negative portrayals in the media, which may not accurately reflect the true lived experience of an LDR (Goldsmith & Byers, 2018). Research suggests that LDRs report high relationship and sexual satisfaction, similar to individuals in Geographically Close Relationships (GCRs) (Dargie, Blair, Goldfinger, & Pukall, 2015; Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013; Roberts & Pistole, 2009; Stafford & Canary, 2006; Stafford & Merolla, 2007). Qualitative research into LDRs has helped to identify commonalities and contradictions within them, by looking at how spending time apart can both enable and constrain time spent together, and vice versa (Sahlstein, 2004). This research used couple interviews, which were conducted without the researcher present but under strict instruction. The present research leant away from having both partners conduct the interview, as Sahlstein (2004) reported that this method might have inhibited the partners from expressing their true feelings, experiences, and opinions.

### **Defining a Long Distance Relationship**

The global term of “long distance relationship” can be defined as a relationship in which it would be practically impossible to see each other face-to-face every day due to distance alone (Roberts & Pistole, 2009). What is regarded a considerable distance can differ according to financial situation, attitude towards travel, work commitment and lived experience. Additionally individuals’ circumstances in LDRs would differ in a variety of factors such as living arrangements, resources (free time, finances etc.) and other commitments, therefore leaving this definition too vague. For example, an LDR where partners live a long-haul plane journey away from each other would be perceived and experienced differently to an LDR where partners are a long drive away. (I.e. London to Bristol is very different from London to Sydney). Thus the experienced challenges in each relationship would be different.

Previous research has failed to comment on the impact that subjective distance may have on a relationship. Research has addressed that the length of the commute for individuals can lead to increased stress (Wener, Evans, Phillips & Nadler, 2003). Therefore it is not a novel idea that an increased travel distance to see a romantic partner would also increase stress. Recent research indicated there were no differences in how individuals perceived “close” LDRs and “far” LDRs (Goldsmith & Byers, 2018), but the actual experiences of close vs. far LDR may differ from how they are perceived. Further research investigating how individuals experience LDRs, also suggests that there are distinct sub-categories of LDRs i.e. Moderate and Extreme (England, 2017). The author’s previous research split LDRs into separate groups, because when participants’ reported relationship distance ranged from 40 miles to 10,535 miles, this range was deemed far too extreme to be considered as part of the same group. The split performed in this research revealed that the amount of distance experienced in an LDR might have important consequences on how individuals attribute Relationship Satisfaction within their interpersonal relationships. This research suggests early indications that not all LDRs are the same and the subjective distance in a LDR should be investigated further. For the purpose of this current research LDRs were therefore split into two groups: Moderate and Extreme LDRs. Moderate long distance relationships (MLDRs) can be defined as LDRs in which it is not practical to see your partner every day, due to distance alone. This is regardless of work, family or other commitments. This categorisation



is also known as the “every-day conundrum” (Aylor, 2003). However, Extreme long distance relationships (ELDRs) are when partners are separated by a substantial distance that requires a great deal of time and costly resources to travel to, perhaps in different countries or even continents.

These two subtypes of LDRs differ greatly in the practical aspects of how the relationship is managed. For example, MLDRs being in the same time zone would allow for easier communication, as active hours would match for both partners, whereas ELDRs conducted across different time zones would require more flexibility for the partners to communicate. International time differences negatively affect business trade and productivity as they disallow synchronous teamwork (Espinosa, Nan, & Carmel, 2007). This raises the possibility that a relationship would also suffer without sufficient synchronicity in active hours of the day. By investigating these two subtypes of LDRs, research can investigate the role that subjective distance plays on specific factors in a relationship.

This paper will therefore examine three self-reported groups of distance: ELDRs, MLDRs and GCRs. This paper aims to examine whether the predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in GCR or MLDR also apply to ELDR groups. Comparisons will also be made across the groups on their Relationship Satisfaction, and the factors that are theorised to predict Relationship Satisfaction including idealisation, trust, love and online communication. The methodological principle used in this research is designed as a concurrent and complementary sample using both quantitative and qualitative methods. We assume that the factors involved with Relationship Satisfaction in LDRs can be derived from an intersection of both quantitative and qualitative methods ( $QUAL \cap QUAN$ ).

### **Relationship Satisfaction at a distance**

This research focuses on what factors play a role in the Relationship-Satisfaction of LDRs. The partners’ subjective valuing of their relationship, can be referred to as “Relationship-Satisfaction” (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). The relationship assessment scale used in this study was designed as an appropriate, useful and brief measure for partnered love relationships, which was tested in a wide variety of research settings, and was therefore chosen due to its conciseness and accuracy. Conceptualising Relationship Satisfaction as a measurable scale allows an understanding of the complex nature of romantic relationships. This attitude creates a mechanism to which they can investigate both the

individuals in the relationship, *and* the relationship itself. Existing research on this topic focuses on the correlates and predictors of satisfaction in married couples (Hendrick, 1988). These include measures such as commitment, self-esteem, cohesion and investment. This can be used to address more holistic questions such as “how does this individual feel about their relationship?” The concept of satisfaction as a measureable entity also allows it to be predicted in association to other relationship phenomena, as it is an important indicator of relationship quality and has consequences for the longevity of the relationship, as more satisfactory relationships are more likely to last longer (Hendrick, 1988).

Relationship Satisfaction is a major established area of relationship assessment, and has numerous different measures to assess feelings, thoughts and behaviours within a relationship (Hendrick, 1988). In GCRs, Relationship Satisfaction has been widely studied, with research suggesting that it can be predicted by: attachment style (Bowlby, 1973), sexual satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008), commitment (Walter, Mueller, & Helfert, 2000), communication, emotional and sexual intimacy (Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2014), intimacy (Berscheid, 1983), and trust/ self-disclosure (Hendrick, 1988). Central components that effect Relationship Satisfaction in GCR are also love (Sternberg, 1986), trust (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017) and idealisation (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). More recent research has suggested that Relationship Satisfaction in GCRs can be affected by anything from stress (Breitenstein, Milek, Nussbeck, Davila, & Bodenmann, 2018), partner similarity in texting behaviours (Ohadi, Brown, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2018), personality traits (Leikas, Ilmarinen, Verkasalo, Vartiainen, & Lönnqvist, 2018), body image (van den Brink, Vollmann, Smeets, Hessen, & Woertman, 2018) and numerous others that are unlikely to be fully researched. This indicates that relationships have many interconnected levels, which can affect individual’s satisfaction. Individuals will most likely find unique traits in their relationship that increase their own Relationship Satisfaction.

Research begins to investigate if some of these prominent predictors of Relationship Satisfaction are still applicable to LDRs. LDRs seem as though they would be less satisfying to romantic partners than GCRs as face-to-face interaction is limited, communication is mostly performed remotely, and the travelling would place financial strains on the relationship (Stafford, 2004; Stafford & Merolla, 2007). These stressors could potentially lead to concerns regarding loyalty, fidelity, and commitment (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman,

2010; Roberts, & Pistole, 2009; Vormbrock, 1993). However, research suggests that many LDRs fare well in terms of standard relationship metrics: LDR members report comparable or even greater satisfaction, trust, stability, and intimacy as compared to GCRs (Crystal-Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Roberts & Pistole, 2009; Stafford, 2004, 2010). Intimacy, trust, and communication satisfaction were found to be the strongest predictors of Relationship Satisfaction for individuals involved in online romances (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006).

### **Uniqueness of This Study**

Previous research by the author presented a model for Relationship Satisfaction in LDRs (England, 2017), including such variables as Trust, Relational Disclosure, Leading Different but not Separate Lives, and Creating Moments. However, the results of this study suggested that ELDR Relationship Satisfaction had significantly less variance due to the model presented. This suggests that there are other variables influencing Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs. To my knowledge<sup>1</sup>, this previous study is the only study to separate and define different LDR styles and investigate them as individual entities. Therefore this current research further investigates factors influencing Relationship Satisfaction in these extreme LDRs, which have not yet been investigated.

Drawing from this previous research, this report aims to investigate the relationship between Relationship Satisfaction, Trust, Idealisation, Love and Online Communication between three sub-categories of distance. This study is unique as it addresses gaps where the literature on this topic has failed to acknowledge. By splitting LDRs into ‘Moderate’ and ‘Extreme’ categories this allows for an in-depth analysis of the differences between these two groups from an internal perspective. To the researchers knowledge this is also the first mixed method study on LDR, particularly to use IPA.

### **Trusting from a distance**

Deutsch (1991) defined Trust, as "confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared". Individuals with higher levels of Trust feel more secure in their relationships and have more confidence in their partners (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes,

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<sup>1</sup> Research was conducted by entering search terms into Google Scholar and the CCCU library database. Terms searched included; Long distance relationships, long distance and idealisation, long distance vs moderate distance, types of long distance relationships, long distance classification etc. A google search conducted in March 2019 revealed that there were around 8 relevant papers published on LDRs between 2005 and 2017.

2001), which would indicate feeling more satisfied in their relationships. Research indicates that Trust is an important attribute, particularly in LDR's (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013), as the partners are not able to conduct routine relational maintenance activities with as much ease as GCR's (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). For example, partners in a GCR could theoretically determine whether their partner is being truthful by visiting them, whilst those in LDRs are forced to have a greater level of acceptance and faith in what their partner tells them.

Trust, along with commitment, are equally important components in relationships formed online (Whitty & Gavin, 2001), as many LDRs would be. A study investigating the predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in online relationships, found Trust to be a prominent attribute (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Studies exploring online only relationships have suggested that strong levels of Trust are not only highly likely when communicating solely online (Henderson & Gilding, 2004), but may also be aided by computer mediated communication (CMC) (Hardey, 2004). CMC has been reported to be a beneficial method of communication when initiating intimacy and Trust in online relationships (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Research suggests that levels of Trust can increase through mutually satisfying interactions (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Additionally although not stated specifically by the researchers, social networking sites could also allow the opportunity for mutually satisfying interactions.

However, research comparing self-reported levels of Relationship Satisfaction and dyadic Trust (Guldner & Swensen, 1995) found similar levels of Trust in participants of LDRs and GCRs. This could be because Trust is of such high importance in the longevity of romantic relationships, that only the relationships with high Trust continue to function successfully, therefore the majority of individuals who report they are satisfied in their relationship, would also report that they trust their partner and vice versa, irrelevant of location.

Rempel, et al. (1985) developed a theoretical model of interpersonal Trust in relationships, which was used in this research. They proposed that trust is composed of faith, dependability and predictability and therefore this scale was chosen due to its ability to compare sub-levels of trust as well as trust as a whole. Researchers define predictability as

“the generalized expectation related to the subjective probability an individual assigns to the occurrence of some set of future events” (Rotter, 1980; Scanzoni, 1979). In LDRs there would be less opportunity for physical meetings, however partners could display predictability in their availability for CMC (i.e. knowing they will be online to video chat at certain times). This is essentially viewing their experiences of their partner as being consistent and stable. Dependability focuses on the expectation of a partner to be reliable in their actions, built gradually through repeated encounters involving the potential for rejection or ridicule (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Physical dependability may not be something that LDRs would experience often, but consistency of emotional support could be translated as dependability. Although due to the independence that LDRs allow, there may not be as much expectation of dependability. Research indicated that LDRs that became GCRs reported missing their previous relational independence (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006), so dependability may not be something that LDRs use to build trust within their relationship. Finally faith captures the essence of a Trust that is not securely rooted in past experience, as a relationship may be faced with new stresses and forces, which were not anticipated and for which no past encounters reasonably correspond (Rempel et al., 1985). In LDRs this faith may be utilised in trusting that the relationship could translate into a GCR. A great “leap of faith” would be necessary to move countries for example. Therefore, this scale has been used in this current study, as it offers a comprehensive measure of Trust.

### **Idealisation in relationships**

One possible predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in LDRs is Idealisation.

Idealisation in romantic relationships refers to the tendency toward positive distortions that minimise problems, essentially viewing your partner through “rose tinted glasses” creating a perception that embellishes virtues and minimises faults in their partners (Murray et al., 1996). Idealisation potentially plays a role in all relationships, as having feelings that one’s partner is less than perfection threatens feelings of safety and security in a relationship (Bowlby, 1973). By idealising a partner, research theorises that individuals are reaching a “cognitive resolution” between their doubts about their partner and their ideals (Abelson, 1959), and in many cases this can strengthen a relationship. This belief system would mean people perceive their partner in a way that both reflects their true knowledge of their partners’ qualities, and combines this with partly reflecting their own hopes for an ideal partner.

Although some may view Idealisation with cynicism, Idealisation is not necessarily a negative quality, as scholars claim that Idealisation actually facilitates relational success (Murray & Holmes, 1993). Recent research suggested that Idealisation was positively associated with Relationship Satisfaction (Lee & Pistle, 2012). Some research findings even suggest that relationships were more satisfying (Murray et al., 1996) and individuals were happier in their relationships when they idealised each other (Murray & Holmes, 1993). Research that used both surveys and interviews indicated that Idealisation facilitates relational success (Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003) and measures on idealisation also predicted increased Relationship Satisfaction (Murray & Holmes, 1997). Findings suggest that relationships persisted and became more satisfying and less distressing when the partners idealised each other (Murray et al., 1996). The authors comment that seeing ‘relationships in the best possible light . . . is a critical feature of satisfying, stable relationships’ (Murray & Holmes, 1993, p. 600).

However, whilst viewing your partner through rose tinted glasses may at first provide a temporary sense of security, there is a more pessimistic view that these ideal fantasies eventually crumble at the feet of harsh reality, as they can lead to avoidance of real relational issues and can eventually break down the relationship if issues continue to be ignored (Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985). Positive perceptions could therefore heighten the possibility for disappointment. Idealising a partner may blind individuals to real difficulties and differences in wants and/or needs that must inevitably emerge (such as hope of getting married or having children) (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). Assuming compatibility where there is underlying conflict can lead to later disappointment. This is especially relevant to LDRs, as partners who have never met may be assuming their successful online relationship will translate well into the physical world. Research also suggest that in the long term, individuals prefer to be seen by partners as they see themselves, and not have to live up to a higher expectation (Murray et al., 1996).

Research into ‘The investment Model’ (Rusbult, 1980) indicated that individuals are more likely to persist with a relationship when they perceive their partner as more desirable than any conceivable alternative (Rusbult, 1983). ‘The Investment Model’ theorises that commitment in a relationship relies on relational satisfaction, comparison with alternatives and investment. These findings suggest that Idealisation can lead to long-lasting satisfactory

relationships. Positive illusions could benefit relationships, as by idealising a partner's faults, it may lead to transforming the meaning of faults into a less significant form (Kelley, 1967) and thus encouraging tolerance and optimism needed to address issues in relationships (Rusbult, 1983).

By perceiving their partner in an idealised way, individuals may enter a belief system in which they feel safer and secure in their commitment (Murstein, 1967). Attachment theorists argue that individuals are strongly motivated to seek feelings of safety and security in their relationships (Bowlby, 1973). These feelings of security are put at risk when faced with a perceived 'Less-than-perfect' partner. As relationships develop inevitable disappointments emerge, often after an already long-term commitment, particularly during major life events (e.g. career changes and raising children). These disappointments can raise doubts in an individual's feeling of security with their partner, and ironically can increase when the barriers to dissolution have also increased.

Potentially LDRs would have the most opportunity for Idealisation, as the partners are apart for considerable amounts of time, and their own belief of their partner's beneficial qualities would remain unchallenged for longer due to less time spent in close proximity to their partner. Research found that reminisced memories were less accurate than memories that were reported consistently over multiple opportunities (Stanley & Benjamin, 2016), therefore an individual's perception of their long-distance partner may be feeding on a recollection of a memory of their partner, which could lead to inaccurate recall over time. Additionally, in cases where partners have never met face-to-face, the accuracy of their knowledge of their partner's qualities would be highly questionable.

Stafford and Reske (1990) investigated the phenomenon of Idealisation in LDRs nearly three decades prior to this current research. Research speculates that due to the limited contact, realistic assessments of the relationship are postponed and their findings indicated that LDR couples were more likely to idealise their partners than GC couples. However, methods of remote communication have become faster, cheaper and more easily accessible since this research took place. With the communication block now lessened due to newer technological advances, current research will investigate if LDRs still experience higher levels of Idealisation, and whether Idealisation predicts Relationship Satisfaction. The chosen

scale was adapted from the Employee's Self-Idealisation Subscale (Hasandedić, Hadžić, Hindija, Miljanović, & Repišti, 2011). This scale, although designed to assess idealisation in the workplace, was deemed appropriate as it was concise and the questions were well worded in a way that reflected the surrounding theories of idealisation. Many of the other scales on this subject were too convoluted for this study. A closer look at the operation of Idealisation in modern LDRs is required to investigate whether Idealisation is still more likely to occur in LDRs compared to GCRs.

### **Triangular theory of Love**

Sternberg's triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) suggests that there are three components of the elusive construct of Love. These are intimacy, passion and commitment, with each component establishing a different aspect of Love. Intimacy refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships. Though one may immediately consider physical intimacy when talking about intimacy, there are different levels of intimacy that couples can experience. These include emotional, physical, intellectual, experiential and spiritual. Passion refers to the drives that lead to physical attraction, romance and sexual consummation. It is noteworthy that this does not refer to the frequency or assessment of sexual activities conducted, but the drives an individual has to engage in them, meaning this concept is still relevant in LDR even with sexual contact being rare or absent. Commitment refers to one's commitment to maintain that Love with a partner on a long-term basis. These three components work together to form a concept of romantic Love that encompasses what is important regarding Love in a relationship. These components are separate but interact with each other, and the relationship grows or fades. For example, greater intimacy may lead to greater passion, just as greater commitment may lead to greater intimacy. The importance of each component in this triangle may vary in different relationships, or even over time (Sternberg, 1986).

Research has suggested that some participants viewed commitment as something deeply significant for intimate relationships and should be permanent (Carter, 2012).

Recent research interviewing individuals in LDRs suggested that there was a perpetuating cycle between investment and commitment (England, 2017) in which participants reported feeling very committed to their partner and were therefore willing to invest more in the relationship, which in turn strengthened the commitment. This coincides with the 'Barrier



Model', which suggests that the amount of investment placed into a relationship corresponds to the strength of commitment the individual has towards pursuing the relationship (Lund, 1985). There are high levels of time and financial investment required to conduct an LDR, and this higher investment could lead to higher commitment.

Previous research, suggested individuals with greater Relationship Satisfaction also reported greater sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Purnine & Carey, 1997). In addition to this, any changes in sexual satisfaction were associated with changes in Relationship Satisfaction (Sprecher, 2002). The lack of opportunity to achieve sexual satisfaction, due to distance in LDRs, could lead to two possibilities. Firstly, as there is no suggestion in research that low Relationship Satisfaction causes low sexual satisfaction, or vice versa (Byers, 2005). Secondly, one should consider that even though LDRs lack physical romance in the traditional sense, the individuals in them could still remain sexually satisfied. This could be due to a number of reasons, including open relationships, utilising video chat, image messaging or imagination to fulfill sexual desires.

The current research aims to investigate how Love, composed of intimacy, commitment and passion, compares and functions across the distinct distance groups selected, using the Sternberg triangular theory of love scale. The Sternberg (1986) scale theorises that these are the three components necessary for the functioning and longevity of a romantic relationship, therefore they should be present in a LDR that is functioning and long lasting, despite the blocks distances creates. However, intimacy and passion may be harder to achieve at a distance, therefore it is predicted that GCRs will have significantly higher levels of Love than ELDRs. To the researcher's knowledge the triangular love theory best captured the concept of love in relationships, whilst allowing the flexibility to explore deeper using the subscales. It is important to consider that this is a complex and multileveled factor, and this research will investigate Love both as a predictor of Relationship Satisfaction and as a feature of lovers' lived experience. In-depth qualitative analysis is required to explain the particular idiosyncrasies and tendencies that the individual experiences regarding Love in their relationship, but a quantitative measure of these is also necessary to gain an understanding of whether these loving traits are still present in those in LDRs comparatively with GCRs.

**Online Communication and Distance**

Another main focus of this research is the use of online communication in LDRs. Since the late 1990s, when research on LDRs was last at its prime in academia, the world has evolved considerably, especially regarding technology and access to remote communication. Relationships conducted through CMC are often meaningful (Parks & Floyd, 1996), therefore a LDR that utilizes modern remote communication should also allow for a meaningful relationship. Research suggests that the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships appears to be equally applicable to both face-to-face and computer mediated relationships (Merkle, & Richardson, 2000). Previous research in this area predicted that more frequent accessibility to E-mail communications would benefit LDRs (Stafford, 2004). Technological advances in online communications have now moved far beyond E-mail, meaning more updated research is required.

Modern communication applications such as 'Skype' allow people to communicate from across the globe and video chat in real time. There are even communication platforms that are not initially designed for communication purposes such as online multiplayer gaming. Research findings suggests that online multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft can lead to the formation of online gaming communities, in which players provide both in-game support and broader emotional support (O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015). Online Gaming communities allow opportunities to meet people with similar interests, and often people will spend several hours a day playing and communicating with people they have never met. There are also striking advancements being made in the technology that can transfer the sensation of touch via Wi-Fi connection (Samani et al., 2012). These technological advances have enabled more frequent communication, allowing individuals to feel less lonely, by easing the limitations of distance (Aguila, 2011).

Social networking sites have become a significant component of people's daily lives and have revolutionised the way that people communicate and conduct business (Xu, Ryan, Prybutok, & Wen, 2012). Online communication is relevant to LDRs as it can decrease social distance (Oh, Curley, & Subramani, 2008). People create social media profiles that reflect a 'better' version of themselves, with the opportunity to edit and re-edit what we put out into the world until it projects the idealised self. Research suggests social networking sites are used to create and communicate idealised selves (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, &

Salimkhan, 2008). According to this idealised virtual-identity hypothesis, profile owners display idealised characteristics. Research suggests that those in LDRs engage in greater selective positive self-presentation (Stafford, 2010) i.e. those in LDRs already selectively present more positive versions of themselves. Research theorised that this may stem from social networking sites providing the space to converse, gain social approval and influence others (Gangadharbatla, 2008). Some research findings indicated that social networking sites do reflect individuals' actual personality, as opposed to an idealised-personality (Back et al., 2010). An idealised virtual-identity could increase the likelihood of Idealisation, as in LDRs the conception of a 'virtual identity' may not ever be challenged, if individuals have yet to meet in person.

Since the rise of online dating, there may be more partner choices available to an individual. By highlighting the vast amount of options we have, it becomes harder to choose (Schwartz et al., 2002). So why would people settle for or even start a relationship where there is such an obvious setback such as distance? Idealised virtual-identity theory could suggest that because those who interact online are presenting an idealised version of themselves, and this perception is rarely challenged, those in LDRs may be conducting relationships with those who are less ideal partners than they appear (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008).

It is important to look at the way that those in LDRs interact with the methods of online communication that are available today, as many conclusions from previous research may now be inaccurate. This study used the scale adapted from Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore (2010) which was originally designed to measure online communication usage in adolescents, to compare levels of loneliness and anxiety. This scale includes many of the important aspects surrounding online communication usage that this research aims to investigate, whilst remaining simple and clear because it was designed for young children. By using a mixed methods approach in this current research, research can begin to evaluate both what technologies are being used and how often, but also how they affect the everyday life of an individual in an LDR.

### **The Current Study**

This study is concerned with the experiences of individuals in Extreme Long Distance Relationships, the predictors of Relationship Satisfaction within this subtype of relationship,

and how factors such as Relationship Satisfaction, Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication compare across distinct distance groups (ELDR, MLDR and GCR). There is no current research that distinguishes an ELDR as a unique and separate sub-type of LDR that requires specific focus. Therefore, the research presented here represents a unique application of both online surveys and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The use of a mixed methods approach allows the option of a narrative to add meaning to numbers, as well as numbers being used to add precision to the narrative (See Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004 for a full review). Additionally the strengths of an additional method can be used to overcome the weaknesses of another. The integration of these methods allows for a holistic picture to form about the inner workings and idiosyncrasies of the understudied ELDR.

The use of a survey allows for the testing of the previously mentioned constructed theories to see if they apply to the ELDR phenomena in a way where research can conclude quantitative predictions. An experiment would not have been suitable for the purpose of this research as there are too many confounding variables. This report uses the IPA method (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) in order to comprehend how individuals experience their Extreme Long Distance Relationship. IPA is highly concerned with “the quality and texture of individual experience” (Willig, 2001, p.69) and was therefore considered an appropriate approach for this research subject. The phenomenological requirement of IPA allows for an understanding and “give a voice” to the concerns and cares of the participants and their orientation toward the world through their experiences. Whilst IPA’s foundations in hermeneutics allows for contextualisation and clarity of these claims from a psychological perspective in an attempt to understand the mutually constitutive relationship between the ‘person’ and their ‘world’ (or relationship). IPA produces an outcome that allows an insight into the phenomenon, informed by the participants’ own engagement with that phenomenon (See Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006 for full review). This is especially true when it comes to romantic relationships. The very nature of romantic relationships, two people becoming romantically involved with each other, means that there are therefore two perceptions of the relationship in itself. Even ex-partners, who were in the same relationship, often each have different views on seemingly clear discernments such as perceptions of who had control over the breakup, and perceptions of reasons for the breakup (Sprecher, 1994). For the purpose of understanding ELDRs, phenomenological interpretation a crucial first step in investigating

this new phenomenon.

This research hopes to explain the roles of these aforementioned factors and measure their prominence across three distinct groupings of distance. The strength of quantitative methods is in the ability to provide an “efficient way of forging connections and gleaning underlying patterns” (Bryman, Bresnen, Beardsworth, & Keil, 1988, p142). IPA was chosen as the most appropriate approach to address this research question. Unlike some other current qualitative approaches (e.g. discourse analysis as employed by Potter & Wetherell, 1987), it is grounded within a ‘realist’ ontology, that is a belief in the chain of connection between account, cognition and behaviour. Therefore IPA was appropriate to this study given our concern with the reasoning behind individuals’ decisions and reasoning behind their involvement in ELDRs.

IPA (Smith, 2004) originated in the health psychology discipline and was designed with quantitative research in mind, as an attempt to bridge the gap between case studies and clinical health trials. Therefore IPA was found to be quite fitting to the purpose of mixed methods, as it bridges the gap between individual cases and statistical trends in the sample population. The focus on individual experience that IPA encourages means that results will naturally indicate areas of interest, or concern, for the participant, which will help to guide research towards areas that are of interest and relevance in ELDRs.

As ELDRs are a new and previously unstudied concept, the openness of qualitative data allows the researcher to gain a rich understanding of how this type of relationship is experienced. It is also important to remember that relationships are very complex entities. Individual people are unique therefore each relationship is a combination of two unique people, which makes it very hard to measure every aspect of the relationship objectively. Especially as ELDRs are a new concept, it is important to see whether there are significant differences in measurable characteristics, comparatively within the categories of distance. Although both parts of this research are focusing on the same factors, the emphases on these factors are different for qualitative and quantitative. The online questionnaire seeks to compare and predict the influence of these factors, where the interviews seek to understand the individuals lived experienced of them.

## **Hypothesis and Research Questions**

### **Quantitative**

The first hypothesis of this research is that there will be significant differences in Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication scores, across Geographically Close Relationships, Moderate Long Distance Relationships and Extreme Long Distance Relationships. The researcher predicts that ELDRs will report significantly higher levels of Idealisation, and Trust than MDLRs and GCRs. However it is predicted that ELDRs will report significantly lower levels of Love than GCRs and MLDRs. It is predicted that GCRs will report significantly higher levels of Relationship Satisfaction and Love than ELDRs and MLDRs, with significantly lower levels of Idealisation, and Trust. Research predicts that there will be no significant difference in Relationship Satisfaction between ELDRs, MLDRs and GCRs.

The Second hypothesis is that the variables measured in this study (Idealisation, Trust, Love & Online Communication) will predict the outcome in Relationship Satisfaction. The researcher predicts that Relationship Satisfaction will be significantly positively predicted by Idealisation, Trust and Love in all distance groups, however there will be differences in predictors according to groups. It is hypothesised that Idealisation will significantly be the highest predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs.

The third hypothesis predicts that Online Communication usage will be significantly higher in ELDRs. It is also predicted that Online Communications will be used for different aspects of relationship maintenance across the distance groups.

### **Qualitative**

The qualitative section of this research question is designed to answer the research question; how are ELDRs experienced? And what do these individuals consider important within their relationships?

The concurrent mixed methods design allows the research to answer the final research question of what factors contribute to the success of these ELDRs, which will give a holistic understanding of this phenomenon in a way not possible with a mono-methodological design.

## Method

### Design

The study design is a concurrent mixed-method approach that utilises aspects of interviews, using IPA and an online questionnaire simultaneously (for a framework see Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>. This involved two separate recruitments and data generations being conducted simultaneously. This mixed methods approach enables the research to draw from the strengths of each method, and minimise the weaknesses of a singular method study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The quantitative questionnaire and the qualitative IPA are used together to comprehend a greater picture of ELDRs. The online questionnaire used numerous predetermined scales to measure outcome variables of relationship factors (Relationship Satisfaction, Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication). These factors were then compared across the grouping variable of the three subjective-distance groups (GCR, MLDR and ELDR). The scales from the online questionnaire were analysed using an ANOVA, then analysed using multiple regressions. The qualitative interviews were analysed using IPA. The integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in this research can be used to disentangle the different processes involved (von der Lippe, Eilertsen, Hartmann, & Killèn, 2010) in a LDR.

The items used in the questionnaires are used as part of a predetermined scale that would give a numerical score for each factor (Relationship Satisfaction, Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication) for each participant. The interview schedule has sections focused on each factor, but the design of the questions will invite a more in-depth and individual explanation, or justification. The qualitative methods heavily relied on the individual being self-aware and conscious of factors that made them happy in their relationship, as opposed to the quantitative method of providing statements in which they had to reveal their level of agreement. The interviews allow participants to discuss how they understand the issues involved in their relationships, whereas the quantitative survey imposes a particular meaning based on the researchers understanding, which may not reflect the

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<sup>2</sup> The interview participants were informed of and advised to take part in the online questionnaire, however completion was not a requirement to qualify for the interview. The anonymity of the questionnaire would not allow any cross comparison and therefore it was deemed up to the interview participant's discretion if they wanted to participate in the online questionnaire.

complexity of their relationship. Together this gives a more rounded picture of the individuals' LDR.



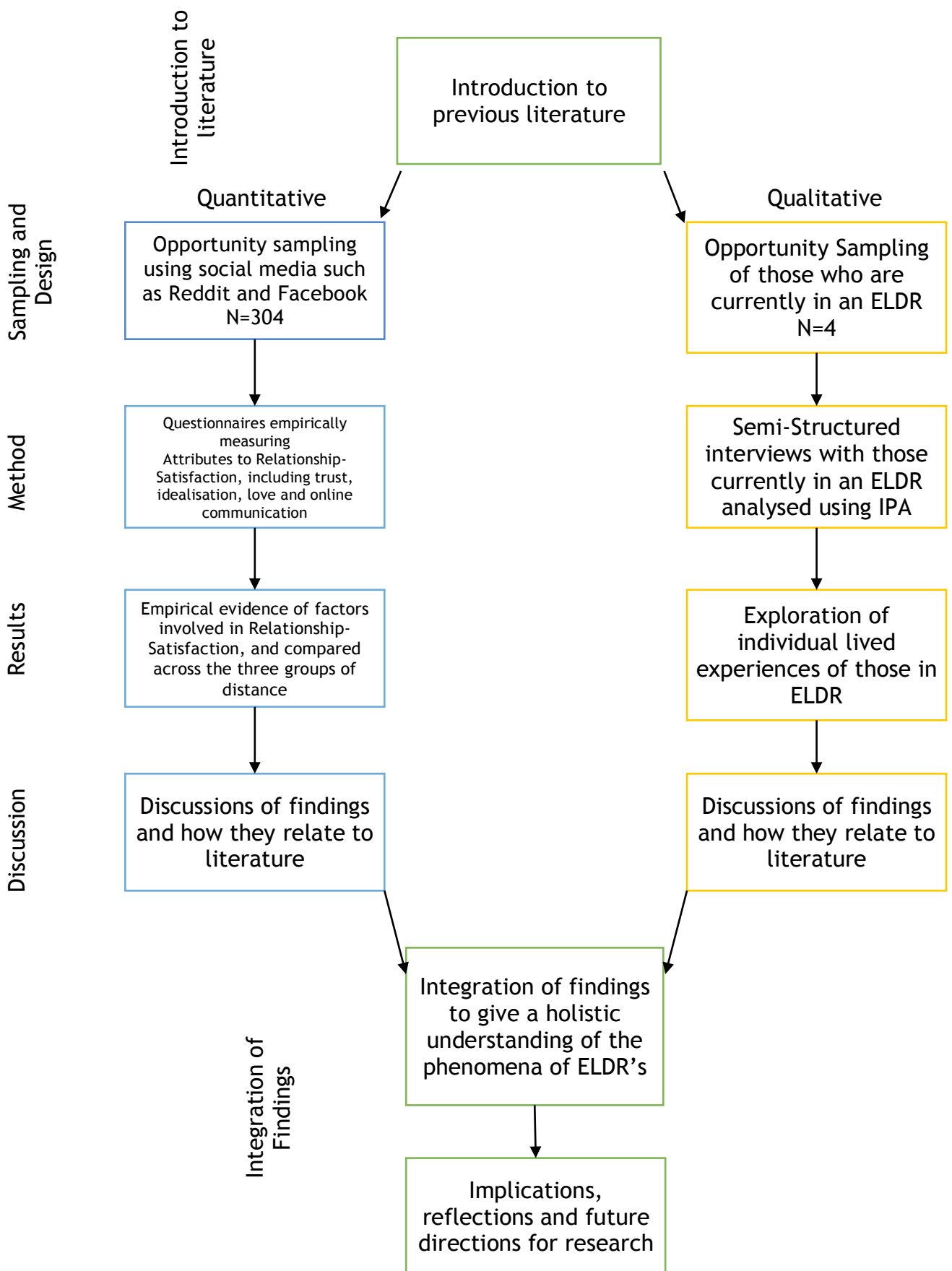


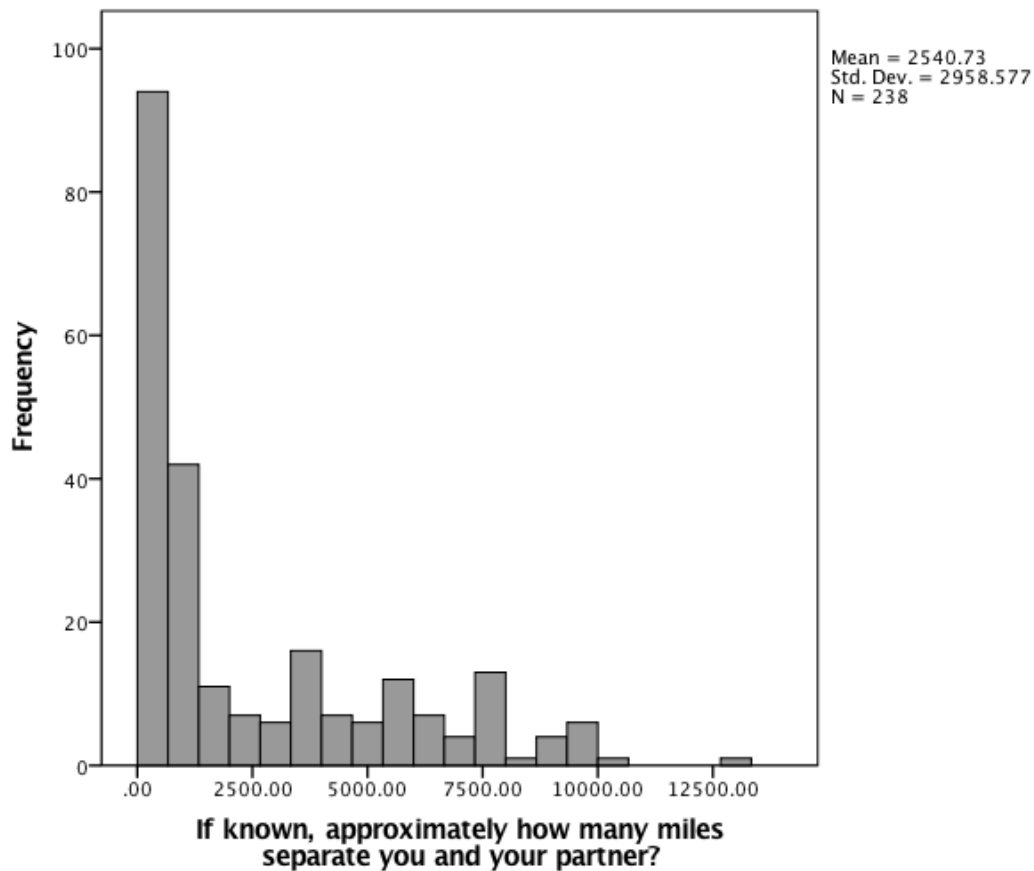
Figure 1

## Participants

### Quantitative

Participants were recruited through the university participation reward scheme, as well as through online social networking sites such as Reddit and Facebook. These social networking sites have support networks and online communities for people in LDRs. Individuals use these sites as a way to gain support, give and receive advice and share stories of their experiences, with an active community of people who are sharing similar experiences. The online forum site Reddit holds a support community page for long distance relationships that exceeds 60,000 individuals. Similarly the Instagram page ‘Surviving.the.distance’ is a social media page dedicated to daily posts sharing positive experiences for people in LDRs, along with advice, inspirational quotes and gift ideas. After contacting the community moderators and gaining permission to advertise an academic survey on the page, it allowed for participants to complete the questionnaire voluntarily and gave participants the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher before they took part.

A total of 375 participants completed the questionnaire. Of these 67 were excluded due to not providing adequate responses to calculate a mean for each scale. 4 participants were removed due to not meeting age requirements. Of the remaining 304 participants, 63 were male and 241 were female. 227 participants were of heterosexual orientation, 66 were bisexual, 5 homosexual males and 6 homosexual females. 153 participants defined their relationship as ELDR, 99 defined themselves as MLDR and 52 were GCR. A priori statistical power analysis was performed for sample size estimation. With an alpha = .05 and power = 0.80, the projected sample size needed with this effect size (Gpower 3.1) is approximately N = 95. Thus, the final sample size of N=304 was deemed acceptable for data analysis. Total mileage of distance reported ranged from 0 miles to 13,300 miles (M=2540.73, Median =1000, SD= 2958.58) (See graph 1). The length of the relationship ranged from 0 months to 262 months (M = 25.54, SD = 29.51). The length of time spent as long distance ranged from 1 month to 107 months (M=17.74, SD = 18.12).



*Graph 1: histogram depicting approximate miles separating participants from their partners as reported by the participants.*

Data was screened for outliers by reviewing Z scores. Following closer inspection of 8 cases with extreme Z scores, they were all deemed to be valid responses (i.e. were not responses from people being untruthful). Similar results occurred whether the outliers were removed or not so the outliers were therefore included in the study.

Participants were asked to select from a range of topics that they talk about online with their partner. This builds up a picture of what couples are discussing when they communicate online with each other. See table 1.

Topic discussed online	Total reported discussion online %	ELDR %	MLDR%	GCR%
Things you've done that day	92.4%	52.3%	33.8%	13.9%
Jokes or funny stories	89.5%	52.6%	33.8%	13.6%
How you feel	88.8%	52.6%	34.4%	13.0%
Parents or family	88.5%	52.4%	35.7%	11.9%
Trivial problems (not very important ones)	87.8%	52.4%	34.1%	13.5%
Your future (e.g., education, jobs)	86.5%	54.0%	35.0%	11.0%
Things that bother you (fears, frustrations)	84.5%	54.1%	33.9%	12.1%
Your health	77.6%	54.7%	33.1%	12.3%
Hobbies	77.3%	54.5%	34.5%	11.1%
Serious problems	76.6%	54.9%	34.8%	10.3%
Plans for social events	76.0%	49.8%	33.3%	16.9%
Current events	74.7%	54.2%	32.2%	13.7%
Films and videos	72.7%	54.8%	31.2%	14.0%
Things in your past	72.0%	55.7%	34.2%	10.0%
Music	68.4%	54.8%	32.2%	13.0%
Secret or confidential things	68.4%	56.3%	33.2%	10.6%
Relationships	68.1%	57.5%	28.5%	14.0%
TV programmes	67.8%	53.4%	32.5%	14.1%
Holidays	59.9%	58.2%	29.1%	12.6%
Gossip/rumours	59.2%	51.7%	33.3%	15.0%
Shopping	49.7%	53.6%	30.5%	15.9%
Books	47.4%	54.2%	34.0%	11.8%
Videogames and online games	45.1%	55.5%	31.4%	13.1%
Politics	41.4%	53.2%	34.9%	11.9%
Websites	41.4%	57.9%	31.0%	11.1%
Clothes and fashion	38.8%	55.9%	31.4%	12.7%
Things you wouldn't say to someone's face	36.8%	58.9%	29.5%	11.6%
Things related to the computer	36.5%	54.1%	31.5%	14.4%
Sports	24.7%	53.3%	34.7%	12.0%
Asking someone to go out with you	12.2%	35.1%	32.4%	32.4%
Other	7.6%	47.8%	34.8%	17.4%

*Table 1: percentage table for topics discussed online. Percentages represent overall percentage of discussion on each topic as reported in the questionnaire. This is then separated into percentages amongst the three distance groups.*

### Qualitative

All the interview participants were local to the Canterbury Christ Church University and were all currently students. Participants were contacted through the university participation reward scheme and through social networking sites.

The interviewees consisted of four individuals who were all in extreme long distance relationships at the time of the interview. A fifth interview did take place, however their experience was found to be fundamentally different from the others and their data will not be used in this analysis, as IPA works better with homogeneous samples. The only demographic details recorded for each participant were age, gender, location of partner and relationship status. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Gender of Partner</i>	<i>Location Of Partner</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>
Polly	22	Female	Male	Manchester (previously Ireland) (ELDR)	Exclusive Relationship
Gary	29	Male	Female	Belgium (ELDR)	Exclusive Relationship
Elizabeth	32	Female	Male	Canada (ELDR)	Engaged
Samantha	21	Female	Male	Canada (ELDR)	Open Relationship

*Table 2: Interview participant demographic details. Note: for the purpose of this analysis 'Exclusive Relationship' is the term used to describe a couple who have entered into the agreement that they are boyfriend/girlfriend exclusively.*

The interview transcripts were transcribed by hand. A first read through of the interviews resulted in brief notes of similarities and commonalities. A secondary reading went into deeper analysis with focus on identifying descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual comments. The identification of emergent patterns were then

drafted, firstly in individual cases then subsequently across multiple cases (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Data was then entered into NVIVO where a preliminary draft of themes emerged (see appendix). These themes were then reread and reworked several times into their final versions.

## **Materials and Apparatus**

### **Quantitative**

The questionnaire was designed through Qualtrics software. The questionnaire used predetermined scales, which were either used unchanged or adapted slightly to become more fitting to current research. Reliability analysis revealed adequate alphas for all items. According to Field (2009) any reliability score above .7 is deemed acceptable and respectful. Thus all available data suggest that the measures used in this report were acceptably reliable and valid indexes of the constructs they were intended to assess.

#### Relationship Satisfaction scale

This 7-item scale was taken directly from Hendrick, et al. (1998). It requested participants to indicate how they felt in regards to their partner. The scale was first developed as a five-item measure of marital satisfaction (Hendrick, 1981) that correlated modestly with a more established measure, the Marriage Adjustment Inventory (Manson & Lerner, 1962). The scale asked questions such as “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” (1= Unsatisfied, 5= Extremely Satisfied) and “How well does your partner meet your needs?” (1 = poorly, 5= extremely well). The scales Cronbach’s alpha was deemed acceptable ( $\alpha = .774$ ).

#### Trust scale

This 17-item scale was taken from Rempel et al. (1985). The scale asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements in relation to someone they had a romantic relationship with. The scale was designed by Rempel et al. (1985) to measure levels of trust within close interpersonal relationships. Items were tailored to represent the predictability, dependability and faith components discussed earlier. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements such as “I can rely on

my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me” and “Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support.” Participants rated using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) through 4 (neither agree nor disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scales Cronbach’s alpha was deemed acceptable ( $\alpha = .848$ ).

#### Love scale

The love scale was based on the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), in which researchers theorised that love has three components: Intimacy, commitment and passion, which were discussed earlier. The 36-item scale asked participants to rate statements regarding their current relationship on a scale from 1 (not at all true) to 9 (extremely true).

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements such as “I adore my partner” and “There is something almost ‘magical’ about my relationship with my partner”. The scales Cronbach’s alpha was deemed acceptable ( $\alpha = .951$ ).

#### Online communication scale

This scale was adapted from Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore (2010, see for original scale). A question was inserted that gave a list of options for what methods of communication were used (e.g. Facebook Messenger, texting, WhatsApp etc.). Questions asking for approximate times of online communication were used but changed into a 24-point slider option instead of ticking block options. It contained questions such as “On an average week day, approximately how long in total do you chat to your partner for?”

The question “What do you talk about online?” in which 31 options were given (e.g. serious problems, your health, hobbies, current events) was changed into a dichotic yes or no option, instead of a never/ sometimes/ always option. Later questions in the original scale were related to loneliness in adolescents so were therefore omitted from the current study as they were not relevant. The scales Cronbach’s alpha was deemed acceptable ( $\alpha = .778$ ).

#### Idealisation Scale

The Idealisation scale was adapted from the Employee’s Self-Idealisation Subscale (Hasandedić, Hadžić, Hindija, Miljanović, & Repišti, 2011). Questions were reworded to apply to romantic relationships. E.g. “I am the most suitable person for my job” was edited to “I am the most suitable person for my partner”, and “When I started my current job, I felt like my dreams came true.” Was edited to “When I started my current relationship, I felt like my

dreams came true” (See Appendix for full scales). Participants were asked to complete the 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), instead of a dichotic yes or no option. The scales Cronbach’s alpha was deemed acceptable ( $\alpha = .837$ ).

The participants were then given the opportunity to mention anything else they thought relevant to their relationship. Once the participants had finished, they were thanked for their time, shown a debrief page and given contact details of useful resources they would possibly like to utilise. The questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete. See appendix for full scales.

### **Qualitative**

The interview schedule (See Appendix) consisted of one A4 page of open-ended questions revolving around the participants’ general relationship and focal topics in this research. The schedule contained probe questions and was designed for the purpose of IPA analysis; by focusing on the individual’s own interpretations of their personal experiences. The interview schedule was divided into sections regarding general questions, trust, Relationship Satisfaction, idealisation, love and online communication.

Qualitative literature has investigated the central components of a long distance relationship (Sahlstien, 2004), and research on LDRs has indicated which factors are important to the success of an LDR. For example research on Relationship Satisfaction (Crystal-Jiang & Hancock, 2013), Idealisation (Stafford & Reske, 1990), Trust (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013) indicate that these factors are higher in LDRs compared to GCRs. However they do not create a picture of how the individuals in LDRs experience these factors in their relationships. Similarly, Greenberg and Neustaedter (2013) conducted case studies investigating the use of video chat in LDRs and stressed the need for day-to-day communication by integrating video chats into a core part of their communication structure. Current research would like to expand on this and investigate the usage, if any, of more modern technology.

Each section consisted of several open questions and probes to guide the conversation, such as “What are the things that make you happy in your relationship?” and “Could you give an example of a positive intimate experience you and your partner shared?”. The interview schedule was designed to last between 45 minutes to an hour. See appendix for schedule.



## **Procedure**

### **Quantitative**

The participants were given an information page in which they were made aware of their right to withdraw, and it was highlighted that they would have to report on their personal romantic relationship. Participants then answered questions that confirmed they were over the age of 18, had understood the information sheet and gave consent for their answers to be used in the current research. The participants then answered demographic questions and reported what category of distance their relationship was. If participants selected MLDR or ELDR, then further demographic questions were asked specific to LDRs. The participants then were instructed to answer a number of questions covering the aforementioned topics, and using Likert scales. After completion of the questionnaire they were given a text box in which they could provide any other information they felt was important to consider about their relationship. They were then debriefed. On the debrief page they were thanked for their time and given information about how to contact the researcher and where to find more information or support surrounding the research topic.

### **Qualitative**

The interviews were conducted in rooms on the Canterbury Christ Church University campus. Upon arriving at the interview room each participant was given an information sheet in which they were made aware of the research requirements to discuss their personal romantic relationship in detail, and informed that they would not be forced to answer questions they didn't want to answer. Participants were asked to sign consent forms indicating they were over 18 years old, they were aware of their right to withdraw and which gave consent to be recorded and for their data to be used in the current research (See Appendix for information sheet and consent forms). After the participant signed consent, the audio recording began and the interview started.

The interview was conducted with the purpose of IPA and focused on the participant's ideographic and personal experiences throughout their time in their long distance relationship. The interviews were approximately 40 minutes long. They were semi-structured and contained open-ended questions in order to leave room for a deeper exploration of what each participant considered to be important factors in their personal

relationships, both positive and negative. After the interview, each participant was given a debrief sheet, in which they were thanked for their time and given further information of how to contact the researcher, and how to find more information about LDR support. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by hand.

The interview transcripts were transcribed by hand, examples of this was performed can be found in the IPA analysis process section of the appendix. A first read through of the interviews resulted in brief notes of similarities and commonalities (See Appendix item a). A secondary reading went into deeper analysis with focus on identifying descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual comments (see Item b). Individual interviews were then bullet pointed (item c) and summarized (Item d). The identification of emergent patterns were then drafted, firstly in individual cases then subsequently across multiple cases (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Data was then entered into NVIVO where a preliminary draft of themes emerged (see appendix item e). These themes were then reread and reworked several times into their final versions.

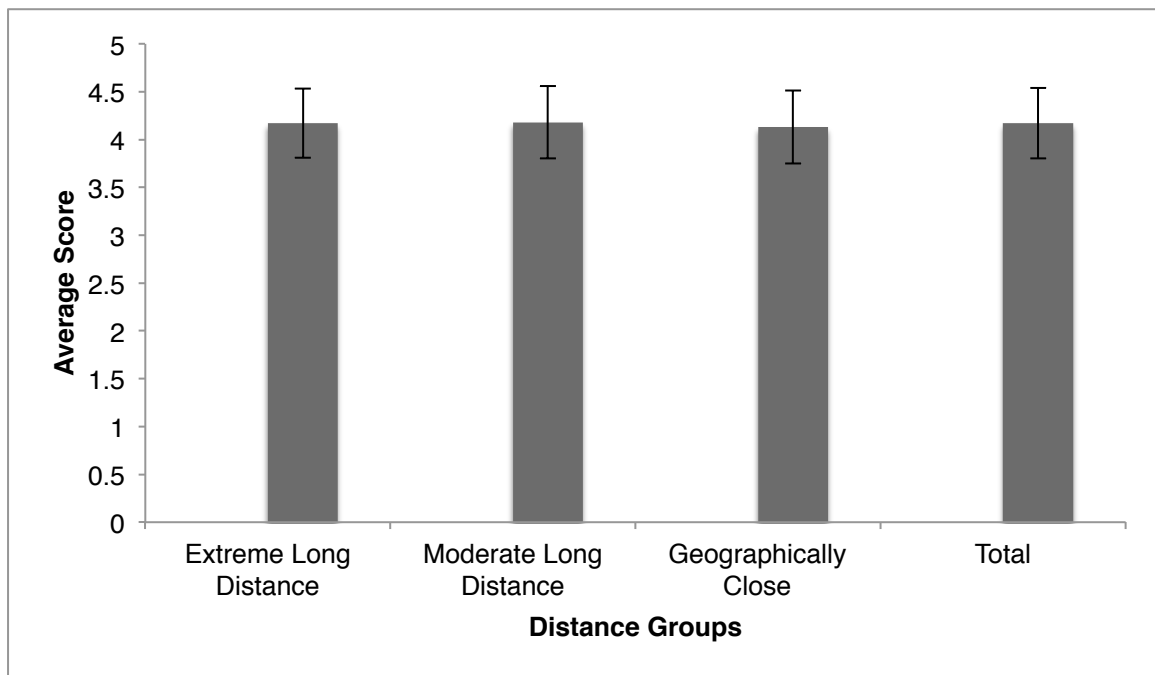
## **Results**

### **Quantitative Data analysis**

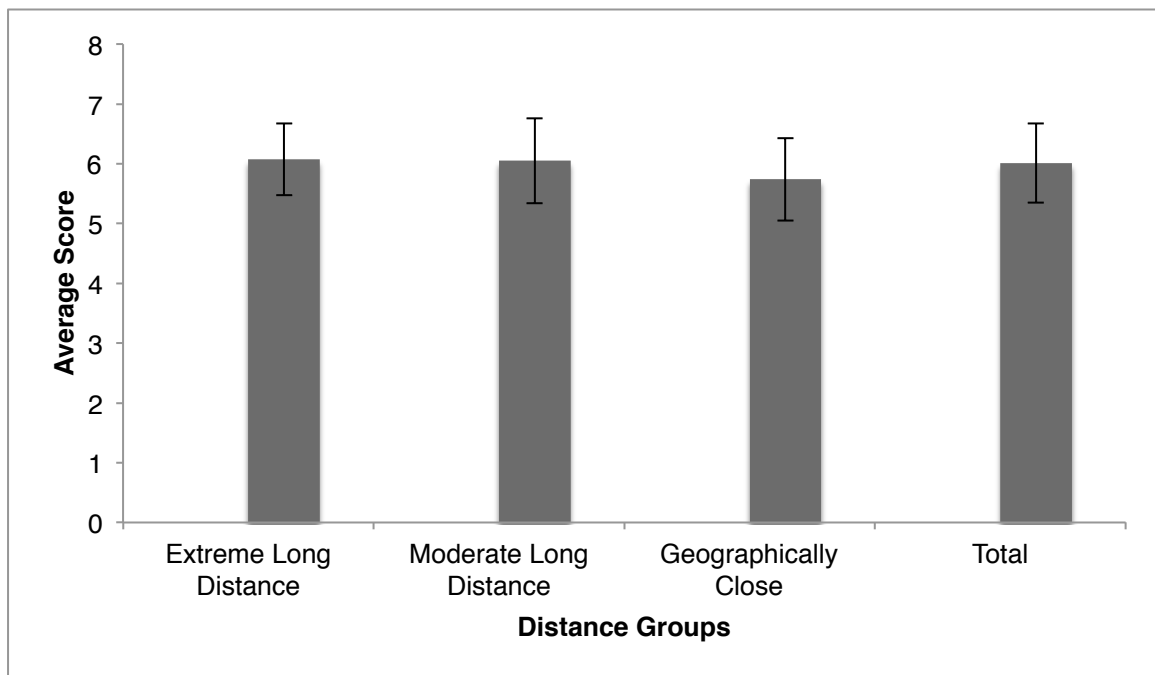
The statistical package SPSS 24.0 for Windows was used for all analyses. To answer the research question of whether relationship factors differ between the distance groups, the analysis was centered in two main areas. Firstly a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to compare all the variables between the distance category groups. Then to answer the second research question, 4 Linear Multiple Regressions were used to examine whether the suggested model (Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication) for predictors of Relationship Satisfaction did account for variance in Relationship Satisfaction. A regression was performed for all the data and then each distance category, to investigate if the predictors differed according to each group, and to see if there were influences on Relationship Satisfaction unique to ELDRs.

Variable	Distance Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Relationship Satisfaction	Extreme Long Distance	153	4.17	.36
	Moderate Long Distance	99	4.18	.38
	Geographically Close	52	4.13	.38
	Total	304	4.17	.37
Idealisation	Extreme Long Distance	153	5.86	.81
	Moderate Long Distance	99	5.81	.91
	Geographically Close	52	5.49	.99
	Total	304	5.78	.88
Trust	Extreme Long Distance	153	6.07	.60
	Moderate Long Distance	99	6.05	.71
	Geographically Close	52	5.74	.69
	Total	304	6.01	.66
Love	Extreme Long Distance	153	8.26	.67
	Moderate Long Distance	99	8.27	.75
	Geographically Close	52	7.93	.99
	Total	304	8.21	.77
Online communication	Extreme Long Distance	153	7.81	4.20
	Moderate Long Distance	99	6.98	3.77
	Geographically Close	52	5.46	3.92
	Total	304	7.14	4.09

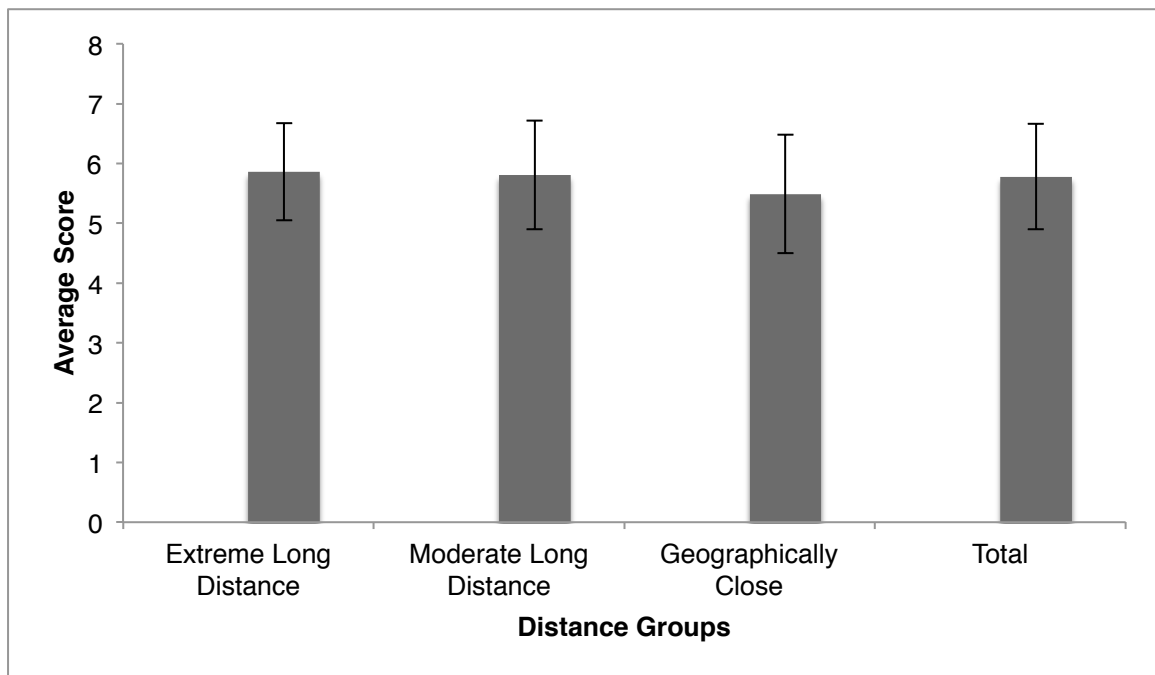
*Table3: Descriptive statistics for key variables used in analysis. The participant number, mean and standard deviation are indicated for each distance group in each variable.*



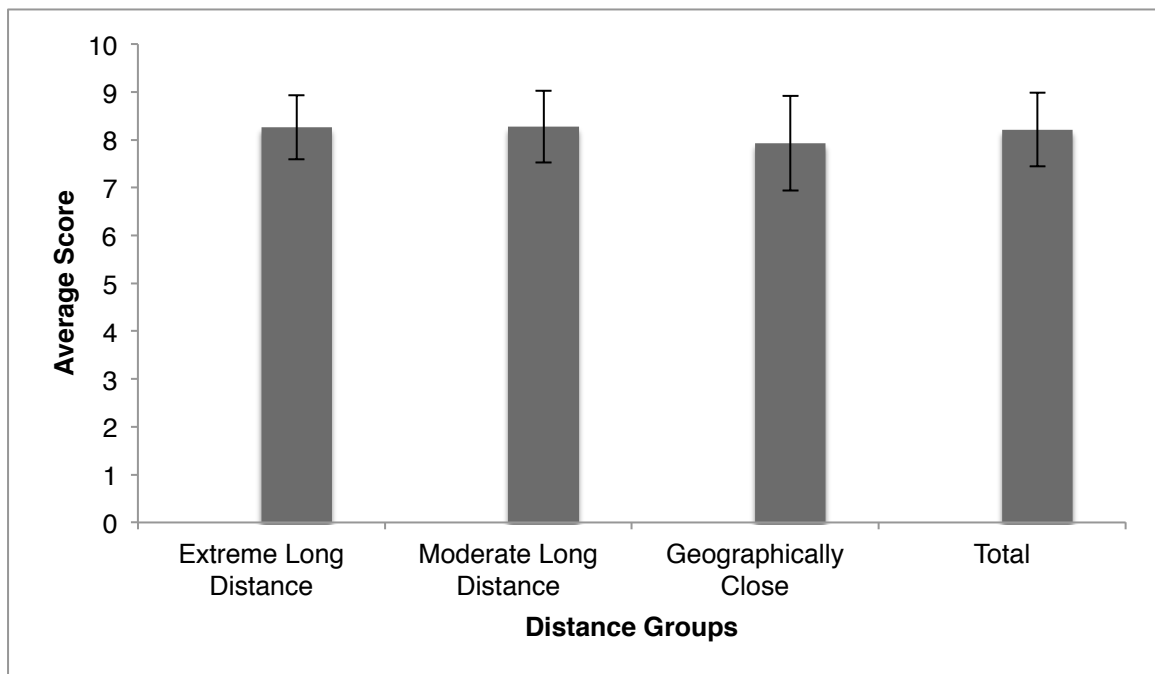
Graph 2: Bar chart depicting mean scores for Relationship Satisfaction for each separate distance category as reported by the participants. Error bars indicate Standard Deviation.



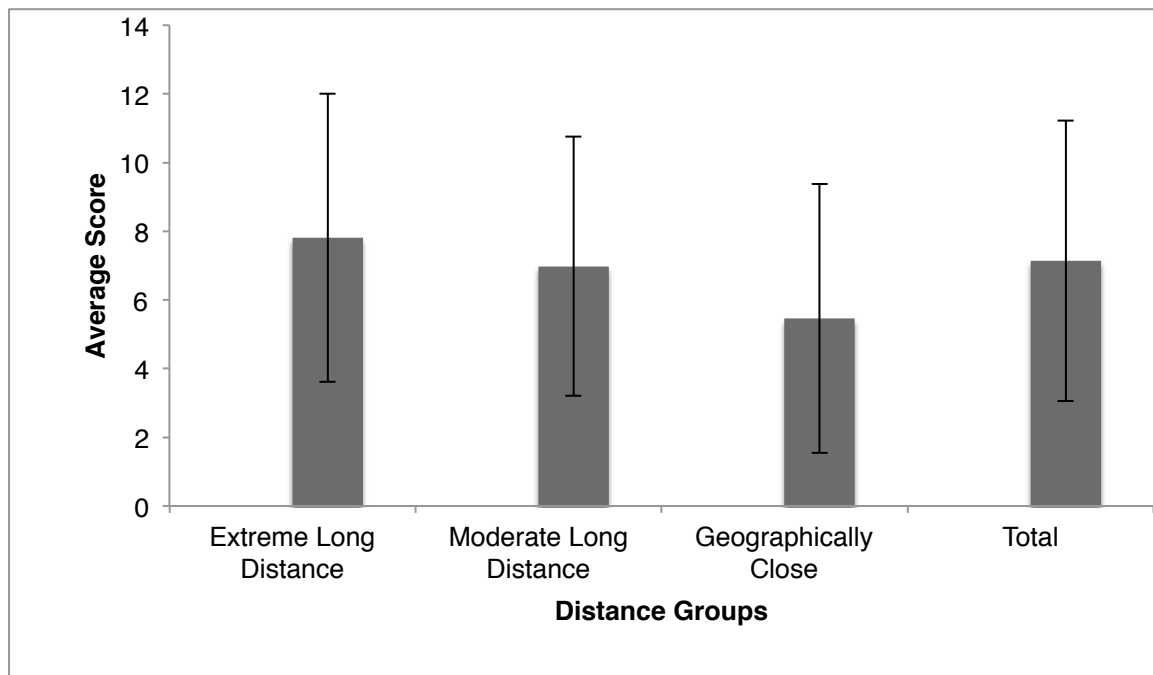
Graph 3: Bar chart depicting mean scores for Trust for each separate distance category as reported by the participants. Error bars indicate Standard Deviation.



Graph 4: Bar chart depicting mean scores for Idealisation for each separate distance category as reported by the participants. Error bars indicate Standard Deviation.



Graph 5: Bar chart depicting mean scores for Love for each separate distance category as reported by the participants. Error bars indicate Standard Deviation.



Graph 6: Bar chart depicting mean scores for Online Communication for each separate distance category as reported by the participants.

### Comparing Measurements across Distance Categories

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test for normality on the main variables; Relationship Satisfaction,  $D(304) = 0.18, p < .05$ , Idealisation,  $D(304) = 0.11, p < .05$ , Trust,  $D(304) = 0.11, p < .05$ , Love,  $D(304) = 0.15, p < .05$ , and Online Communication,  $D(304) = 0.12, p < .05$ , were all significantly not normal. However, ANOVA tests are robust to violations of normality (Field, 2009) therefore this method of analysis was used. To measure homogeneity of variance, Levene's tests were performed. Tests indicated Relationship Satisfaction,  $F(2,301) = 0.26, p = .77$ , Idealisation,  $F(2,301) = 1.23, p = .29$ , Trust,  $F(2,301) = 0.392, p = .68$ , Love,  $F(2,301) = 2.15, p = .12$  and Online Communication,  $F(2,301) = 2.51, p = .08$  were all non-significant therefore the variances were equal for ELDR, MDLR and GCR.

An analysis of variance showed that for Relationship Satisfaction there were no significant differences detected ( $F(2,301) = 0.254, p = .776, \eta^2 = .002$ ).

There was a significant difference in idealisation ( $F(2,301) = 3.458, p < .05, \eta^2 = .022$ ). A post-hoc analysis with a Bonferroni adjustment indicated that a significant difference was

found between GCRs and ELDRs ( $p=0.03$ ), with people in ELDRs reporting higher levels of Idealisation than in GCRs. There was no significant difference in Idealisation found between MLDRs and GCRs or MLDRs and ELDRs.

There was a significant difference in Trust, ( $F(2,301) = 5.273, p < .05, \eta^2 = .034$ ). Post-hoc analysis Bonferroni indicated that a significant difference was found between ELDRs and GCRs ( $p=0.06$ ) with ELDRs reporting higher levels of Trust than GCRs. Analysis also indicated that there was a significant difference between MLDRs and GCRs ( $p=0.016$ ) with MLDRs reporting higher levels of Trust than GCRs. No significant difference was found between ELDRs and MLDRs.

There was a significant difference in Love, ( $F(2,301) = 4.188, p < .05, \eta^2 = .374$ ). Post-hoc analysis Bonferroni indicated that a significant difference was found between ELDRs and GCRs ( $p=0.023$ ) with EDLRs reporting higher levels of Love than GCRs. Analysis also indicated that there was a significant difference between MLDRs and GCRs ( $p=0.025$ ) with MLDRs reporting higher levels of Love than GCRs. No significant difference was found between ELDRs and MLDRs.

There was a significant difference in Online Communication, ( $F(2,301) = 6.713, p < .05, \eta^2 = .240$ ). Post-hoc analysis Bonferroni indicated that a significant difference was found between ELDRs and GCRs ( $p = 0.001$ ) with ELDRs reporting higher levels of Online Communication than GCRs. There was no significant difference in Online Communication found between MLDRs and GCRs or MLDRs and ELDRs.

### **Predicting Relationship Satisfaction**

Four multiple linear regressions were calculated to predict Relationship Satisfaction based on Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication. This was done in answer to the second research question: Will the predictors of Relationship Satisfaction (Idealisation, Trust, Love & Online Communication) differ according to distance? The subscales were not used in the regression because of the multicollinearity issues that are to be expected when you look at both the overall scales and subscales together, as the overall score is a function of the component scores. Some predictors have high correlations with each other, which may cause an overlap of variance in the regression. See Table 4.

EXTREME LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ROLE OF IDEALISATION

	Distance	<i>n</i>	Rel Sat	Idealisation	Trust	Love	Online Com
Rel Sat	All	304					
Idealisation	All	304	.604***				
Trust	All	304	.524***	.661***			
Love	All	304	.611***	.744***	.627***		
Online Com	All	304	.161**	.253***	.133**	.244***	
Rel Sat	ELDR	153					
Idealisation	ELDR	153	.609***				
Trust	ELDR	153	.496***	.662***			
Love	ELDR	153	.577***	.682***	.585***		
Online Com	ELDR	153	.109	.177*	.181*	.183*	
Rel Sat	MLDR	99					
Idealisation	MLDR	99	.533***				
Trust	MLDR	99	.545***	.672***			
Love	MLDR	99	.652***	.777***	.701***		
Online Com	MLDR	99	.179*	.279**	0.11	.246**	
Rel Sat	GCR	52					
Idealisation	GCR	52	.729***				
Trust	GCR	52	.569***	.595***			
Love	GCR	52	.649***	.788***	.56***		
Online Com	GCR	52	.266**	.301**	-0.13	.301**	

Table 4 : Correlations for Relationship Satisfaction, Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication. \*\*\* Indicates  $p < .001$ , \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ , \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ .



The first regression included all three-distance groups (GCR, MLDR & ELDR). A significant regression equation was found ( $F(4,299) = 57.439, p < .05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .435. Idealisation ( $\beta = .272, p < .05$ ), Trust ( $\beta = .145, p < .05$ ) and Love ( $\beta = .318, p < .05$ ) were found to be significantly positively correlated with Relationship Satisfaction.

All	$\beta$	$R^2$	Lower CI	Upper CI	$p$	Semi partial correlations
Constant		.435				
Idealisation	.272		.056	.173	.000	.167
Trust	.145		.015	.149	.017	.105
Love	.318		.089	.218	.000	.204
Online Communication	-.005		-.009	.008	.911	-.005

Table 5: Table indicating beta values, R-squared values, Confidence intervals, significance values and semi partial correlation values for all participants.  $N = 304$  Note. CI = Confidence Interval.

The second regression included just the ELDR group. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(4,148) = 27.392, p < .05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .425. Idealisation ( $\beta = .354, p < .05$ ) and Love ( $\beta = .280, p < .05$ ) were found to be significantly and positively correlated with Relationship Satisfaction.

All	$\beta$	$R^2$	Lower CI	Upper CI	$p$	Semi partial correlations
Constant		.425				
Idealisation	.354		.075	.244	.000	.232
Trust	.102		-.041	.165	.238	.074
Love	.280		.057	.245	.002	.198
Online Communication	-.024		-.013	.009	.708	-.023

Table 6: Table indicating beta values, R-squared values, Confidence intervals, significance values and semi partial correlation values for ELDR participants  $N = 153$  Note. CI = Confidence Interval.

The Third regression included just the MLDR group A significant regression equation was found ( $F(4, 94) = 18.533, p < .05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .441. Love ( $\beta = .519, p < .05$ ) was found to be significantly positively correlated with Relationship Satisfaction.

All	$\beta$	$R^2$	Lower CI	Upper CI	$p$	Semi partial correlations
Constant		.441				
Idealisation	.002		-.107	.108	.986	.001
Trust	.176		-.027	.215	.126	.119
Love	.519		.128	.395	.000	.300
Online Communication	.031		-.013	.019	.699	.030

*Table 7: Table indicating beta values, R-squared values, Confidence intervals, significance values and semi partial correlation values for MLDR participants. N= 99. Note. CI = Confidence Interval.*

The fourth regression included just the GCR group. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(4, 47) = 16.279, p < .05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .581. Idealisation ( $\beta = .447, p < .05$ ) was found to be significantly positively correlated with Relationship Satisfaction. However due to the small sample, results reported here may not have enough power to give an accurate representation.

All	$\beta$	$R^2$	Lower CI	Upper CI	$p$	Semi partial correlations
Constant		.581				
Idealisation	.447		.043	.302	.010	.253
Trust	.254		-.007	.290	.061	.181
Love	.117		-.079	.169	.467	.069
Online Communication	.131		-.009	.035	.242	.112

*Table 8: Table indicating beta values, R-squared values, Confidence intervals, significance values and semi partial correlation values for GCR participant. N=52. Note. CI = Confidence Interval.*

## Quantitative Discussion

An ANOVA was performed to detect significant differences in Idealisation, Relationship-Satisfaction, Trust, Love & Online Communication scores, across GCR, MLDR and ELDR. This research separates LDRs into two distinct distance categories to investigate the effect of

distance on a number of factors. A significant difference was found between the groups in Trust, Idealisation, Love and Online Communication. This suggests LDRs should be separated into distinct distance categories in future as they differ in these factors.

GCRs were reported to have Relationship Satisfaction predicted by levels of Idealisation, GCRs also reported the lowest levels of Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication. MLDRs were reported to have Relationship Satisfaction predicted by levels of Love, and were also found to have significantly higher levels of Trust and Love than GCRs. ELDRs were found to have Relationship Satisfaction predicted by levels of Love and Idealisation, and were also found to have significantly higher levels of Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication.

There was no significant difference detected in Relationship Satisfaction between the three distance groups. This is consistent with research suggesting that Relationship Satisfaction reported in LDRs is equal to GCRs (for a review, see Stafford, 2010). Similarly, this research suggests that neither those in ELDRs or MLDRs are at a disadvantage; this also supports previous research suggesting that those in LDRs are at no disadvantage regarding happiness in their relationship (Dargie, Blair, Goldfinger, & Pukall, 2015).

Levels of Idealisation in LDRs are significantly higher in ELDRs than GCRs, which supports the claims of Stafford and Reske (1990). However their justifications for higher levels of Idealisation in LDRs was explained to be due to “limited contact”. However, this is no longer applicable as ELDRs actually reported higher levels of Online Communication than GCRs, so there is no longer a block of communication present in ELDRs. The levels of higher Idealisation may be explained by the virtual-identity hypothesis (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008) suggesting that social networking sites allow for the creation of more idealised identities and selective positive self-presentation (Stafford, 2010).

ELDRs found higher levels of Trust than GCRs, similarly MLDRs also found higher levels of Trust compared to GCRs. These results differ to research where similar levels of Trust were found in participants of LDRs and GCRs (Guldner & Swensen, 1995). This could be explained by the higher levels of the computer-mediated communication which research suggested increased trust in online relationships (Hardey, 2004). Compared with 1995, Online Communication is more immersive and immediate since methods of remote communications have improved, as will be discussed in the qualitative section of this report.

There may also be more opportunity to display behaviors indicating predictability, due to the regularity with which partners are available to communicate remotely. Alternatively the higher levels of Trust may occur because individuals who are willing to become involved in MLDRs or ELDRs may be those who already have higher levels of Trust prior to entering into their relationships.

Levels of Love were found to be significantly higher in ELDRs than GCRs. Higher levels of Love were also found in MLDRs than GCRs. This does not mean higher levels of emotional “love” but higher levels of the combination of the components passion, commitment and intimacy measured by the scale. This supports the barrier model theory (Lund, 1985), and ‘The investment Model’ theory (Rusbult, 1980), as these theories suggests investment can increase commitment. The high levels of time and financial investment required to conduct an LDR could account for higher commitments scores, which could lead to higher Love scores.

In accordance with the first hypothesis of this research, ELDRs have significantly higher levels of Trust, Idealisation, Love, and Online Communication than GCRs (although Love was predicted to be significantly lower in EDLRs). For this hypothesis (H1) it is correct that a significant difference was found between the three distance groups. MLDRs were found to have significantly higher levels of Trust and Love than GCRs. However there were no significant differences in any of the factors between ELDRs and MLDRs. This suggests that although there are differences between LDRs and GCRs, once a relationship has a moderate distance, it does not differ from ELDRs on Relationship Satisfaction, Trust, Love or Online Communication. This contradicts previous research that suggested that Moderate and Extreme Long Distance Relationships should be regarded as separate sub-categories of LDRs (England, 2017).

The regression results presented above are overall consistent with expectations based on previous literature. All four regressions suggest the model presented account for high levels of variance within Relationship Satisfaction. This means that the model presented can be confident that the predictors for Relationship Satisfaction do account for a large proportion of the variance in Relationship Satisfaction. However the groups used in this analysis were not of equal size. Additionally there were high correlations found between the measurements used.

In the second research question, it was predicted that Relationship Satisfaction would be positively predicted by Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online Communication in all distance groups. In the first regression, Idealisation, Trust and Love all significantly predicted Relationship Satisfaction and accounted for 43.5% of the variance. These results concur with the literature, which suggested that central components affecting Relationship Satisfaction in GCR included Idealisation (Murray et al., 1996), Trust (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017) and Love (Sternberg, 1986). These results suggest that in any type of relationship, regardless of distance, Idealisation, Trust and Love, are significant in achieving Relationship Satisfaction. This suggests that Idealisation, Love, and Trust are all important and interconnected in relationships. Trust being a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction is in line with research suggesting individuals with high levels of Trust are more secure and confident in their partners and interpret events in accordance with their positive expectations (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001). Online Communication was not found to be a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in any relationship type studied.

In answer to the second part of the second research question, looking at predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in specifically ELDRs, results suggested that Idealisation and Love accounted for 42.5% of variance in Relationship Satisfaction. However these two components are correlated fairly strongly, suggesting there is some overlap between them, however this is to be expected with the nature of idealisation. These results strengthen Sternberg's triangulation theory (1986) suggesting that love is needed for the longevity of a relationship, as a satisfactory relationship is longer lasting (Hendrick et al., 1998). Findings that Idealisation positively predicts Relationship Satisfaction are in concurrence with previous research that suggests Idealisation is positively associated with Relationship Satisfaction (Lee & Pistole, 2012) in LDRs. This suggests that Idealisation does predict Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs.

However, Trust was not found to be a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs. This fails to replicate research that Trust was a significant attribute in predicting Relationship Satisfaction in online relationships (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). However, Trust was found to be significantly correlated with Relationship Satisfaction ( $R=.496, p < .05$ ). This may suggest that trust shares variance with the other components, as it does also highly correlate with Idealisation ( $R=.662, p < .05$ ) and Love ( $R=.585, p < .05$ ).

Overlap in definitions across different bodies of literature may explain the substantial bivariate correlations. Alternatively it may be the case that those in ELDRs are already trusting, as trust becomes a prerequisite of being able to begin a LDR. The results may suggest a ceiling effect of trust.

Online Communication was also found not to be a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs. This may be due to individuals in ELDRs only being able to communicate with their partner online, and therefore it does not predict their satisfaction because it is just an instrument used to conduct their relationship.

For MLDRs, Love was the only significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction, and accounted for 44.1% of the variance. This again strengthens Sternberg's triangulation of love theory (1986). Idealisation, Trust and Online Communication were found not to be significant predictors of Relationship Satisfaction. This suggests that there are other aspects involved in Relationship Satisfaction in relationships with a moderate distance, which have yet to be explored under the current model. This model differs from the results of the ELDR regression, suggesting that although there are no significant differences in Idealisation, Love, Trust or Online Communication between ELDRs and MLDRs, these separate distance categories do have different predictors of Relationship Satisfaction. This suggests that these groups should be viewed as separate sub-categories of LDRs.

For GCRs, Idealisation was the only significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction, however it accounted for 58.1% of the variance. This backs up research claims suggesting that seeing a partner in a best possible light is a critical feature of a satisfying relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1997). The current research suggests that the current model accounts for a considerable amount of variance in Relationship Satisfaction. However, this sample is under powered ( $1 - \beta = .54$ , according to GPower) and this may account for the lack of significance in other factors within the model.

Trust was only found to be a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction when the data set was analysed as a whole, but not when distance groups were assessed individually. Online Communication was also not found to be significant in any part of the analysis. As mentioned earlier this may be due to Online Communication being integrated as an instrument to the functioning of the relationship, therefore is not a predictor of the levels of satisfaction in relationships.

The ANOVA addressed H3, as it investigated the frequency of Online Communication comparatively across the distance groups. Online Communication was reportedly higher in ELDRs than GCRs. This is unsurprising as individuals in ELDRs commonly only have the option to communicate online, as face-to-face visits are often a rarity (or in some cases have never happened). It is a possibility that those in ELDRs have to work harder to cultivate Online Communication. All types of relationships used online Communication, as even GCR couples do experience occurrences when they are not together all the time, due to work or other commitments in their lives. Interestingly, there were no significant differences found between MLDRs and GCRs. Those in MLDRs are still able to see their partners more frequently than in ELDRs, therefore this highlights the uniqueness of ELDRs with regard to Online Communication. Individuals in ELDRs may put more effort into communicating online and therefore rely on it more in their relationship.

These findings are encouraging, however there are several limitations of the quantitative part of this study that need to be acknowledged. Firstly the recruitment technique for the online questionnaire meant the study was advertised in a way that resulted in unequal distance group sizes. This may have left the GCR group lacking enough power to achieve significant results, therefore caution should be taken before generalising the results to all GCRs. Additionally, the dataset is over representative of participants of a bisexual orientation, possibly also due to the methods of recruitment. Although current research is not looking at sexual orientation comparatively, the percentage of bisexuals in this study is more than in the general population so this must be considered when making general conclusions of this research.

This research is unique in that it has split long distance relationships into subgroups of moderate and extreme. It has also used multiple independent variables in multiple ways, which has not been seen in previous research on LDRs to the same extent. However, some quantitative findings contradict previous research, such as Trust not predicting Relationship Satisfaction (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006).

To conclude, in line with the researcher's hypotheses, ELDRs reported significantly higher levels of Trust, Idealisation and Online Communication than GCRs. Similarly in line with researcher's hypothesis, Online Communication was significantly higher in ELDRs than GCRs. Contrary to the research hypothesis, levels of Love were reported to be significantly

higher in ELDRs than GCRs. MLDRs also reported higher levels of Trust and Love than GCRs. In line with hypotheses there were no significant differences in Relationship Satisfaction between any of the groups. In line with the second hypothesis, Idealisation was a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs. Contrary to the second hypothesis, Trust, Idealisation, and Love were not all found to be significant predictors across all three-distance groups. It was found that Idealisation and Love significantly predicted Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs, Love significantly predicted Relationship Satisfaction in MLDRs, and Idealisation significantly predicted Relationship Satisfaction in GCRs. Although there were no significant differences between the dependent variables between ELDRS and MLDRs, the factors that predicted Relationship Satisfaction were different, which leads to the conclusion that further research must be conducted to compare the two distinct subtypes of LDR. The second half of this study will now use qualitative methods to add depth and insight to these qualitative findings, in order to give a more holistic picture of how these factors are experienced in an ELDR. This could explain how Love and Idealisation are experienced in an ELDR.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

#### **The lived experience of Extreme Long distance Relationships**

The interviews highlighted the problems that participants faced in an ELDR, but also highlighted the enjoyable aspects experienced by those in ELDRs along with the creative ways of how they create and manage experiences together. The subjective experiences expressed by participants can be organised into four main themes: 'Preventing Solutions / Causing Conflict', which includes subthemes of; 'Conflict Resolution', 'Physical Presence Needed During Conflict', 'Blaming the Distance', and 'Misinterpretation Due to Remote Communication'. The second theme, 'Adjusting to the Distance', has subthemes of 'Investment and Sacrifice' and 'Relationship Status'. The third theme, 'Virtual Presence' has subthemes of; 'Communication Is Key yet Talking Remotely Is Not the Same' and 'Mimicking Physicality'. The final theme, 'Hopes and Fears about Cohabitation', includes sub themes of 'Risk of Inability to Cohabit Harmoniously' and 'Used to independence'. The sub themes in this report help to highlight the commonalities and contradictions in participants' responses, as well as highlighting points of particular interest.



Participants' experiences were over all very mixed, with very negative attitudes towards the distance itself, but overall, overwhelmingly positive towards the relationship and relationship dynamics. Participants did share some similar experiences in their discussion of their relationships, surprisingly often making nearly identical comments or remarks in some instances. The participants also all experienced very different relationships, and the focus of the interview was different for each individual participant. However this is the nature of relationships and IPA.

The transcription of the data used the following annotations: [...] indicates omitted text; ... indicates a long pause; [ ] indicates additional information such as sighing or laughing; "Ermm" is used throughout by participants and denotes an audible filler word whilst the participant is thinking or processing what to say next; *R* indicates the researcher.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Preventing Solutions/ Causing Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Conflict Resolution</li> <li>b) Physical Presence Needed During Conflict</li> <li>c) Blaming the Distance</li> <li>d) Misinterpretation due to Remote Communication</li> </ul>
Adjusting to the Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Investment and Sacrifice</li> <li>b) Relationship Status</li> </ul>
Virtual Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Communication is Key yet Talking Remotely is not the Same</li> <li>b) Mimicking Physicality</li> </ul>
Hopes and Fears about Cohabitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Risk of Inability to Cohabit Harmoniously</li> <li>b) Used to Independence</li> </ul>

*Table 9: Table depicting main themes and sub-themes identified in the qualitative analysis.*

### **Preventing Solutions/Causing Conflict**

The first main theme in this analysis addresses how individuals interviewed struggle with the distance as a component of their relationships. Each individual has their own struggles that stem from the distance, and some find it harder than others. This theme separates into sub themes of ‘Preventing Solutions’ and ‘Causing Conflict’, which includes subthemes of; ‘Conflict Resolution’, ‘Physical Presence Needed during Conflict’, ‘Blaming the Distance’, and ‘Misinterpretation due to Remote Communication’.

### **Conflict Resolution**

A concurrent point throughout the interviews was that the distance prohibits the individuals from sitting down with their partner and discussing, or addressing, their relationship issues. The issues don’t necessarily have to be surrounding their relationship, as Samantha mentions that the distance makes it difficult to support their partner with their own daily emotional struggles from afar, although they try their hardest to give support, the distance does complicate things.

*S: err... h- he is like a little defeatist [...] if that makes sense like something bad will happen and he’ll be like “oh that’s just my life” or something like that so [laugh] [...] hard to kind of support them from four and a half thousand miles away [laughs] [185-193]*

Samantha feels her partner has a defeatist personality, and although being closer together would not change his personality and entirely solve the issue, she feels it would make it easier to support him during episodes of higher negativity. Perhaps a simple gesture like a reassuring touch would go a long way, but the inability to provide that emotional support means the upset becomes exacerbated by the distance. This emotional turmoil is also very distressing to Samantha as she obviously wants to support her partner but there is a considerable distance stopping her from doing simple things.

Also regarding how individuals address conflict in an ELDR, Gary reveals that he is more prone to avoiding the conflict of addressing major issues in his relationship. Gary states that because he sees his partner infrequently, it makes him “scared” to bring up these difficult topics because he does not wish to spoil the precious face-to-face time that they have together.

*G: the more time you spend with them the more comfortable you're gonna be with them and the better it's gonna be in the long run which is why I wanna move so I'm not having to have to keep doing this crap of going over once every couple of months and then, you know when you do see them you're scared to say anything because you don't wanna rock the boat [...] I don't wanna address any of the issues and then the whole trips ruined because shes gone in a mood and you're just like "oh fuck" [...] you wanna enjoy the time you spend together rather than tryna do the difficult conversations about things [229-240]*

Gary talks about not wanting to “rock the boat” which depicts how fragile he believes their time spent together is, and how averse he is to using that time to deal with conflict. This has led to Gary’s decision to move nearer to his partner so he can create a “comfortable” space where these issues can be discussed without ruining the phone calls or trips that are so imperative to him. The fragility of their physical time together causes Gary to become avoidant and anxious towards dealing with conflict. Concurrently this avoidance can lead to frustration as Gary feels he is bottling up a lot of emotions.

*G: ermm, and, I can't...talk to her about certain things because I know what kind of mood it's gonna put her in [...] so while I can talk to her about anything, I have to pick the right time [...] and it has to really come to a point where I can't hold it back I bottle a lot of things in with her [...] just because I don't wanna push her, erm so that does irritate me [550-558]*

Gary does admit that he restricts himself from talking openly about topics in his relationship due to fear of a negative reaction. Gary highlights the importance of finding the “right time” to have a sensitive discussion, to avoid the negative mood he is certain it will produce. His choice to restrict his sensitive conversations does lead to his own frustration, as he admits having to censor certain topics from conversations that he wants to address, is causing resentment to build. Another frustration he feels is due to his own inability to support his partner, which he feels is exacerbated by the distance. He reveals his partner’s lack of self-esteem and how he is really struggling to help her with the distance between them.

*G: oh no plenty of things are broken plenty of things need to be fixed, just not right now, I can't do it from here I can't do it, I can't fix things long distance, [...] and things have to be fixed things absolutely have to or else she's never gonna be happy in her life in general, this is the biggest problem, she's an unhappy person [...] and she needs... she needs a friend, near her [722-729]*

*G: but you know it's all part of, getting her self-esteem back, and I can only*

*do so much, from a distance [578-579]*

Gary is irritated with the distance for hindering his own efforts to help his partner address these issues. The distance is causing him to feel helpless in his relationship, as he believes he is unable to help his partner address her own emotional issues from a distance. However, these issues are of high importance to him, which heightens the level of urgency for the issues to be resolved. Therefore for Gary, moving closer and lessening the impact of that distance is the only conceivable option, as it removes the barrier that is preventing them from addressing their issues.

Alternatively, Polly states that she and her partner do manage to discuss their issues, although they do still find this challenging, to the point of nearly terminating their relationship. She indicates her hopefulness that “everything will be okay once we’re together”, which emphasises how that distance is strenuous on their relationship.

*P: Ermm I guess, maybe we- we do talk about everything like if we have an argument like we have to sit down and talk about it for ages and like work through it like I think that’s what I always wanna do, ermm but like we have had really really bad parts of our relationship like that were, we’ve basically almost broken up, like got so close to it, [...] but I think we always kinda say “it’ll be fine when we live near each other” [...] and, we’re always like waiting for that time, but I think I won’t even know like how good we actually are for each other until we are in the same place [206-215]*

Polly reveals how strongly her emotional well being is affected by this. She acknowledges the uncertainty she feels towards the relationship working in close proximity and feels strong doubts that some issues cannot be addressed even with the closure of the distance. The conflict she experiences in the relationship, she ensures is discussed at length, until she feels it has been resolved. When the conflict brought her close to terminating the relationship, they were able to “work through it”. By reassuring herself the conflict will not be present when they are together, this allows her to continue with the relationship. Polly is uncertain whether the relationship will translate well in close proximity or whether they will still experience problems.

The distance accounts for some inability to solve issues in the relationships. Although these individuals can attempt to resolve conflict, they feel there are certain issues that are

unable to be addressed or dealt with at a great distance. Participants also look to decrease the distance as a solution.

### **Physical Presence Needed during Conflict**

The difficulty participants experience when attempting to resolve conflict at a distance may be due to lack of physical presence during an argument. The close proximity is sought out both during and after a difficult discussion has taken place.

Gary expands on his inability to discuss these difficult topics in his relationship because the distance means that his partner can easily avoid the conversation as they can just “hang up” or stop responding to him. For him it is important that he can physically address the issue head on with his partner in a situation where she cannot avoid the issue.

*G: But again it's all due to the distance [...] you know its very easy when you're talking on the phone to just hang up and that's it, but unless you're sitting there in front of them and you push them into a corner and there's nowhere for them to go, their stuck [558-563]*

This physicality is important to Gary as he feels it necessary in order to have the discussion. Gary's partner's tendency to avoid conflict by ceasing communication leads him to believe that she does need to be “cornered” in a metaphorical sense, so that the issue can be addressed. The avoidant behavior he experiences is easier at a distance as once someone ceases to respond through phone or online communication, there is no way Gary can express his feelings to his partner.

Physicality is also important after a conflict, when the emotions have died down and they wish to make amends. A simple act of physical touch (e.g. a hug or hand hold) and emotional comfort can help to relieve the emotional turmoil post-conflict. This is something that is missing in ELDRs as after an argument the partners are both left in the resonance of that argument. Polly discusses how she finds it difficult in an ELDR to move on when left with no relief for that anger.

*P: like we had an argument and like we didn't speak for like the whole next day and when you're not seeing them and you're not speaking to them, it- you're like left with like that feeling of that argument – like of that anger [...] ju- you're just thinking about it constantly [laughs][...]I think it just makes me feel really confused about my relationship [272-286]*

By not talking to each other after a disagreement, they are essentially cutting off the only communicative connection that they have to each other, which exaggerates the emotional tension. Polly states that this leaves her feeling doubts towards about her relationship as she is left to deal with her anger internally, which can lead to increasing her anger and not resolving it. The distance creates a void where the partner cannot physically show them that they are no longer upset or angry and instead leaves the partners in feelings of negativity, allowing for doubts to enter.

However the lack of physical presence can be experienced as a positive, as one participant felt it has increased her own independence.

*E: but because he's not here, physically, [...] erm I've had to become a lot more independent again [...] so if anything it's been a positive thing.[462-468]*

The positive emotions felt from regaining an independent lifestyle have encouraged Elizabeth to become more independent. Her independence is something that Elizabeth considers positive, and becoming less reliant on her partners physical presence is something she holds in high regard. Although the lack of physical presence has led to complications in resolving conflict, the benefit of obtaining independence is seen as a positive; this is explored in more detail later in analysis.

### **Blaming the Distance**

As discussed, the distance can prevent solutions to issues the couples have, but it could be considered that the distance actually creates problems in the relationship. Or at least the individuals are using distance as a scapegoat for their problems. We have seen a few examples of this with Gary and Polly revealing their ideology that things will get better when the distance closes. Therefore the individuals are not delusional, they are aware that their relationship has problems just like any relationship, but they may place a large amount of the blame on distance.

The distance is frustrating and there are relationship issues that can stem from that frustration. For example Samantha comments on how the distance puts doubts in her mind about the relationship.

*S: yeah I feel like i- [laughs] i- it is difficult cause, one of the things that I*

*have noticed about the distance is that puts doubts, in my mind [...] like, I know I want to be with him, then part of me's like "oh if we're struggling now, are we gonna struggle when we're in the same place" if that makes some sort of sense [329-344]*

*S: ... dunno [laughs] like honestly things have gotten more difficult since the distance, started, like...when we were together we were fine, and then distance and then it was like...gah it's really hard to explain [laughs][...]...er...[long pause] trying to think [laughs] ... [...] [In Canada] we were like, we weren't arguing, or like we got a long really well, [...] there wasn't really any sort of issues [...] just like some really good honey moon period [...] [now] we'll have like, little disagreements but it's not really been anything that we haven't been able to fix [...] pretty quickly... if that makes sense [196-213]*

Even though she knows she wants to be with her partner, the distance makes her consider the possibility that there may always be struggles in the relationship. This is especially difficult for Samantha as she is aware that she and her partner did not have these struggles before the distance. She mentions that before that there were no arguments or disagreements, and feels that it is the new distance in their relationship that is the catalyst for conflict in their relationship.

However it is hard to tell whether it *is* the distance that is the cause of these problems, but by blaming it on the distance it perhaps helps the individuals cope with the struggles, as they can believe that once the distance is reduced, their relationship will improve. This links back to the idea of desiring proximity, which is seen as a solution to the issues that distance prevents solutions to.

*P: because I thi- I dunno if it is the distance that's what I've always like blamed it on, but... we have these arguments and they are intense because we don't see each other and maybe it's that frustration of not seeing each other that causes it [...] but...like I said I'm not gonna know until we're actually like, seeing each other regularly [288-293]*

Polly openly admits to blaming her problems on the distance, and the couple's frustration of not being able to see each other. This means that it is yet to be determined on whether the relationship will translate well into close proximity, as it can be difficult to disentangle what problems are onset by distance and what problems will continue in close proximity.

Gary feels that the distance plays a massive part in his relationship problems, as it can be distressing missing your partner, or being unable to see each other after a fight, as mentioned earlier. Gary describes the distance as tiring and exhausting and he feels that it really does

require a lot of emotional strength to be able to “deal” with the distance.

*G: ermm... and I know- well I hope, that things will work out properly eventually, more likely when I move [...] cause like I keep saying I think the distance is the biggest issue [675-678]*

*G: because it was just too much, I don't think either of us were really in a position to, handle long distance relationship [49-50]*

Gary reveals his relationship has broken down before, and he does directly blame the distance for one of the reasons why this happened, as the emotional strain it placed on him required more than he was able to give, and as he says, he wasn't “in a position” to handle that strain of distance.

*G: I think it's a multiple- , I think it's a multitude of reasons, I think distance plays a massive part of it [...] ermm not being able to, see each other whenever you've had a fight or whenever you're really missing each other just when you want it's very very difficult [...] ermm when we started our relationship the first time because this is the second time we're on this, ermm, it was very, erm, tiring because you'd just miss them so much and all you do is think about that person [...] and it was tiring and it was exhausting and that's one of the reasons it ultimately failed the first time [35-47]*

Gary's false start of “I know- well I hope” is a perfect illustration of this point where even though as these quotes portray, he does highly blame the emotional strain of the distance for a great deal of his relational down falls, there is a spec of doubt on whether these issues will go away when the distance finishes.

One individual feels that only down fall in her relationship is the distance itself. Elizabeth doesn't appear to have any doubts about her relationship. Although the distance can perpetuate a decline in mental health.

*E: yeah, just cause I tend to struggle anyway, if I'm, missing him, particularly badly one day then it kind of amplifies everything else [...]so that's been tough to adjust to but I think we've gotten into a nice rhythm now [...] yeah and if anything it's been good for my mental health cause I feel like I depended on people too much, [455-461]*

*E: about the relationship ermm.. not really no I mean I, the distance is sometimes a struggle as far as mental health goes, but nothing about the relationship makes me unhappy [450-452]*

Elizabeth does admit that the distance causes her mental health to deteriorate. Her own struggle with mental health is touched upon and she acknowledges that intensely missing her partner can amplify her other negative emotions, which can combine with the struggles of



mental health in a downward spiral. Elizabeth feels that although adjusting to that cycle of mental health and intense longing for her distant partner was difficult, she feels that she has found a successful solution. Although the distance can intensify Elizabeth's mental health struggles, she states that nothing about the relationship makes her unhappy, she remains satisfied and fulfilled in her relationship.

### **Misinterpretation due to Remote Communication**

The reliance on remote communication due to the distance can lead to misinterpretation, which can in turn lead to conflict. The couples are only able to talk to each other remotely most of the time, so some key misunderstandings can happen as they are missing certain aspects of everyday communication, such as body language and tone, which are necessary components for full interpretation. Occasionally this misinterpretation can lead to conflict.

*S: sometimes we'll have like, little disagreements and I feel like I start most of them without even meaning to [laughs] so, or like maybe I'll say something and it can quite easily get taken like the wrong way [...] and like if it gets taken the wrong way I'm like oh well I didn't mean that and, how do I go about saying it like not the wrong way [497-503]*

Samantha feels that her partner misinterprets her well-intended comments and this leads to conflict. Samantha acknowledges that her misunderstood words are the start of conflict, and seeks for an alternative phrasing to get her point across. That struggle to find the right words could lead to very panicked emotions.

Polly reveals that most of her conflict happens over the phone. As the phone calls are only part of that person's physicality, Polly finds it easier to get angry as she can only hear a voice that aggravates her and not the whole of the person that she loves.

*P: I think like we can like have a phone call and just one person says the wrong thing and then that's like the phone calls ruined it's an argument, over something really stupid [...] it's mostly over the phone, the arguments [...] I think so, I think everything's just better when we're seeing each other and when we're together, but a phone call when you're not seeing each other you're just hearing their*

*voice [...] I think it's easier to get angry [...] cause you're not there looking at them like aww [...] [laughs] yeah exactly, you just hear their annoying voice [184-197]*

Polly highlights how quickly a wrong word can descend into an argument over the phone, and how easily that misinterpretation can lead to conflict. Polly finds this frustrating, as the conflict is “stupid” and unnecessary, as it would have been easily avoided. The ease at which Polly can slip into anger over the phone is worsened by her inability to see and experience her partner as a whole. She resents his voice because that is the only connection she feels with him over the phone. Polly reports feeling everything being better when she is with her partner and she is able to see him. Closing the distance would reduce this type of conflict, but misinterpretation can still happen when partners are physically together.

### **Adjusting to the Distance**

The second main theme is that distance requires adjustment, although distance is subjective to each individual. LDRs require a bespoke strategy to cope with the distance, which can often drain resources. The individual's access to resources can alter their perception of distance. Different individuals viewed the same distance as more or less according to their own resources of both time and finances. It can be upsetting if the actual distance and the desired distance are not in line with each other. This theme has subthemes of ‘Investment and Sacrifice’ and ‘Relationship Status’.

### **Investment and Sacrifice**

The participants also reveal that they are forced to adjust to their LDRs by investing a considerable amount of financial and time resources into the upkeep of their relationship. The participants are making sacrifices in other areas of their lives in order to continue the relationship.

Samantha has a negative perception towards travelling to see her partner. Samantha's full-time education means that her focus is on her studies which leaves her and her partner with little disposable income of which to spend on travel to invest in their relationship. The financial element of travelling to see each other is a critical issue for them and they have not been able to see each other for eight months because of it.

*S: but he also doesn't have a passport so he'll have to pay for that [...] and*

*get time off work and yeah, it just got really complicated so [30-34]*

Samantha discusses finance in a negative way, and portrays it as quite a complicated matter, especially because her partner has extra costs and has more difficulty arranging time off work, which increases the difficulty of finding the time and resources to travel to be together.

Samantha's struggles with gathering the time and finances to see her partner cause her to dismiss the concept of it being an achievable goal in the short term. Samantha has also had multiple plans fall through due to her partner not being able to secure funding.

*S: yeah cause he was supposed to be coming over in a couple of months, but then obviously that's not happening, and then I was gonna over there with another friend who I met out there, [...] but it doesn't sound like that's gonna happen either [...] when his plans fell through I was like really angry like really annoyed, like, cause he's like "oh I don't think I can afford it" [...] it's like he just needed like, not even that much for a passport or just like to cover like a little bit because the prices did go up [...] and it's like, did you really have to buy that gaming laptop? So yeah it was like, really frustrating [713-731]*

Samantha felt very frustrated on hearing that her partner spent his finances on a laptop instead of putting it towards seeing her. Samantha places high importance on wanting to invest to spend time with her partner, but their situation makes it difficult. Samantha juxtaposes the expense for a plane ticket with the expense for a new laptop, as they are both big financial commitments. The imbalance of willingness to invest in the relationship causes Samantha great frustration. Samantha feels sacrifices are needed (although not always managed) to enable the possibility of travelling to see each other to invest in their relationship.

Alternatively, Elizabeth describes planning to see her partner as "winging it" and does not act as if the financial element of travel is a big issue to them, and she is able to see her partner at regular intervals. Elizabeth's self-employment is seen as a benefit as it allows for more flexibility around travel.

*E: yeah, its been good going so far we're aiming for every two months at the moment [...] self employment helps [...] ermm he's not but the company he works for a pretty good about giving time off and flexible working hours and stuff so that's pretty good [21-31]*

The flexibility Elizabeth has in her relationship due to her self-employment and her partner's flexible job means that they are able to spend time together with ease. Additionally, Elizabeth's full time work means her attitude towards investing her finances in her relationship is more positive.

*E: ermm, [exhales] we, ah it- to be honest it's kind of free and loose, we tend to do it like I say alternate every two months, [...] we don't tend to plan the next trip more than a couple of months ahead [...] so, we just, I mean, I know when my busy periods at work are and when I can't do, so I just have to try and, plan it- just kinda wing it really [91-98]*

Elizabeth has a much more blasé attitude towards seeing her partner, which she expresses positively. Elizabeth and her partner alternate travel expenses and visitations, and this co-operation and coordination in organisation allows for more frequent visitations.

Polly also highlights the importance of resources in a LDR. Polly's partner was originally in Ireland, but moved to Manchester not long before the interview took place. Canterbury to Manchester is still a considerable distance but because of the lived experience of him living even further away, it makes it seem less distant than if they began as GCR. For example a plane or ferry journey is now no longer required, lowering travel time and expenses.

*P: but I think if most couples were like I'm moving to Manchester, from Canterbury they'd be like what the fuck how are we gonna do this but I think for me, now like we were both like oh my god this is gonna be so easy it's only gonna take a few hours amazing! [...] yeah exactly, so if it wasn't so extreme in the start It probably would have been awful but because it was, it's like half the time basically and the money as well so it's a lot easier [502-509]*

Polly states that it is now so much easier and cheaper than before, and she feels much closer to him. Yet if he had moved from a close proximity to the same place in Manchester, it would seem like a much more dramatic distance. The partners didn't have to move in together to ease the financial and time constraints of the distance. Participants reported adjusting their recourses in order to commit to their LDR. The willingness to invest resources

to see your partner more often can help the distance feel smaller and partners to feel closer and more connected.

However, there are other sacrifices involved in the maintenance of LDRs. Polly is sacrificing her own career in order to see her partner, as she admits to taking time off work and putting her other responsibilities as a low priority.

*P: ermm... I guess... we've taken time off work [...] so it's whenever we have time but like we don't really think about it that much and I probably shouldn't see him as much as I do because I'm behind on everything[...] yeah, which I need to change yeah [64-75]*

Polly is reluctant to admit that she is putting her relationship at a higher priority than her career responsibilities. Polly admits to being impulsive in her decisions to see her partner, which may account for her falling behind in the other responsibilities in her life. She is aware of the need to focus on her work life, however she is willing to make adjustments to her schedule in order to see her partner whenever she can.

### **Relationship Status**

As well as adjusting financial and time resources in their relationships, some participants reported adjusting to the distance by changing the status of their relationship. The relationship issues individual to each relationship caused participants to adjust their relationship when it was somewhat exacerbated by distance. Whilst one participant chose to adjust their relationship by formalising the commitment, another participant chose to deformalise theirs through allowing non-monogamous behaviour.

Samantha feels that the biggest problem with the distance is lack of physical intimacy, with even emotional intimacy being harder to achieve remotely. Samantha reveals that it did come as a shock to her how much the lack of physical intimacy affected her.

*S:I feel like, there's quite a while where, lack of intimacy was, a really big issue [...] that was on- I feel like that was one of the big shock things about when it first happened, because we were pretty much living together [...] and then, was in a totally different country, so, that was like, the biggest shock I think [...] ermm..Physical, probably emotional as well, yeah [300-312]*

*S:...like even though I feel like I can still open up to him, I feel like it is that little bit harder [...] I feel so...yeah I feel like it's just harder to be emotional [laughs] I guess [316 -319]*

Samantha and her partner have made the decision as a couple to ease the strain of lack

of physical intimacy by becoming an open relationship, meaning that as long as they communicate about it to each other, they have arranged different rules for infidelity and given each other permission to become physically intimate with other people. Infidelity is defined as breaking the faith, and Samantha and her partner have agreed not to see physical intimacy with others as a break of faith, under the condition that they discuss it.

*S: mm not really, we've erm, recently opened up the relationship, to try and like fix the intimacy, issues [640-641]*

*S: ermm, I mean I was, okay with it because, at that point it was just a lot of "I will try anything to, get us to survive this" so, in my opinion I was just like if an open relationship is what's gonna do this, then I'm happy to do that, as long as we like communicate about it and things like [...] yeah it seems to be [working] [670-675]*

*S: yeah, a lot of people say that as soon as I say open relationship everyone goes I can't do that [laughs] [...] oh there's no way I would do if we were in the same place, like at all [696-700]*

By making the decision to change the rules of infidelity in their relationship, they are editing the dynamic of how their relationship works. For them trust is not based on exclusivity but is now based on openness and honesty about their physical acts outside of the relationship. Samantha does say that it's not something she would consider if they were close together.

This means that this is purely a practical solution to their intimacy issue, as they do not have the resources to close the distance in the foreseeable future so they have come up with a creative solution as a couple, that they are both in agreement with. This issue is an example of something that stems from the distance and wouldn't be an issue if they were close geographically.

Elizabeth discussed how the distance itself was the most prominent issue in their relationship. She feels a great deal of trust and love towards her partner and they have decided to marry. This decision means she is making a significant commitment to her partner, as marriage is an agreement to make the relationship work through whatever obstacles come their way (in sickness and in health).

*E: ermm... not that I can think of, I mean other than the ring obviously like that's a, big step, ermm, not really, it hasn't been necessary, [...] I think, ermm the trust was just there, [...] like neither of us felt like we had to prove anything and were both, so forthcoming with information honest about where we are, who we're with*

*like, there's never any worry there [169-176]*

*E: uh there's it's just easy, there's, we don't have to think about anything we don't have to second guess anything it just is...that's the best way I can kind of explain it [...] yeah it feels really natural and easy and comfortable [430-434]*

Elizabeth sees her ring as a sign of trust and of their commitment to each other. Elizabeth is satisfied in her relationship and feels like she has found someone who she can trust and who she shares a deep emotional connection with. Elizabeth is excited to take this next step with her partner, although she acknowledges that there will need to be some changes in her life.

*E: ermm I think it would take some adjustment but I'd be really happy about it [...] I mean the sooner the better as far as I'm concerned [...] so we've spent extensive periods of time in each others company, and we know it works and we're not gonna get under each others feet or annoy each other [489-503]*

Elizabeth is confident that the relationship will adjust well to moving in and marrying her partner. Although they have never lived together, they frequently (every two months) spend long periods of time together (2 to 3 weeks). She is eager for this next chapter to start and end the distance. This step has put a timeframe on the distance ending, as the visa process dictates that they must be married within six months of her partner moving. Putting a clock on the distance makes it less daunting to her as she is now assured the distance is only temporary

*E: ermm but as far as I can understand if we're getting a spouse visa, he, we would have to get married within six months, and he can't work until we're married [215-216]*

Elizabeth is assured that within six months of her partner moving they will be married, meaning they are committed to make the marriage work. Elizabeth's engagement was her relationship's response to adjusting to the distance, and coincidentally, also the demise of the distance.

### **Virtual Presence**

As adjustments have been made to allow the continuation of these LDRs, one crucial aspect of this is adjustment is around communication. As face-to-face communication is difficult to achieve, the participants have had to settle for remote communication. All the participants stated that communication is the most important thing in their ELDR in helping

them cope with the distance. The participants feel that they are able to communicate with their partners with ease as they have worked it into their daily lives. Communication is important to their relationships, although talking remotely is not the same as face-to-face interaction. The participants did develop creative solutions using a selection of different online activities with which to help ease the distance and bring variety into their relationship routines. This theme has subthemes of ‘Communication is Key yet Talking Remotely is not the same’ and ‘Mimicking Physicality’.

### **Communication is Key yet Talking Remotely is not the Same**

The remote communication helps them feel connected to their partner, as they can only create the memories and experiences most GCR couples have, through remote conversation. This means it is the most central part of the relationship.

*S: ...Definitely have to trust each other...and communicate said before if they're not there there's no point [149-150]*

Samantha highlights that she wouldn't feel the point in being with her partner if they were not communicating. Samantha places communication and trust on the same level of importance in her relationship, as she sees these two factors as core to her relationships functionality. Polly expands on this point by going as far as to say that she would feel single if she weren't in constant remote contact with her partner.

*P: ermm I guess we just speak as much as we can [...] like we have phone calls basically like every day almost and if we don't, then it feels really weird because it feels like you're single if you don't keep in contact because you're never seeing them [88-92]*

Polly reveals that she talks to her partner on the phone every day, but this is due to the partners both committing to communicate with each other as often as they are able to. This highlights how important the communication is as it is the only opportunity they have to engage with their partner in a meaningful way. The very act of talking to her partner is the only thing about the ELDR that makes Polly feel like she is actually in a relationship. This is possibly unique to the ELDR as the opportunities to be together are extremely rare.

Elizabeth also ranked communication as important in her relationship. Due to the distance her and her partner are in different time zones, which is worsened by her partner working nights. The time difference means that she has to work harder to incorporate



communication into their daily lives.

*E: oh co- as much communication as possible [...] yeah, it's difficult cause he works nights so we're already on a different schedule, [...]he would go to work at 4pm which would be our 9pm so we've basically got a 5/6 hours window to talk every day [...] it works out really nice actually because I get to do a full day of work and then he tends to wake up at like 4/5 pm our time [110-119]*

Elizabeth mentions that originally working their communication into their schedule was difficult, as they only have a few hours of the day where they are both able to talk. They have now found a system that works well for her. She is able to go to work and then her partner is able to talk to her once she has finished her workload. Elizabeth is well adjusted to this schedule of communicating with her partner, and she is happy to utilise the time she has in order to maintain her relationship.

All the individuals admitted to spending a considerable amount of time on remote communication platforms, such as Skype, phone or messaging. Although talking on the phone helped them feel more connected in the moment, it also reminded them that they are not in a GCR. Talking on a remote platform highlights to Gary that he is far away from his partner, and although he wants to enjoy any connection he can have with her, it does cause a strain on him emotionally.

*G: so I think we just stopped doing that [sigh] I think the biggest problem is that because you can't see each other so often you don't wanna keep being reminded so mu- i- when you hear their voice it's not the same as seeing them [...] it's different so it's kinda easier to deal with [...] it's its I mean we got to the point the first when we were video chatting every single night, and then, we'd hang up and it was just like...I don't wanna do this and the- and then you call back and then it it continue like that and i- that's what I mean by exhausting because it was non-stop it was all the time it was, it was stupid, it was so stupid [499-511]*

Gary reveals how it was so hard for him to say goodbye over Skype, as once that connection was gone he was left alone and reminded of the fact that his partner is not with him. He feels that his need to be constantly talking to her became exhausting, as it must have made him very physically tired and emotionally drained as well. This inability to say goodbye highlights the importance of that sense of connection with a partner.

### **Mimicking Physicality**

All the participants also revealed how they came up with their own, unique ways to

mimic the physicality of their partner remotely. Going beyond simple messaging, with each activity mimicking an aspect of a GCR that they do not get to engage in within their ELDR. Firstly Samantha comments on how she watches her partner live stream games online. This means her partner will play a video game of his choice, and then live stream it online where anyone can watch him play.

*S: ermm no not really, like ermm, which is weird because we used to game a lot but erm sometimes like he'll stream a game and I'll watch the stream [...] but I don't physically have anything to game on, [...] so that, if- I'm sure that if I could game we would do it together [laugh] but erm [...] yeah so like he'll tell me if he's playing something and then he can see if people are watching mm so [...] yeah and sometimes he'll just message me like it's you isn't it? Like [...] yeah it's me [...] yeah it's like he's like having fun and... Yeah you can hear it and sometimes it'll have his housemate in the background going someone's actually watching you [...] yeah [...] yeah it's definitely, well it's quite interesting [laughs] [269-298]*

This mimics the partner support that you might experience going to see a partner play football or other sport. Being able to watch you partner focus on and perform a task in real time, is perhaps a regular aspect of GCRs that is difficult to emulate in LDR. Watching the natural animation of her partner might also be appealing.

Elizabeth admits that she and her partner play an online multiplayer game called 'left 4 dead'. Between 1 – 4 people create a team, and the aim of the game is that they must heal and help fight a zombie apocalypse. This “us against the world” type game could be seen as quite a romantic and intimate experience if it's played as a couple.

*E: sometimes [we'll game together] [laugh] [...] mostly stuff like left 4 dead on the xbox [...] when we're together we game, so, it sort of feels natural to do that when we're apart as well but yeah it does feel more, immediate than just texting back and forth [395-404]*

Elizabeth admits that it feels natural to do this when they are apart, because it is an activity that they do when they are together, The activity also mimics physicality as it doesn't matter where they are in the world, they are seeing the same characters and interactions on their screens. By recreating this activity that they do together, they are able to mimic that closeness. She makes quite a powerful comparison with texting here, using the word “immediate”, suggesting that gaming together can create a more intensive experience of a moment together if the individuals are competent gamers.

Polly discusses how she also recreates an activity that she and her partner do when

they are together by having “Skype dates”, where they both buy food and drink and will interact with each other. This mimics the activity of both engage in the social act of drinking with each other, but over video message rather than face-to-face.

*P: every once in a while we'll go on Skype and get drunk [...] and have like a date so we'll get like a bottle of wine or something [...] [laughs] every now and then but, we haven't done that in a while because we get, so drunk [...] but it's usually until like six in the morning that we're there on the- on the skype and it's like [laughs][...] it is nice it is cute [252-262]*

It is clear that Polly very much enjoys doing this type of thing with her partner, and it creates a fun and social activity where they can feel connected while they are separated. It's also a more immediate real time conversation than texting would be.

Gary also recreates a social activity by playing the game ‘Cards Against Humanity’ online with his partner and friends. This mimics a face-to-face social card game based on dark, shock humour and making people laugh.

*G: erm sometimes we found er cards against humanity [...] an online er thing of that so sometimes you know her sister and brother in law will play as well and that kind of always ends up quite bad [...] in so many ways [529-534]*

This game is usually played in small groups at social events and is a way of creating connections with people as you gain reactions from illicit jokes and situations. Because this is such an emotionally provoking game, Gary may be using it as a way to engage emotionally with his partner, as he feels is unable to do so fully with the distance in place. All the participants have used their own imaginations and technology to create or mimic a virtual presence of their partner in a way that helps them cope with the distance and helps them feel connected in a personal way.

### **Hopes and Fears about Cohabitation**

The fourth main theme in this analysis resides around the pressure that the relationship faces if the couples decide to move in with, or closer to their partner. Previous themes in this analysis highlight the struggles that distance has caused and the need for adjustment to allow investment in the relationship. A simple solution to these issues would be to end the distance, but participants reveal concerns with regard to cohabitation. Moving in with someone is a big commitment to that person regardless of how far away they are; however in the case of ELDR, the risks are greater as they may be moving so far away from their current established

lives. Considering the earlier point of the distance preventing solutions in the relationship, the pressure of moving in with a partner and for the relationship to work is exacerbated in an ELDR, as at least one partner has uprooted their lives and committed a considerable amount (some couples may consider a “meet-halfway” solution, however this was not the case in the participants in this study). This theme developed subthemes of ‘Risk of Inability to Cohabit Harmoniously’ and ‘Used to Independence’.

### **Risk of Inability to Cohabit Harmoniously**

The central part of this theme is that nearly all of the participants are conscious of, and even nervous about the possibility of moving to a new area, and realising the relationship dynamic doesn’t work or that they cannot solve the issues they have even with the distance removed. There are concerns that cohabitation with their partner may lead to the realisation that the relationship is not “working out”. Not all the participants are concerned about this though. Samantha reveals that although she is very hopeful they will work out in close proximity, she admits her partner is very concerned that she will resent him if she moves to be with him and it doesn’t work out. Although they spent a considerable amount of time together whilst Samantha was in Canada studying, they have yet to live together.

*S: erm I feel like he was, I mean this was like the main time when his concerns were like if you do come over and we don’t work out, [...] what, like..yeah and what if you hate me and things like that, like yeah and everything just sort of built up [...] and... yeah it sort of just happened [laughs] [655-661]*

Samantha admits that this issue was a catalyst in a previous break down in the relationship, when her partner’s concerns climaxed to the extent that he felt they should terminate the relationship. Although they did get back together shortly afterwards, this highlights the extent of pressure that is placed on the relationship when a partner decides to move such a distance from their home.

*S: i- it does cross my mind, but...yeah I’m pretty hopeful that it would work out [...] cause I had a really good time in Canada, even without, my boyfriend [laughs] if that makes sense, but erm so, if it was somewhere that I didn’t like and I didn’t know I felt comfortable it might be a bit different, but I know I felt comfortable in Canada so that makes things easier [laughs][...] yeah I mean... wh- when we were together we were discussing it quite a lot so the idea was always I was gonna finish uni here, move over there and then we’d just settle down eventually [laughs] erm, yeah... and now it’s sort of just like, the moving there is the hurdle now so [570 -582]*

Samantha reveals that she is not as concerned as her partner about her moving, as when she was in Canada before, she was happy. She is comforted by the fact she knows she enjoys the place where she would move too. They have discussed the future and see the distance as the only thing that is stopping them from being together. Therefore Samantha is happy to take this risk to move so they can finally be committed to each other.

Many individuals interviewed felt worried that they might not be able to solve the issues they have blamed on the distance, and that they may move somewhere new and far away only knowing their partner. As mentioned earlier the distance is a struggle, but there is also a sense of the fear of the unknown, as they do not know if living together is going to be more unpleasant.

*P: yeah I think so because it's like, if I go to see- if I go to move there I'll move in with him and then if it doesn't work then I've just moved across the country [laughs softly] with no like not knowing anyone other than him [...] for it not to work out so it's like a big commitment [...] yeah definitely definitely [willing to make that commitment] [295-301]*

Polly acknowledges the risk of her making the big commitment to move across the country for her partner, and her nervous laughter indicates that she is scared by the idea of being a new place without a safety net. She is conscious of the fact that she would be doing it all for him, which places a massive pressure on the relationship. However despite this, in Polly's case she is still willing to make that commitment.

Gary describes his decision to move as possibly "daft" because he acknowledges the risk of moving to a new country by himself for a relationship where he is not certain they can sort out their issues.

*G: yeah ki- it seems in my mind it seems like a daft thing you're moving to another country for a person where it may not work, but then, you do that anyway you know, you might say oh you know, got to know someone in London I'll move to London it's still a big thing [243-246]*

Gary acknowledges the risk he is taking by moving to a new county, however he feels that the same risk is involved in any relationship. He feels that taking that risk is a necessity in any relationship if it wishes to continue. He feels the decision to live with your partner is a crucial symbol of commitment in the relationship. Although Gary admits that it is a drastic life decision, he again is still willing to make it.

Gary does lower the intensity of the risk by making the choice to move to the same town as his partner but not actually to move in together. By doing this he can address the problems in his relationship he was unable to before, whilst retaining some of his independence.

*G: she just says "I can't imagine you moving out of your comfort zone and coming over here and learning Dutch for example" or doing something that's just compl- it's just I'll believe it when I see it so it's gonna be a major shock for her [...] I am [excited] but I'm also very scared, it's a big thing, [...] erm yeah moving to a country you don't really speak the language you know I've started learning Dutch but I can't...get by [161-168]*

Gary doesn't think they are ready to live together, and feels they have to address their issues and spend more time together before a co-habiting decision. But as Gary mentioned earlier, he feels unable to continue with the distance, so something has to change. Gary indicates that his partner is skeptical of the idea of Gary making such a major step outside of his comfort zone.

*G: I don't know, I don't know I don't know how that would work at the moment [...] I don't think it would at the moment, no no it definitely wouldn't work at the moment [...] I'm still gonna go ahead with it, eventually but I don't, I don't think either of us are in a position at the moment [...] I just don't think, while we know each other very very well I just don't think we know each other well enough, you know what I mean [739-748]*

Gary highlights the importance of the language barrier he faces by moving, as that will also be a feature that could isolate him in his new life. He reiterates that moving is a "big thing" but feels he is also willing to take that risk as a commitment to his relationship.

### **Used to Independence**

The reasoning that Gary is using to not move directly in with his partner, but just move closer, is based on the premise that Gary and his partner like time alone, and do not feel they are in a place where they want to give up their independence from each other.

*G: I just don't think we're ready I don't think we're in a position where we could happily live in the same house, you know, we both need a lot of time alone [...] and I think, until we get to a point where, both of us say, I can't live without this person [...] you can't do it [...] otherwise you're effectively ermm scuppering your relationship [...] if you can't say you know yes I can spend all my time with this person, without getting annoyed all the time, you shouldn't do it [756-757]*

Being independent is an important part of Gary's identity and both he and his partner

enjoy spending time in their own company. He argues that until he is ready to spend all his time with her, he doesn't want to risk moving in and losing that independence. As ELDRs prevent the partners from becoming too dependent on each other, this may be something that he does not want to surrender.

Polly also shows a strong connection to her independence. Although she is simultaneously excited to have her partner close more often, she is apprehensive about the idea of having constant physical touching.

*P: I love having my own space as well [...] after work like go home and be in my room like I have to like be on my own [...] like a lot of the time cause otherwise I just find it exhausting when I'm always talking to people, and I don't know how that would work when we live together like, especially sharing a bed together all the time, like having someone o- like it's nice to have someone there but not like, touching you all the time [...] yeah I'd say [I'm an independent person] [...] but then I do think that when we live together I'm like "oh are our lives just gonna like merge too much maybe" [381-396]*

Polly also enjoys her independence, and mentions that she doesn't like the idea of someone always being in her "space" as she needs to be alone to unwind and calm down. She finds it exhausting being around people, and relies on that 'alone time' to recharge, which is something she considers greatly important. She doesn't want her and her partner's lives to merge too much, therefore she may see the distance as a protection from fear of committing to their partner, or fear that the relationship will not work as a GCR.

## **Qualitative Discussion**

Four themes representing the most important aspects of the lived experience of ELDRs were identified: 'Preventing Solutions / Causing Conflict', 'Adjusting to the Distance', 'Virtual Presence' and 'Hopes and Fears about Cohabitation'. The interviews in many ways highlight how the participants create ways of feeling more together whilst they are apart, and how being apart hinders them being together which is in line with Sahlstein (2004).

For the most part, participants revealed that they found the distance to be a struggle in their relationship. Each individual struggled with different components that the distance

caused or amplified. The distance was considered an entity that prevented solutions to conflict and directly caused frustration and upset (e.g. through miscommunication). The distance also required the individuals to adjust their lives, and often make sacrifices and invest considerable amounts of time or money for the sake of their relationship. In a few cases the status of the relationship was also adjusted. The couples also had to adjust to using remote communication, which was a key aspect of their relationship, and they often created creative ways to mimic physicality. Although the distance has caused much disruption, the solution of closing the distance itself also brings concerns about the likelihood of the relationships' survival, and loss of independence. In a very simple answer to the research question of 'How do people experience ELDR?', the answer is that they struggle but they preserve and do enjoy some aspects, such as independence. This then encourages the question, what makes it difficult? And, why don't they stop? What is it about their relationship that makes them want to persevere through the hardship of distance?

A prominent theme is that the distance prevents solutions to relationship issues that arise. The relationship maintenance behaviors are limited and often the distance does not allow for a comfortable space for the couple to address conflict. However, preventing solutions is not the same as creating conflict, yet individuals are using the distance as a scapegoat to blame their relational problems on, as it becomes very easy to deflect blame from themselves and their partners onto the distance between them. The distance almost becomes like a third entity in the relationship that they can blame their relational conflicts on, as the distance causes them frustration. It is possible that the issues in the relationship are exacerbated or in some cases directly caused by the distance, e.g. Samantha talks about how much of a shock the lack of intimacy was to her when they moved apart. This became very frustrating for her, and they compromised by opening up the relationship to address this issue from a distance. Miscommunication from remote communication could be an issue that directly stems from distance, as misunderstanding or misinterpreting can lead to conflict, and the majority of time, remotely is the only way they can communicate.

However, higher levels of Idealisation (as seen in the quantitative part of this research) may explain why they believe that everything will be better when they move closer, as they anticipate they will be less frustrated by the stresses of distance. However it is hard to tell whether the distance is causing issues or whether partners are idealising their partner by



pushing the blame onto “the distance” and focusing on their partner’s ideal traits. Research suggests that Idealisation is higher in ELDRs than GCRs (Stafford & Reske, 1990). This is an example of a cognitive resolution that Abelson (1959) discusses, as they are developing a mental representation of the relationship that balances external blame with the individual’s ideal partner traits. There are examples of idealised comments from Elizabeth to the effect that there is nothing wrong with the relationship and their only problem is the distance.

Participants’ general attitudes towards the distance were negative, but they held very positive attitudes towards the relationship itself. One of the main hurdles they experience is that they are unable to address their relational issues, and they cannot provide emotional support to the same extent without being physically present. The distance hampers problem solving in these couples’ relationships, as they feel unable to talk about issues remotely, which is often their only option. Research has previously suggested that basic tactile sensations were found to influence higher social cognitive processing (Ackerman, Nocera, & Bargh, 2010). This research also suggests that even a simple act such as sitting on a soft surface such as a sofa, can make people more accommodating, compared to sitting on a hard chair, such as computer chairs. The nature of distance means that partners sitting together and being tactile with each other are infrequent, which could contribute to explain why those in ELDRs are having difficulty with the conflict resolution in their relationships.

Participants also feel unable to talk about issues face to face because they don’t want to cause conflict during their limited time together. This relates to similar research where LDR couples admitted to residue issues lingering during their time apart, as topics brought up during their limited time together were not drawn to a close (Sahlstein, 2004). This suggests that physical presence is needed during and after arguments. After an argument has occurred with partners at a distance, they are “left in the resonance of the arguments” where they are left alone and things feel unresolved. Distance hindering resolutions is different from the distance directly causing problems.

This creates a dilemma where they see that the only solution to their problems is closing the distance, either by moving in together or by moving closer together. This links to the idea of additional risk and pressure on the relationship.. As they feel unable to solve their problems from a distance, a move is seen as a solution, but that pressure to have a problem-

free relationship in turn adds more pressure to the move. There is the risk that they still won't be able to solve their issues even when they are living close to each other.

The second theme focuses on the adjustments that are necessary for the individual to maintain their LDR. The subjective measure of distance seemed to be more influential than objective distance in this data set. Depending on life experience and resources available different people view the distance differently, and this subjectivity can make them feel closer or further away from their partner, regardless of actual distance. Work flexibility or other commitments and the financial resources will influence this. The perceived distance of their partner is relative to the participant's own experiences. Future research should explore how resources and availability affect perceived distance of LDRs.

This means that with each individual the difference feels different. Samantha's lack of finances has left her with a negative view of travelling to see her partner, as the financial responsibilities are too great for them to be able to see each other in the foreseeable future. Elizabeth however, who has to travel the same distance to see her partner, has a much more relaxed attitude towards travelling to see her partner, as they both can be quite flexible, which ensures that they can see each other more often. Financial resources and availability could also explain the variance seen in the self-reported distance question in the questionnaire. Of interest, is there was no trend between Moderate and Extreme, some viewed their relationship as extreme at 100 miles, and other viewed themselves as moderate at 1000 miles. Therefore actual mileage does not affect the classification between MLDR and ELDR, instead it is the partners own perception of how distant they are from their partner. Future research should investigate this phenomenon more in-depth in order to gain a fuller understanding of the subjectivity of distance in modern LDRs.

Samantha and Elizabeth also adjust the status of their relationship as a way to cope with the distance, although they do it in different ways. Samantha views physical intimacy as important to her own well-being, and was struggling with the lack of said intimacy in her LDR. Her solution was to redefine the definition of infidelity in her relationship so she could engage in physically with others in her close proximity. This is a major adjustment to her relationship status as she admits that if she wasn't in an LDR she would not have considered an open relationship as an option. This is a bespoke solution to Samantha's difficulties and

this adjustment eases the strain of distance in her relationship. The definition of intimacy within non-monogamous relationships is flexible, and it is difficult to distinguish between emotional and physical intimacy within any relationship (Jamieson, 2004). Alternatively, Elizabeth also redefined the status of her relationship as she and her partner became engaged. This massive commitment removes the risk and ambiguity surrounding the likelihood of the relationship succeeding as they have essentially entered into an agreement that they are fully committed to each other. Marriage and non-monogamous relationships are very different solutions to the same problem, as they could be considered opposites on a spectrum of monogamy (however, some marriages can be non-monogamous or even poly-amorous), and yet they are both adjustments that the participants in this study were willing to make to cope with the distance. Couples defined commitment in a marriage as driving their choices and their goals for the future together (Weigel, 2003). The decision to marry may help Elizabeth experience joy and relief from a lifelong expectation.

In the third theme of the findings, participants revealed their use of online communication to create a Virtual Presence and mimic the physicality of GCRs. This can help to alleviate the feelings of distance by easing feelings of loneliness (Turkle, 2011). However, as mentioned before, remote communication is often the only method of communication that ELDR can use, and is the only way partners can create and share experiences as a couple. Research has suggested that those in LDRs use social networking sites to perform relationship maintaining behaviour's more than those in GCRs (Billedo, Kerkhof & Finkenauer, 2015). Participants admit that talking remotely is not the same as talking face to face. For example, talking to someone on Skype is not a natural way to hold a conversation. Body language is more rigid and eye contact is impossible to achieve due to the camera and screen positions. This strengthens recent research into "social telepresence" (the sense of resembling face-to-face interaction) comparing video-chat interaction with robot interactions that physically embodied body language and facial expressions which found that physical embodiment enhanced social telepresence (Tanaka, Nakanishi, & Ishiguro, 2014). The ELDRs in this research lack physical embodiment in their remote communication, which may explain why they are having trouble talking about issues, and with misinterpretation.

However, the participants show creativity in using methods of remote communication that they have available to them, to mimic the physicality of a GCR. Samantha revealed that she watches her partner live stream video games online. In demonstrating a favorable attitude to her partner's passions and leisure activities, this is very similar to the emotional support that a spouse would provide with a leisure activity, such as running. This emotional support can minimise conflict within family units (Goff, Fick, & Oppliger, 1997). So by providing support for her partner's interests remotely, Samantha is replicating an important element of a GCR through online communication. Polly talks about enjoying "Skype dates" in which they replicate the activities they do when they are together through the use of video chatting, which she finds endearing. Similarly Gary talks about an online version of a card game. These examples are the couples creative attempt to replicate the intimacy and connections that they are unable to experience through the distance. This strengthens research that argues, "The human capacity for creativity fosters use of online communication that can equal, or even exceed, the quality of face-to-face communication" (Walther, 1996). Despite this research being twenty years old, the theories on interpersonal computer-mediated-communication are still relevant in today's culture.

Walther (1996) also discusses 'hyperpersonal' computer-mediated-communication, in which online communication could facilitate opportunities that surpass normal interpersonal levels. This can be seen in this research where Elizabeth describes how her and her partner play multiplayer games together online, but also play the same games when they are together in real life (therefore gaming has surpassed face-to-face conversation). The character avatars created in the game work together in live time, to achieve a goal, which requires communication and cooperation skills, which are suggested to be improved by multiplayer games (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005). The use of these socialisation skills, and performing the same activities whilst together and apart, may ease the struggles of separation, whilst also being a "natural" activity to partake whilst apart, as the gameplay is no different whether the players are in the same room, or in different locations.

The fourth theme is about pressure placed on the relationship to be successful if they decide to end the distance and the risks involved in ending the distance. The partners report issues that they can't solve remotely, and moving is seen as the solution. That places a lot of pressure for relationship success after the move, as living together leaves the couples without

a scapegoat for their issues. If the issues are not solved by the move after all, they might not last as a couple. In a longitudinal study investigating what happens when an LDR becomes a GCR, researchers found that a third of reunited couples terminated their relationship within three months (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006), and participants reported they “realised their partners negative characteristics”. However this research also reported some “partners’ relationships becoming deeper, more personal, or more serious after reunion”, and a realisation of their partner’s positive characteristics (p.910). Therefore couples may be able to solve their issues and grow as a couple, however their relationship is at risk of failing. A risk has to be taken in order to solve it, but unlike GCRs, the risk is amplified by at least one partner having to move a considerable distance, possibly sacrificing their friends, family and work life to move to a new part of the world to be with their partner. Gary is lessening the risk by moving closer to his partner, but deciding not to cohabit with her straight away, but to slowly integrate himself into her life. Research suggests there are comparable levels of commitment in both LDRs and GCRs (Billedo, Kerkhof & Finkenauer, 2015).

Independence is a really important trait to all the interviewees; it is seen as an element of distance that they enjoy. Participants claim they have gotten used to functioning independently from their partner in their day-to-day lives, and therefore are hesitant to sacrifice their independence by moving in with their partner. The distance creates a unique opportunity for partners to create separate lives from each other. Sahlstein (2004) and Gerstel and Gross (1984) found that individuals felt distance required partners to segment their lives such that when apart schoolwork and other relationships were at the forefront, though couples focused almost solely on each other when they were together. This independence is an important part of their identities and partners reported not wanting to give up the space and time in their own company. Although the participants say they find the distance to be a struggle, it is in some ways used as a barrier to protect the individuals from committing to their partner and losing the Independent lives they have built. Research suggests there may be individuals who enjoy the distance as it allows both the satisfaction of a romantic relationship and the autonomy that comes with being single (Maguire, 2007).

There were some limitations to the IPA section of this research. The creativity required for IPA can leave the validity of the analysis highly subjective, as it is an individual’s interpretation of the events. For this reason IPA has been criticised as ambiguous

and lacking standardisation. It is important to note that IPA does not attempt to generalise to a target population, but closely investigates the emotional context of few individuals' experiences. Current research does not consider the ambiguity of IPA to be an issue, as the aim of this research was purely exploratory. However, the analysis and interpretation of this data, and also the nature of IPA's double interpretative technique means that other researchers may come to alternative conclusions from what the participant said. More specifically to current research is the inexperience of the researcher. The researcher's interview technique could have been improved, as many vital participant experiences may have been missed through the lack of probing at certain points throughout the interview.

### **Integration**

Up until this point the results and discussions in this research have been treated as separate entities, and have been presented individually. It is important now to consider how both the quantitative and qualitative elements of this research integrate, contradict and complement each other in order to address the research questions of this study.

The RQ1 asked if there was a significant difference between the three distance groups in Idealisation, Trust, Love, Relationship Satisfaction and Online Communication. ELDRs had significantly higher Idealisation, Love, Trust and Online Communication than GCRs. The interviewees all revealed the distance was a struggle, which would suggest they would report low levels of Relationship Satisfaction. However, the relationships were viewed very positively, and the distance itself was seen as something that protects the individual's independence, as well as protecting the relationship from terminating. Research has suggested that some individuals in LDRs enjoy the independence that accompanies a LDR (Maguire, 2007), which may explain why they were found to be just as satisfied as in a GCR. It may be the case that many people in LDRs do enjoy the autonomy whilst knowing they are in a romantic relationship.

However, participants did scapegoat the distance for their relational doubts and inability to address their relational issues from afar, whilst relishing that the relationship in itself was satisfactory. This can be linked to attribution theory (Kelley, 1967), as the participants are blaming the negative aspects of their relationship on the external attribution of "the distance". Theoretically, external attributions (to the distance) may prevent internal

attributions (to the person) that would be hurtful or raise questions about the suitability of the other person. Research suggests the use of external attributions for negative stimuli may lead to increased Relationship Satisfaction (for review see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) as they credit the “distance”, an entity external to the relationship, with the responsibility of negative aspects of their relationship. This could lead, in some cases, to a higher level of Relationship Satisfaction. Although since in the present study no significant differences were detected in Relationship Satisfaction between distance groups cannot be inferred

The scapegoating found in the interviews, may also explain the higher levels of Idealisation found in the online surveys. As the participants have this separate entity of “the distance” to blame their relational downfalls on, it creates the opportunity for more idealistic views about their partner. They develop an attitude of “it’s not them it’s the distance” and it is seen as an obstacle to overcome. The very definition of idealisation is to attribute exaggeratedly positive qualities to the self or others, therefore the act of externally attributing negative qualities onto the distance, may in itself be an act of idealisation. Therefore the higher levels of idealisation found in ELDRs may be due to couples reaching the cognitive resolution to scapegoat the distance for their issues.

Regarding the second part of RQ2, ELDRs did experience a unique combination of Relationship Satisfaction predictors, being Love and Idealisation. The interviews give weight to this as the themes also focus on idealisation by scapegoating the distance. For example where Elizabeth discusses how the only issue in her relationship is the distance, but nothing about the relationship made her unhappy. The components intimacy, commitment and passion, which make the Love scale, also are expanded on in the interviews. For example where Samantha discusses how lack of intimacy is an issue for them, thereby affecting her satisfaction in the relationship. Also the interviews show the participants’ commitment where they discuss moving to be closer to their partner, where even though it is a risk, they are all still willing to make that commitment.

Higher levels of Trust in ELDRs compared to GCRs were seen in the online survey. This integrates with Samantha’s comment about how she “*has* to trust her partner”. Polly also says something similar about “having to trust” her partner. It may be the case that the distance creates an opportunity where faith has to be accepted and cannot be questioned, or is

unable to be questioned as there is no way of knowing if the partner is telling the truth. Arguably there is no way of knowing if a partner is telling the truth in a GCR either, but as the interviews highlight, partners are just forced not to question the trust in their relationships. Research defined trust as “believing others in the absence of clear-cut reasons to disbelieve” (Rotter, 1980, p1), which assumes that some people trust until proven otherwise, as opposed to distrusting until proven otherwise. The distance may lead to less opportunity for partners to give reasons to be regarded as untrustworthy (i.e. not going to walk in on a partner being unfaithful).

As mentioned previously, Samantha and her partner chose to enter into an open relationship. This is otherwise known as “Consensual non-monogamy”, a term used to describe intimate romantic relationships which are negotiated between more than two people and are therefore nonexclusive, either sexually or emotionally or in combination (Conley, Matsick, Moors, & Ziegler, 2017). As this is a negotiated agreement between the partners, it redefines Trust within their interpersonal relationship. She reveals that the lack of intimacy was a distinct issue that came as a direct result of the extreme distance they were newly experiencing. A recent study suggested that there was no significant difference in trust levels in non-monogamous relationships compared to monogamous ones (Conley, Matsick, Moors, & Ziegler, 2017) which suggests that if the trust levels are the same, it is just the negotiated relationship expectations that are different. Recent research indicates that over one fifth of their studied sample engaged in consensual sexually nonexclusive relationships at some point in their lives (Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017). These findings suggest that a proportion of LDRs would also be open. As the rules of Trust in an open relationship are different to the mainstream western societal norm of Trust within monogamy, and as the findings in the current study suggest that Trust was higher in ELDRs than GCRs, this indicates that further research should be performed to investigate the prevalence of consensual non-monogamy in LDRs. Although researchers must be careful not to generalise qualitative results to the general population.

The higher levels of Love in ELDRs compared to GCRs detected in the quantitative study may be due to the component of intimacy that created the Love scale used. By analyzing people’s communications, research suggested that long-distance couples felt more intimate with each other compared to geographically close couples, in part because the



LDR couples disclosed more about themselves in their interactions (Crystal-Jiang & Hancock, 2013). As seen in the interviews, the couples became very creative with mimicking the physicality of their partners in their LDRs, where they replicated or repeated activities similar to relational maintaining behaviours in GCRs, and this may lead to higher feelings of intimacy. The RQ3 asks about the role of Online Communication, how often it is being used and how it is being used in ELDRs. There were higher levels of Online Communication measured in ELDRs than in GCRs, and this may be due to the fact that ELDRs can rarely experience other forms of communication that are not based on remote methods. Online Communication is usually the only way in which partners can share experiences and feel connected with one another. Although research has suggested that LDR couples do try harder to communicate affection and intimacy than GCR couples (Crystal-Jiang & Hancock, 2013). This indicates that due to remote communication being to only form of communication, one would have to make more effort to communicate affection as LDR couples are unable to show affection in ways that GCR couples are able (e.g. basic tactile gestures). Interviews revealed that the participants felt that remote communication did not replicate the high standard of face to face communication, but they did claim that without communicating every day they “wouldn’t see the point” in being together or “wouldn’t feel like a couple”. Therefore that communication is required in ELDRs, but there are limitations of remote communication.

### **Reflections and Future Research**

A few points that should be reflected on when reading this research. Firstly, the online questionnaire data was over represented bi-sexuals. Although the prevalence of bi-sexuality in LDRs specifically is not known, the current data set does have a higher percentage of bi-sexuals that what is reported in the general western population. However this was not deemed a major issue in the research as the focus of this research was not on sexual orientation but on distance. However it does mean that caution should be taken when applying this research to the sample population of those in LDRs. As mentioned, future research should investigate the prevalence and role of sexual orientation in LDRs, as research is missing in this area.

The finding that trust did not predict Relationship Satisfaction are inconclusive. The design of this research means that no implications can be made about causality between trust and Relationship Satisfaction. Future research should focus on developing a way to measure

if LDRs do increase trust, or if only trusting people engage in LDRs to begin with. Based on the literature on similar to other relationship types, predictors of Relationship-Satisfaction in ELDRs; Love, Trust and Idealisation all have substantial bivariate correlations with Relationship-Satisfaction suggesting there is an overlap in the variance measured. This is expected as the literature often uses different terminology to cover similar concepts. For example, Intimacy is regarded as an important aspect of Love, however part of intimacy considers being honest and open with a partner, which is also encompassed by the concept of trust.

The nature of IPA being double hermeneutic (see Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) means that different researchers will draw different interpretations of the data presented. This means that the accounts presented in this research may change with a different researcher and differ from what the participant meant. It is important to consider this dynamic when undertaking the interviews, and due to the inexperience of the researcher it is possible that interview technique could be improved. More probes could have been used during the interviews and more care taken not to influence responses with preconceptions. However the topic of relationships are very sensitive and difficult to talk about, even with a stranger, and there is a fine line between probing for further explanation and making the participant uncomfortable when discussing something personal to them, especially if they haven't considered difficult topics before. Future research interviewing those in LDRs should therefore use more open questions so as to allow a comfortable flow into the inner workings of their relationship. Additionally, given a bigger time frame, time should be spent building rapport with participants so the conversations feel more like a conversation with a close friend rather than a researcher.

The use of qualitative methods in this research proved useful in expanding on statistical findings. There is a lack of qualitative research on LDRs, which future research should aim to address, as there are several valuable points raised in the interviews that would have been overlooked otherwise.

## **Conclusions**

This unique study addressed the previous gap in academic research around the effect of subjective distance and various factors involved in LDRs. This research does not claim to

be a definitive or final deduction on the topic of LDRs, and in fact raises many questions about LDRs that have yet to be addressed. This study explored how factors in relationships were compared across three distant categories of distance. It also investigated how LDRs were experienced by individuals within them, to give a deeper understanding of how a modern day ELDR takes place. This study has highlighted the importance of subjective distance in a LDR and has indicated that there is a clear distinction between a MLDR and an ELDR which should be taken into account for future research. This has addressed the previous gap in academic research around the effect of subjective distance on various factors involved in LDRs. This is important to consider in future research regarding LDRs, as treating all LDRs as one entity is too ambiguous. Future research should consider the sub-types of LDRs established in this paper, as failure to do this could lead to research that is inaccurate and over averaged. Recent research has begun to touch on the need for a comparison between close vs. far LDRs with regard to the outside perceptions of LDRs (Goldsmith & Byers, 2018). However the current research suggests a much clearer distinction should be made between the sub-categories.

The quantitative section of this research addresses the differences between distance groups. This section also contributes to literature by demonstrating the similarities and differences between ELDR, MLDR and GCR models explaining Relationship Satisfaction. In answer to the first research question, higher levels of Idealisation, Trust, Love and Online communication were reported in ELDRs compared to GCRs, where MLDRs reported higher levels of Trust and Love compared to GCRs. However MLDRs did not significantly differ from ELDRs on Relationship Satisfaction, Trust, Idealisation, Love or Online Communication, although these separate distance categories did have different predictors of Relationship Satisfaction. In answer to the second research question, in ELDRs Idealisation and Love significantly predicted Relationship Satisfaction, whereas only Love was found to be a significant predictor of Relationship Satisfaction in MLDRs. ELDRs are a new concept to this research, and although they do not significantly differ from MLDRs in Idealisation, Trust, Love, Online Communication and Relationship Satisfaction, as predicted, the components that predict Relationship Satisfaction are different. This suggests that they should be considered separate subcategories of LDRs. Idealisation is not only more

prominent in ELDRs than GCRs, but is an important aspect in the success of ELDRs but not in other types of LDRs.

The interviews focused on ELDRs revealing that distance was a struggle that caused frustrations in relationships, and which people scapegoated for relational issues. The distance prevented solutions to problems, and moving was seen as the only viable solution. However the move was therefore perceived as a bigger risk, as there was uncertainty about whether the distance was the cause of issues within the relationships. This suggests that although the distance does have its downfalls, the blame of issues that emerge in the relationship can possibly become misplaced externally, although it is difficult to tell where the blame truly lies. Distance was also seen subjectively, and experienced differently depending on people's lived experiences and financial situations. Online communication was used in creative ways to mimic the physicality of GCRs, this suggests that utilising online communication eases the difficulties of ELDRs. Those in ELDRs should utilise creative ways to discuss their issues whilst as a distance, whilst taking care not to blame the distance unnecessarily.

To conclude, the use of qualitative and quantitative data enables more holistic picture to be given in answers to the research questions posed in this research. The interviews found that distance was a struggle, which would suggest lower satisfaction; however there were no significant differences found in Relationship Satisfaction between the distance groups. The interviews suggest that a possible explanation for this is that those in ELDRs enjoy their independence. The higher levels of Idealisation found in ELDRs may be explained by the scapegoating of distance that the interview participants reported. ELDRs did have a unique combination of Love and Idealisation predicting Relationship Satisfaction, which was reflected by the Idealisation seen in the interviews. Higher levels of Trust in ELDRs may be explained by participants feeling they *have* to trust their partners as seen in the interviews, as well as the possibility of open relationships redefining trust. Higher levels of Love in ELDRs may link to Online Communication as Online Communication is suggested to create more intimacy. In answer to RQ3, Online Communication was used more by ELDRs, and the interviews showed it was used creatively, although it was often the only method they could use to feel connected to their partner.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the new phenomenon of ELDRs and MLDRs and their similarities and differences. They both have higher levels of Trust and

Love than GCRs, but no significant differences between each other. However, the role of Idealisation is much more prominent in Relationship Satisfaction in ELDRs. The results of this study create a mixed message, but as a first look into separating the two subcategories of LDRs, this research has created a complex picture of the interworking of these relationships.

Those who are in, or are considering engaging in an ELDR should understand that there is an aspect of difficulty that accompanies the distance, and should take care when addressing issues within the relationship, and practice caution when externalising blame onto the distance. However, the results of this study suggest that there is no difference in the satisfaction that individuals gain from these relationship types, i.e. it doesn't matter where in the world your partner is as long as you are passionate, intimate, committed and see the best in them.

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Appendix



Participant Consent Form

**Study Title:** Interview exploring student’s experiences of long distance relationships

Have you read the information sheet?	Yes	No
Have you had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study?	Yes	No
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?	Yes	No
To whom have you spoken? (write name) .....		
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason?	Yes	No
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that this form may be examined by an Ethics Committee as part of the monitoring process	Yes	No

**Your Name in Block Capital Letters:** .....

**Signature** **Date**

**Name of person obtaining consent** .....

**Signature** **Date**



## Participant Information Sheet

**Study:** Interview exploring extreme Long-Distance Relationships

You are invited to participate in a study exploring how individuals experience extreme long-distance relationships at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) By Michelle England. The study will take about one hour to complete. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part

This study aims to explore what factors are involved in the Relationship-Satisfaction of those in long distance relationships. Long distance relationships are becoming increasingly common however they are understudied in academia. This study hopes to explore long distance relationships and point towards how they can be improved for those who are involved in them

To participant in this study you must be over 18 and currently be in a romantic relationship with someone who lives in a different country.

During the study you will be asked to complete an interview asking you about your *personal* experiences in a long-distance relationship. It is important you understand this will involve answering questions about your *current romantic relationship*. Please be as detailed as you can be but you do not have to discuss anything that you do not wish to. If you become uncomfortable during the interview then let the researcher know.

The results of this study will be available in August 2018, please email if you wish to be contacted with the finished report.

To protect your privacy any data you provide will be associated with a pseudonym. This study is anonymous to protect your privacy. All data and personal data will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the university's own data protection requirements. Data can only be accessed by the research, supervisors and examination board where this study will then be submitted for review.

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedure or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact me. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

If you have any further questions/queries about this study you are welcome to contact me.



## Participant Information Sheet

**Study:** Questionnaire exploring individual's experiences of long distance relationships

You are invited to participate in a study exploring how individuals experience extreme long-distance relationships at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) By Michelle England. The study will take about 20 minutes to complete. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part

This study aims to explore what factors are involved in the Relationship-Satisfaction of those in long distance relationships. Long distance relationships are becoming increasingly common however they are understudied in academia. This study hopes to explore long distance relationships and point towards how they can be improved for those who are involved in them.

To participant in this study you must be over 18 and currently be in a romantic relationship. Comparisons will be made across moderate long distance, extreme long distance and geographically close relationships, so it doesn't matter where your partner is.

During the study, you will be asked to complete a selection of questionnaires asking you about your *personal* experiences in your romantic relationship. It is important you understand this will involve answering questions about your *current romantic relationship*. If you do not wish to answer a particular question then you can skip to the next one.

The results of this study will be available in August 2018, please email if you wish to be contacted with the finished report.

This study is anonymous to protect your privacy. All data and personal data will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the university's own data protection requirements. Data can only be accessed by the research, supervisors and examination board where this study will then be submitted for review.

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedure or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact me. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

If you have any further questions/queries about this study you are welcome to contact me.



## Participant Debrief Sheet

**Study Title:** investigating extreme long-distance relationships and the role of idealisation and online communication habits.

Thank you for taking part in this study. The aim of this study was to explore student's experiences of long distance relationships focusing on role of idealisation, intimacy and online communication habits.

At a broader level, we are particularly interested in what people experience in long distance relationships, and what make extreme long-distance relationships satisfactory, as they are becoming increasingly common, due to people studying at university, joining the army, incarceration and increase in internet dating.

This research has used both interviews and questionnaires in a sequential mix methods design to form a well-rounded analysis of what is involved in long-distance relationships. As this is a relatively unexplored area, mixed methods allow both theories to be tested quantitatively and deeply explored qualitatively.

If you are interested in finding out more about how people experience long distance relationships you can read:

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Erin\\_Parcell/publication/249719555\\_Relating\\_at\\_a\\_distance\\_Negotiating\\_being\\_together\\_and\\_being\\_apart\\_in\\_long-distance\\_relationships/links/554cd6570cf29752ee813c61.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Erin_Parcell/publication/249719555_Relating_at_a_distance_Negotiating_being_together_and_being_apart_in_long-distance_relationships/links/554cd6570cf29752ee813c61.pdf)

If you have worries or concerns regarding your relationship or anything discussed in this research and would like to talk to someone about them, please contact the relationship charity relate at <https://www.relate.org.uk/>

If you have any more questions or would like to know the final outcome of the study please contact me

**Over all relationship**

Describe your current long-distance relationship?

- Prompt: how long have you been together?
- How did you meet your partner?

Describe the details of how you define your relationship as long distance?

- Prompt: how often do you see your partner?
- How do you and your partner organise your lives around seeing each other
- Describe what you consider to be important in your relationship?
- How do you personally deal with the distance in your relationship?
  - o Does the distance bother you?

**Idealisation**

Describe your partner's strengths?

- Prompt: does your partner make you happy?

Do you think your partner truly satisfies your wants/needs from a relationship?

- Prompt: what are the qualities for a perfect partner?
  - o Does your partner meet these qualities?

Describe any downfalls in your relationship?

- Prompt: what do you think are your partner's weaknesses?

**Trust**

Is your partner trustworthy?

- Prompt: How has your partner shown you they are trust worthy?
- Prompt: Do you share your problems and weaknesses with your partner?
- Prompt: How do you feel when your partner is making decisions that affect you personally?
- Do you think your partner would be unfaithful?

**Online Contact**

Outline your daily routine of talking to your partner?

- Prompt: what platforms do you use to communicate with?
  - o What do you talk about online?
- Prompt: do you engage in other activities online other than talking? i.e. gaming?

**Relationship-Satisfaction**

Are you satisfied in your relationship?

- Prompt: Do you love your partner?
- Prompt: How would you compare your relationship to others?
- Prompt: What are the things that make you happy in your relationship?
- Prompt: Is there anything that makes you unhappy in your relationship?

**Intimacy**

Describe how you would feel if you moved in with your partner?

- Prompt: Have you discussed it (the future) with your partner?
  - o Are you committed to your partner?
- Prompt: Are you comfortable and open with your partner?

Describe how you and your partner express intimacy?

- Prompt: Could you give an example of a positive intimate experience you and your partner shared?
- Prompt: How do you and your partner cope with the lack of physical intimacy?

**General probes**

- Prompt: is there anything you consider important to you and your partners happiness that we haven't discussed?

Online communication scale was adapted from Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore (2010). A question was inserted that gave a list of options for what methods of communication were used. Questions 1,2,3 and 4 were used but changed into a slider option instead of ticking block options. Question 5 was changed into a dichotic yes or no option, instead of a never/ sometimes/ always option. Questions 6,7,8 and 9 were omitted, as they were not relevant to the current study.

Employee's Self-Idealization Subscale was adapted from (Hasandedić, Hadžić, Hindija, Miljanović, & Repišti, 2011). Questions were reworded to apply to romantic relationships (See appendix.), and also asked as a 7-point Likert scale instead of a dichotic yes or no answer.

#### Original

- 1) Every day, I look forward to working for my organization/firm.
- 2) This organization/firm is perfect in all its aspects.
- 3) I am the most suitable person for this workplace.
- 4) Every day, I come to my workplace with a feeling of great happiness.
- 5) I always successfully complete my working tasks.
- 6) There were moments when I consider my job as something negative.
- 7) My working conditions are entirely excellent.
- 8) When I started to work at my current position, I felt like my dreams came true.

#### Adapted

- 1) Every day, I look forward to seeing and talking to my partner
- 2) My partner is perfect for me in every way
- 3) I am the more suitable person for my partner
- 4) Every time I think of my partner, I have a feeling of great happiness
- 5) I always satisfy all my partners needs and desires
- 6) There were moments when I consider my relationship to be negative (R)
- 7) My relationship is entirely excellent
- 8) When started my current relationship, I felt like my dreams came true.

## Online Questionnaire

Have you read the information sheet?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Are you aged 18 years or older

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Do you agree to take part in the study?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Do you understand that this form may be examined by an Ethics Committee as part of the monitoring process

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Please create a participant code for your data using the first and last letter of your first name, the year of your birth and the first two letters of the road you grew up on e.g. ME94CA.

Please keep a note of your unique code as if you wish to withdraw your data I will need this code to do so. Thank you.

---

Firstly, please answer these brief demographic questions about yourself and your relationship

What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other Please Specify (3) \_\_\_\_\_

What year were you born?

Year (3)      ▼ 1900 (1) ... 2049 (150)

Which gender are you attracted to?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Both (3)
- Other Please Specify (4) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your relationship status?

- Casual (1)
- Dating (2)
- Cohabitation (3)
- Engaged (4)
- Married (5)
- Open Relationship (6)

How did you meet your romantic partner?

- School/ College/ University (1)
  - Work (2)
  - Through Friends/Family (3)
  - Through Internet Dating Sites/ Dating Apps (Tinder) (4)
  - Clubbing/ Drinking Establishment (5)
  - Club or Organisation (e.g. Sports club, Scouts, Societies) (6)
  - Online Gaming (7)
  - Travelling (8)
  - Online Chat Forum/ Social Networking Site (i.e. Reddit, Facebook) (9)
  - We Have not met yet (10)
  - Other Please Specify (11)
- 

How long have you been with your romantic partner?

- Years (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- Months (2) \_\_\_\_\_

How would you define your relationship?

- Extreme Long Distance (i.e. Different Countries/ Very Far Apart) (1)
- Moderate Long Distance? (i.e. too far away to see each other every day) (2)
- Geographically Close (3)

If you answered Geographically Close then please skip to the next section of this questionnaire.

If you are in a Long Distance Relationship then please continue below

How long has your relationship been long distance?

- Years (1) \_\_\_\_\_
- Months (2) \_\_\_\_\_

If known, approximately how many miles separate you and your partner?

---

How often do you see your partner face to face?

- Every Year (1)
- Every 3+ Months (2)
- Every Month (3)



- o Every Fortnight (4)
- o Every Week (5)
- o Every Day (6)
- o Other Please Specify (7) \_\_\_\_\_

In the last month approximately how many days have you spent together face to face?

\_\_\_\_\_

Why are you in a long distance relationship? Please select all that apply

- University/ Higher Education (1)
- Traveling (2)
- Incarceration (3)
- Family Circumstances (4)
- Work Commitments (5)
- Army/ Military Service (6)
- Met On-line (7)
- Other Please Specify (8) \_\_\_\_\_

Using the Scale below, please indicate which answer best reflects how you feel in regards to your romantic partner

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?

Poorly (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Extremely Well (5)

2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

Unsatisfied (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Extremely Satisfied (5)

3. How good is your relationship compared to most?

Poor (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Excellent (5)

4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?

Never (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Always (5)

5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?

Hardly at all (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Completely (5)

6. How much do you love your partner?

Not Much (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Very Much (5)

7. How many problems are there in your relationship?

Very Few (1) (2) Average (3) (4) Very Many (5)

Using the 5 point scale below, please indicate the extent you agree with each of these statements in relation to your romantic partner.

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6) Strongly agree (7)

Every day, I look forward to talking to my partner (1)

My partner is perfect for me in every way (2)

I am the most suitable person for my partner (3)

Every time I think of my partner, I have a feeling of great happiness (4)

I satisfy my partners needs and desires (5)

There are moments when I consider my relationship to be negative (6)

My relationship is entirely excellent (7)

When I started my current relationship, I felt like my dreams came true. (8)

Using the 7 point scale shown below, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements as they relate to someone with whom you have a romantic relationship.

Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6) Strongly agree (7)

1. My partner has proven to be trustworthy and I am willing to let him/her engage in activities which other partners find too threatening.

2. Even when I don't know how my partner will react, I feel comfortable telling him/her anything about myself, even those things of which I am ashamed

3. Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support.

4. I am certain that my partner won't do something that I dislike or will embarrass me.

5. My partner is very unpredictable. I never know how he/she is going to act from one day to the next.

6. I feel very uncomfortable when my partner has to make decisions which will affect me personally.

7. I have found that my partner is unusually dependable, especially when it comes to things which are important to me

8. My partner behaves in a very consistent manner

9. Whenever we have to make an important decision in a situation we have never encountered before, I know my partner will be concerned about my welfare.

10. Even if I have no reason to expect my partner to share things with me, I still feel certain that he/she will

11. I can rely on my partner to react in a positive way when I expose my weaknesses to him/her.

12. When I share my problems with my partner, I know he/she will respond in a loving way even before I say anything.

13. I am certain that my partner would not cheat on me, even if the opportunity arose and there was no chance that he/she would get caught.

I fear saying or doing something which might create conflict

15. I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me

16. When I am with my partner, I feel secure in facing unknown new situations.

17. Even when my partner makes excuses which sound rather unlikely, I am confident that he/she is telling the truth.

Refer to the following statements regarding your currently relationship, on a scale from not at all true (1) to extremely true (9)

Not at all True (1)    Almost Never True (2)    Usually Not True (3)    Rarely True (4)  
 Occasionally True (5)    Often True (6)    Usually True (7)    Almost Always True (8)  
 Extremely True (9)

1. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner.
2. I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as my partner does
3. I view my relationship with my partner as permanent
4. I experience Intimate communication with my partner
5. There is nothing more important to me than my relationship with my partner
6. I would stay with my partner through the most difficult times
7. I strongly desire to promote the well-being of my partner
8. My relationship with my partner is very romantic
9. I view my commitment to my partner as a matter of principle
10. I have a relationship of mutual understanding with my partner
11. I cannot imagine being without my partner
12. I am certain of my love for my partner
13. I receive considerable emotional support from my partner
14. I adore my partner
15. I have decided that I love my partner
16. I am able to count on my partner in times of need
17. I find myself thinking about my partner frequently during the day
18. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner
19. My partner is able to count on me in times of need
20. Just seeing my partner is exciting for me
21. I view my relationship with my partner as, in part, a thought-out decision
22. I value my partner greatly in my life
23. I find my partner very attractive physically
24. I would not let anything get in the way of my commitment to my partner
25. I am willing to share myself and my possessions with my partner
26. I idealise my partner
27. I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with my partner
28. I experience great happiness with my partner
29. There is something almost 'magical' about my relationship with my partner
30. I will always feel a strong responsibility for my partner
31. I feel emotionally close to my partner
32. My relationship with my partner is very 'alive'
33. I expect my love for my partner to last for the rest of my life
34. I give considerable emotional support to my partner
35. I especially like giving presents to my partner
36. I can't imagine ending my relationship with my partner

Answer the following questions referring to your online communication habits in your current relationship

How do you communicate with your partner when you are apart? (select all that apply)

- Text (1)
- Whatsapp (2)
- Snapchat (3)
- Phone Call (4)
- Skype/ Video chat (5)
- Letters (6)
- Facebook/ Facebook Messenger (7)
- Other Please Specify (8) \_\_\_\_\_

How many days in the past week have you been online to chat to your partner? Tick one box

0      1      1      2      3      4      4      5      6      6      7

On the last day you were online, approximately how long did you chat to your partner for?

Tick one box

0      2      4      6      8      10      12      14      16      18      20      22  
24

On an average week day, approximately how long in total do you chat to your partner for ?

Tick one box

0      2      4      6      8      10      12      14      16      18      20      22  
24

On an average weekend day, approximately how long in total do you chat to your partner?

Tick one box

0      2      4      6      8      10      12      14      16      18      20      22  
24

What do you talk about online? Tick all that apply

- Serious problems (1)
- Trivial problems (not very important ones) (2)
- Things you wouldn't say to someone's face (3)
- Plans for social events (4)
- Asking someone to go out with you (5)
- Sports (6)
- Videogames and online games (7)
- Gossip/rumours (8)
- Books (9)
- Shopping (10)
- Current events (11)

- Politics (12)
  - Your health (13)
  - Hobbies (14)
  - Relationships (15)
  - Things that bother you (fears, frustrations) (16)
  - Clothes and fashion (17)
  - Music (18)
  - TV programmes (19)
  - Films and videos (20)
  - Parents or family (21)
  - Websites (22)
  - Things related to the computer (23)
  - How you feel (24)
  - Your future (e.g., education, jobs) (25)
  - Things in your past (26)
  - Things you've done that day (27)
  - Secret or confidential things (28)
  - Jokes or funny stories (29)
  - Holidays (30)
  - Other (Please Specify) (31)
- 

Q53 Finally, In your own words please describe what being your relationship has been like for you.

Is there anything else that you consider important in making your relationship work?

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## IPA Analysis Process

## a) Transcript Reading Example

538 V: it's all freely given on both sides  
 539 R: aww that's nice, ermm, could you give me an example of like a positive  
 540 intimacy experience you've shared, like is there a particular example of  
 541 something that's like sweet or  
 542 V: hmm ...  
 543 R: made you feel close when you were far apart  
 544 V: erm... I can't think of anything specific  
 545 R: it's hard to think of things on the spot  
 546 V: it is ... dunno I'm struggling to think of like an isolated incident  
 547 R: that's okay a lot of these questions are quite hard because even though you  
 548 know your partner and you know yourself these aren't necessarily things that  
 549 you've thought about directly before  
 550 V: yeah  
 551 R: so you do just kinda go errr, but yeah that's okay ...now this is, you don't have  
 552 to go into too much detail if you don't want to, but do you and your partner cope  
 553 with the lack of physical closeness in your relationship?  
 554 V: ermm, it's never really been a massive issue, erm I dunno if it's the fact that  
 555 we're both at an age where sex drive isn't quite what it was [both laugh] but erm  
 556 I dunno it's never really been an issue, erm ... we just try and make up for lost  
 557 time when we are together I suppose [both laugh]  
 558 R: makes sense, and you never get like jealous or,  
 559 V: what other people who have partners who live close you mean or?  
 560 R: yeah  
 561 V: sometimes, sometimes erm, like M\*\*\*\*s girlfriend will come over and they'll  
 562 be cuddles up on the sofa and that you know that'll make me miss him, a bit more  
 563 intensely but otherwise  
 564 R: no, you don't have like a hug pillow or anything  
 565 V: no [laughs] maybe I should get one, that's not a bad idea  
 566 R: put his shirt on it  
 567 V: I do have some of his deodorant in my room, just put that on it  
 568 R: [laughs] erm so yeah, also with jealousy you don't like get jealous, like if he's  
 569 hanging out with girl friends or anything?  
 570 V: no  
 571 R: and he's comfortable with your living situation  
 572 V: yeah  
 573 R: wow great, erm is there anything else you consider important that we haven't  
 574 kind of covered?  
 575 V: erm... not that I can think of really  
 576 R: no, that's good that's fine, ermm that those are all of my questions, we got  
 577 through them really quickly so that's fine, ermm yeah so thanks for your time  
 578 V: that's alright is it all okay?  
 579 R: yeah!  
 580 [END 32:07]  
 581  
 582  
 583

independence  
 Mental health

shared interests

couldn't do  
 distance for  
 anyone else.

## b) Transcript Break Down Example

P: the tickets for the plane, which is like sixty and then the tickets from the err airport to his house so that's like another thirty so it was about 130 pound every time at least	Plane travel Additional costs Financial resources Large sum of money to see partner
R: oo	
P: at Christmas I paid like 280 for like tr- for plane tickets alone	Christmas Travel tickets
R: [gasp] oh my god	
P: cause they're like for Christmas so it was so expensive erm, so now it's really good, if you- if you book it in advance you can get to Manchester for like thirty pound	Because of the holidays Large financial burden/ improvement Planning Cheap tickets
R: oh my god door to door	
P: easy!	Simple process
R: [laughs] oh my god, okay so, erm how do you and your partner kind of organise your lives around seeing each other	
P: ermm... I guess... we've taken time off work or, if I have- I only work three days a week so,	Adjusted around work life Flexible working hours
R: mm	
P: I just like go up there on the Friday and then come back to work on Tuesday I thin-	Simple journey now Long weekend
R: oh okay	
P: so it's whenever we have time but like we don't really think about it that much and I probably shouldn't see him as much as I do because I'm behind on everything	Whenever available Thoughtless See him more Letting other commitments fall behind
R: [laughs] but everything else just kind takes a back shelf and you're just like let's go	
P: yeah, which I need to change yeah	Need to focus on work life
R: aww that's cute, er so, what do you think is important in your relationship...like I dunno anything you can think of	
P: ermm I guess, because it's long distance I think trust is the most important thing	Due to distance Trust
R: mm	
P: ermm i- ea- it's really easy to like, get jealous when someone's so far away and you know that they're gonna be out an-	Jealousy is easy Partner is far away /aware they're out Clubbing/drinking
R: yeah	
P: especially when he's moved into like a big city and there's so many beautiful girls everywhere so you have to have trust I think, I think that's the most important thing in a long distance relationship, for me	Particularly city life Other potential partners Trust not going to be unfaithful Most important Due to distance
R: okay good, erm how do you personally deal with the distance?	
P: ermm I guess we just speak as much as we can	Communication
R: mm	
P: like we have phone calls basically like every day almost and if we don't, then it feels really weird because it feels like you're single if you don't keep in contact because you're never seeing them	Phone calls consistently Feels like without a partner If not contact Or with them

## c) Interview bullet points example

Elizabeth

- Female
- Met on Instagram – had lots of similar interests
- Engaged
- Together 1 year
- Canada to Canterbury
- See each other every two months
- Because they met online was worried that it wouldn't translate into real life
- Communication is important
- Have a routine of talking to each other every day
- Are honest
- Don't have to prove anything
- Are both forthcoming with information
- Visa issues – he will move here – have to get married within six months
- Perfect partner
- Have followers on Instagram that really support the relationship
- Shared interests
- Increased her confidence in herself
- Holds herself differently
- Never been this happy with someone
- Previous LDR not worked
- Its just easy with him
- Be stupid not to pursue this
- Completely satisfied in the relationship
- Natural/ easy / comfortable
- Missing him amplified mental health
- Try and stay busy to take mind of missing him
- Distraction
- Throw self into things to make time go faster
- Don't want to wish time away
- Any downfalls? Yeah the distance
- Distance is a struggle as far as mental health goes
- Nothing about the relationship makes her unhappy
- Would take some adjustment to move in together but would be really happy
- Has always lived with the same person, would be weird to change that
- Been good for mental health also
- Depending too much on people
- Because he's not here physically had to become more independent
- Positive
- Talking as much as possible



## d) Interview Summary example

## How people describe feelings/ make sense of situation

**Gary** frequently mentions about how his girlfriend has issues with her **emotions**. He is very aware of the problems in his relationship and knows that his partner is far from perfect. He mentions she struggles to open up, and she lacks empathy and self-confidence. He states how he feels he is **unable to address these problems from the distance** and sees the only option is to move closer to her. However, he does not feel like they are in a position in their relationship where they would be **comfortable living together**. He plans to move near her in Belgium, because he needs to be closer to her, so he can **address these issues** with her social contact and confidence by being able to take her out and go places with her. He feels he is unable to sort these issues out with the distance because he **does not want to cause a situation that would upset her**, or put her in a bad mood, there by ruining the phone call or face to face trip. This **conflict avoidance** means that he is becoming frustrated with the relationship and with her. He says he wants to enjoy the time they have together and not bring up difficult conversations about things and **rocking the boat**. Moving in with her would be a high-risk situation because he does not think they are strong enough in their relationship, they have broken up previously. By moving near, her, he is **lowering the risk** and creating a situation where by he can address issues with his partners mental health and their relationship, **without putting as much pressure on the relationship to work**. He is excited to move, but he is also very scared about moving to a new country, as it is a big move, and a big commitment, and very much takes him out of his comfort zone. He says he does think it's daft to move to a country where it might not work out, but it's a step that people make in relationships regardless of distance. He is aware that the "real challenge" will begin once he moves closer to her, where he will be in a **position to address the issues** he's been unable to deal with because of distance. He doesn't believe they are ready to move into together at the moment because they both **need a lot of time alone**, and he doesn't want to move in until he can't live without her. He would like to believe he'd like to put up with having her around more, but he won't know until he goes there.

Despite these difficulties however he believes that he cares for her so much that he's willing to put up with her bullshit. He says the relationship has never been smooth or easy but he sees something special in her. He says that she is the person he cares about most in the world and **he is unable to walk away**, even though he knows it could be easy, logistically as she's not overly involved in his day-to-day life. He says he's never been able to put his finger on why, he sees something in her that he doesn't see in anyone else, and would only do the distance for her. He feels like he's been with her for a long time and he knows what she's going to say before she says it, and vice versa, they know each other very well and their friends and family think they ask like an old married couple. He says they express intimacy in certain ways and certain actions and words that to others may seem like a quirk but to them, and their special connection they understand just how much that means to the other partner. He loves her and gets on with her despite the problems, and he doesn't think that's ever going to go away. However Gary states that is **isn't satisfied in his relationship as he doesn't see her often enough**, and that means that he has to hold certain things back because he doesn't want to push her or upset her.

## e) NVIVO Example Node Breakdown

[Internals\\G Interview](#)

1 reference coded, 0.28% coverage

Reference 1: 0.28% coverage

I: I think it's a multiple- , I think it's a multitude of reasons, I think distance plays a massive part of it

[Internals\\P Interview](#)

2 references coded, 1.21% coverage

Reference 1: 0.29% coverage

M: but I think we always kinda say "it'll be fine when we live near each other"

Reference 2: 0.92% coverage

M: because I thi- I dunno if it is the distance that's what I've always like blamed it on, but... we have these arguments and they are intense because we don't see each other and maybe it's that frustration of not seeing each other that causes it

[Internals\\S interview](#)

5 references coded, 3.70% coverage

Reference 1: 0.75% coverage

S: ermm.... [long pause] other than the distance? R: well you can just say that S: wel the distance is definitely a big one, err... [long pause] R: you don't have to say anything, it can the only one S: no i- no I think the distance is the main one that we're facing right now anyway Yeah

Reference 2: 0.94% coverage

S:... dunno [laughs] like honestly things have gotten more difficult since the distance, started, like...when we were together we were fine, and then distance and then it was like...gah it's really hard to explain [laughs] R: can you think of an example, like just of one aspect of your relationship? S:...er...[long pause] trying to think [laughs] ...

Reference 3: 0.45% coverage

S: there wasn't really any sort of issues R: why do you think that was? Was it just, you just worked S: yeah either that or just like some really good honey moon period

Reference 4: 0.86% coverage

S: yeah I feel like i- [laughs] i- it is difficult cause, one of the things that I have noticed about the distance is that puts doubts, in my mind R: mm S: like, I know I want to be with him, then part of me's like "oh if we're struggling now, are we gonna struggle when we're in the same place" if that makes some sort of sense

Reference 5: 0.71% coverage

S: it's like erm...like so if we go a while without talking, like video calling or if the messages seem a bit off R: mm S: or something I'll be like "oh what if somethings wrong" and tryna figure out if somethings wrong it's just like "but what if we can't fix it" yeah

[Internals\\E interview](#)

1 reference coded, 0.42% coverage

Reference 1: 0.42% coverage

R: ermm okay so do you think there are any down falls in your relationship? V: erm yeah the distance [both laugh]