

## **So Close But So Far Away: Comparing Intimacy Levels in Long Distance and Geographically Close Dating Relationships**

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### **Abstract**

Long distance dating relationships (LDDRs) have become an increasingly popular phenomenon on college campuses. The effect of distance on dating couples' intimacy levels is unclear, as previous studies have produced mixed results. Using a survey questionnaire of undergraduate students at a liberal arts college in the upper Midwest, we tested the hypotheses: 1) students in long distance relationships have intimacy levels to participants in geographically close relationships (GCRs) and 2) there are gender differences among long distance dating relationships in perceived intimacy levels. We found no significant differences in intimacy levels between LDDR and GCR couples and also no difference between male and female respondents in LDDRs.

### Introduction and Review of Literature

For many years, the challenges of geographic separation have not deterred college students from involving themselves in that most controversial and prominent fixture of college dating culture, the long distance dating relationship (LDDR). Noting the prevalence of this phenomenon, researchers for the past fifty years have asked the classic question, “Does distance *really* make the heart grow fonder?” In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the hand-written letters and phone calls that characterized LDDR communication in the past have been replaced with e-mails, text-messages, and the webcam. In particular, the growing popularity of the software program Skype, which allows people to make calls and communicate face-to-face over the internet, has made meaningful communication over long distance more feasible than ever. In light of these recent developments, the LDDR of the past has arguably been transformed.

Due to the perceived prevalence of long distance dating relationships (LDDRs) among college students and these recent advances in technology, the LDDR is a ripe topic for study. A recent survey has found that as many as 20 percent of undergraduates are involved in LDDRs and 37 percent had been involved in one at some time (Knox, Zusman, Daniels, and Brantley 2002). Recent studies of this phenomenon define LDDRs according to different criteria. A common consensus among them is that a LDDR is any relationship in which the participants are prevented from seeing each other often because of geographic distance. Working under this definition, specific studies have focused on various aspects of LDDRs.

Thoughts about the future appear to play a significant role in determining the outcome of LDDRs. Lydon, Pierce and O'Regan (1997) found that relationships are more stable and participants more willing to try to overcome problems when there is a high level of “commitment” within the relationship itself. In another study, females reported that having a “commitment to the future” was an important factor for having a successful LDDR (Carpenter and Knox 1986). Maguire (2007) found that participants in relationships with the potential for becoming proximal, such that participants expect to be reunited permanently, reported higher levels of satisfaction than participants in relationships in which this possibility of proximity is uncertain. However, some participants also reported high satisfaction with their uncertain relationships which had no possibility of becoming proximal. They felt this helped them to maintain an individual lifestyle while having a partner to rely on.

Lydon, Pierce and O'Regan (1997) further distinguished between these related factors of commitment and satisfaction. They differentiated between *moral* commitment (in which a participant feels he/she “ought to” continue a relationship) and *enthusiastic* commitment (in which a participant feels he/she “wants to” continue a relationship). Moral commitment was

found to correlate highly with relationship longevity and success, while enthusiastic commitment correlated with higher reported levels of relationship satisfaction.

Additional research examined the origin of traits participants believed necessary for a lasting LDDR, such as communication skills, patience, and willingness to “commit.” These skills were perceived either as products of experience in past relationships or as individual traits that the person possessed outside the realm of relationships. Mietzner and Li-Wen (2005) found that although some LDDR participants gained skills as a result of their relationship experience, such as trust, patience, and the communication skills, these skills might not impact the outcome of participants’ *current* relationship, although they might prove helpful for the stability of *future* relationships. Cameron and Ross (2007) focused on participants’ affectivity and found that preexisting traits such as optimism, high self-esteem, and a tendency to feel positive emotions were good predictors of a relationship’s high level of stability, regardless of previous experience.

The origin of trust, another trait found to be integral to relationship stability, has been a subject of debate. Mietzner and Li-Wen (2005) found that learning the importance of *trust* was vital to the development and foundation of healthy relationships and to the development/maintenance of personal confidence. Thus, trust was a product developed through experience in a relationship rather than an innate personal tendency. Cameron and Ross (2007), however, found that trust within a relationship was relative to the amount of negative affectivity one has when entering the relationship. Pre-existing negative personal characteristics, such as pessimism and low self-esteem, heavily influenced the amount of trust the participant invested in the relationship. In addition, Arditti and Kauffman (2004) reported that couples often considered trust to be inextricably linked to the overall success or failure of a LDDR. Regardless of origin, it is clear that trust is an important factor in LDDR maintenance and satisfaction.

Mietzner and Li-Wen (2005) also found that *patience* was a crucial skill one must possess to communicate effectively and maintain a relationship. Cameron and Ross (2007) attributed the effectiveness of communication to social support rather than patience. Since the primary source of social support for men (e.g. the significant other) is often found to be different than that for women (e.g. family and friends), different communication practices can result in miscommunication between partners. Therefore, Cameron and Ross (2007) argue that differences in social support systems between partners are a better indicator of the future success of LDDRs than patience.

Further gender differences in attitudes towards LDDRs have been observed in other studies. Carpenter and Knox (1986) found that, when considering the factors leading to success in LDDRs, men emphasized physical, “face-to-face” contact, while women emphasized



emotional involvement and commitment to their partner. Men reported seeing their partner frequently, having these visits initiated by the woman, being able to date other people, and considering their relationship a “quality relationship” as important factors for the future of the relationship. Alternatively, females reported being emotionally connected to their relationship and being committed to the future of the relationship as important factors for the success of the relationship.

Research also investigated gender differences in relationship satisfaction. Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing (1994) found that men were significantly less satisfied than women in their LDDRs with respect to levels of intellectual, sexual, recreational, and social intimacy. The study also found that women daydreamed more about their partners than males and suggests that this daydreaming led to greater *idealization* of their partner and, as a result, more satisfaction with their relationship. Some recent studies, however, have found no gender differences when measuring satisfaction with LDDRs (Stafford and Reske 2002; Maguire 2007). It is apparent that debate still exists as to whether gender has an effect on attitudes and satisfaction in LDDRs.

The phenomenon of *idealization* has been cited as an underlying factor in the results of several studies. Maguire (2007) found that only 28 of 186 participants reported low levels of relationship satisfaction. The researcher suggests a link between high levels of satisfaction and the participants’ idealization of their partners. Stafford and Reske (2002) investigated this phenomenon specifically, comparing levels of idealization and satisfaction in geographically close relationship (GCR) and LDDR couples. The study found that LDDR couples reported significantly higher satisfaction with their relationships than GCR couples and also reported significantly higher levels of idealization than GCR couples. Stafford and Merolla’s study (2007) highlighted similar results, finding that couples in LDDRs were more likely to idealize their partners and that this idealization was positively linked to a lack of frequent “face to face” communication. Due to this idealization, LDDR couples were also more likely to report higher satisfaction with their relationship and more likely to describe them in unrealistically positive terms.

Outside these central topics of debate, it is important to note that there are large gaps in LDDR research. As a notable example, sexual orientation has not been a focus in many of the studies. There appears to be a heterosexual bias, as demonstrated in Carpenter and Knox’s (1986) study on gender. Couples were surveyed for the study but were not described in terms of heterosexual or homosexual orientation. Rather, heterosexuality is assumed because the respondents are discussed relating to their opposite gender partners. This example reflects our

general observation that homosexual couples have essentially been excluded from the literature on LDDRs. In addition, other demographic categories such as income level, ethnicity, and nationality have not been specifically addressed. Comparing couples of different cultural and class backgrounds would create a broader, more complex picture of LDDRs.

We also note that the literature does not exhaustively identify and investigate the various forms that a LDDR can take. Couples separated due to differing circumstances such as employment, study-abroad programs, and school vacations, among other causes have been classified together under one category. More research is needed to define and compare these specific situations and their effect on different aspects of the relationship. For example, a couple separated due to unavoidable employment decisions may face different challenges than a couple separated by voluntary international travel.

Debate continues as to whether LDDRs are more satisfying and successful than GCRs. Results obtained from a sample of 438 undergraduates showed that separation was damaging to relationships, with 21 percent breaking up and another 20 percent stating that separation made the relationship worse (Knox, Zusman, Daniels, Brantley 2002). When asked whether the statement "out of sight, out of mind" was true, 40 percent of respondents who had been in LDDRs considered the statement to be true. Stafford and Reske (2002) and Stafford and Merolla (2007) both found that LDDR couples were more satisfied with their quality of communication and relationships than GCR couples. However, to complicate these findings, Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing (1994) found no significant difference between LDDR and GCR couples in satisfaction with social, sexual, emotional, and intellectual intimacy.

These conflicting findings continue to raise the question of whether distance improves or hinders relationships. We applied some of the questions raised in these studies to our own research at St. Olaf and narrowed our focus to specifically investigate satisfaction with intimacy. Our first research question asks whether there is a difference in intimacy satisfaction between GCRs and LDDRs. Drawing on the Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard- Paolucci, and Rushing (1994) study which compared intimacy levels of LDDRs and GCRs, and based on their results, our first hypothesis is that respondents of LDDRs and GCRs have similar intimacy levels. Our second research question asked whether there is a gender difference between reported intimacy levels of LDDRs. Based on the consensus of multiple studies which found gender differences in relationship satisfaction in LDDRs (Cameron and Ross 2007; Carpenter and Knox 1986; Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing 1994), our second hypothesis is that there are gender differences in reported intimacy levels in LDDRs.

## Methods

For the purposes of gathering our data we administered a survey questionnaire via an online web tool. Prior to creating this survey, we organized a focus group to help us conceptualize our research topic. Based on the discussions in our focus group and previous studies, we decided to focus our survey questions on gender, most recent relationship status, and student's perceived intimacy levels in LDDR and GCR situations.

To categorize relationship status, we allowed respondents to self-define whether their relationship was long-distance or geographically close, based on their own perceptions. In cases where respondents were unsure, they were provided the opportunity to explain their situation. We then examined the unsure responses and categorized them according to guidelines common to many studies (for example, participants living in separate towns would be classified as being in a long distance relationship). Like other researchers (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci and Rushing 1994; Cameron and Ross 2007), we propose that an approach based on a respondent's own perception of their relationship is more valid than assigning arbitrary definitions of our own.

Using Schaefer and Olson's well-established PAIR inventory (1981:50) as a guide, we conceptualized intimacy as consisting of five distinct facets: intellectual, social, sexual, recreational, and emotional. To measure each facet, the respondent was asked to assess their relationship according to their degree of agreement with the following series of statements: "When it comes to having a serious discussion, it seems that we have little to talk about" (intellectual intimacy); "We like spending time as a couple with other people" (social intimacy); "Physical/sexual closeness is an important part of our relationship" and "I feel our physical intimacy is just routine" (sexual intimacy); "We enjoy the same leisure activities" and "My partner and I share very few interests" (recreational intimacy); "I often feel emotionally distant from my partner" and "I can share my feelings without my partner getting defensive" (emotional intimacy). Response categories for these statements were based on a Likert scale, including Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. We did not provide a "Neutral" response category because respondents should be able to assess their relationships either positively or negatively. A neutral category can serve as a way for respondents to avoid answering sensitive questions (Patten 2001:35). Each response was assigned a numerical value, 1-4, with 4 indicating a high intimacy level. The eight responses for each participant were summed to calculate their relationship's intimacy level on a scale we created ranging from 8-32. Levels ranging from 8 to 14 correspond to the least intimate category, 15 to 20 to the less



intimate category, 21 to 26 to the more intimate category, and 27 to 32 to the most intimate category.

When choosing these measures, we attempted to establish validity and reliability in various ways. Face validity exists when the scientific community agrees that a study's measures accurately match its concepts (Neuman 2006:118). We established this type of validity by administering a pilot survey to knowledgeable classmates and consulting with our professor, Ryan Sheppard. Based on the comments from these sources, we made several revisions to our survey questions.

Criterion validity occurs when measures in one study agree with different measures in other studies (Neuman 2006:118). We attempted to establish this sort of validity by using validated Likert-type response categories and statements similar to those used in previous LDDR studies. The Likert Scale has been widely used and is respected in the field as a valid method of measurement (Neuman 2006:34).

Content validity exists when a measure captures the whole meaning of a concept (Neuman 2006:118). We established this class of validity through careful analysis of our concepts and consideration of conceptualizations used in previous research. As mentioned previously, the PAIR inventory (Schaefer and Olson 1981) was particularly helpful as a guide for conceptualizing the many aspects of intimacy including social, sexual, emotional, recreational, and intellectual aspects.

Another important step in our measurement process was to establish reliability. Reliability is an indicator of a measure's stability and ensures that the measures themselves do not affect the variety of responses (Neuman 2006:116). We attempted to achieve reliability through four steps during various stages of our study, including: clearly defining our concepts, increasing the level of measurement, using several indicators of concepts, and administering a pilot-test (Neuman 2006:116). First, in consultation with pertinent literature and previous research we defined our concept of intimacy. We also opted to use several indicators of intimacy by presenting multiple statements for each facet (excluding intellectual and social intimacy due to space restriction). By increasing the levels of measurement from two categories of Agree and Disagree to four of Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree and Strongly Disagree, we gathered more precise information. After compiling the survey questions, we administered a pilot-test to our classmates. By taking these steps we aimed to construct a reliable study which future studies would be able to use to produce similar, accurate results.

Data was collected in the fall of 2008 at St. Olaf College in the upper Midwestern United States. Our target population was all undergraduate students, and our accessible population

was limited to currently enrolled St. Olaf College students. Participants were chosen using a simple random sampling technique. Susan Canon, Director of the Office of Institutional Research, generated our sample using a computer program. She then gave us an email alias for our sample to ensure the anonymity of our respondents. We first excluded students that fit into one or more of the following categories: students under the age of 18, students enrolled in Sociology/Anthropology 371 A or B, students who were participants in our focus groups, students studying abroad, non-fulltime students, and statistics fellows collaborating on this project. These students were excluded to avoid issues of bias or, in the case of student's studying abroad, feasibility. Surveys were sent to 540 students and 315 students returned completed surveys for a response rate of approximately 58.3 percent. All students were of traditional college age, ranging from 18-mid 20s. Our sample was 37.5 percent male and 61.5 percent female. We had respondents from every class year, divided into 24.4 percent first year, 25.6 percent sophomore, 23.1 percent junior, 22.1 percent senior, and 3.8 percent other. With regards to race, 0.3 percent were American Indian, 3.2 percent were Asian American, 1 percent were African American, 89.1 percent were Non-Hispanic White, 0.3 percent were Pacific Islander, 1 percent were Hispanic, and 3.2 percent were Other.

Regarding interactions with these participants, we were confronted with many ethical issues before, during, and after the study. One of the issues addressed was informed consent, when a participant states their willingness to participate in a study after being notified of the research procedures (Neuman 2006:54). Due to the importance of informed consent, we sent a cover letter to describe the study and emphasize the voluntary nature of participation. We also stated the name of our sponsor, St. Olaf College Sociology/Anthropology Department, to help give participants a sense that the survey is respectable and trustworthy. Lastly, the cover letter notified participants about opportunities to see the results of our study. To address the problem of special populations, we excluded students under the age of 18 because we would need to acquire informed consent from legal guardians in order to include these students in our study. We established anonymity through the use of the Form Creator program, which assigned a number to each participant in place of their name. Lastly, to ensure that our study was conducted ethically and openly, we submitted our research plan to the Institutional Review Board of St. Olaf College and were granted approval.



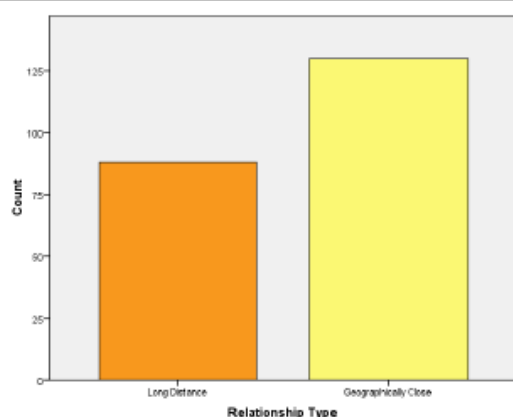
## Results

*Hypothesis 1: Respondents of LDDRs and GCRs have similar intimacy levels.*

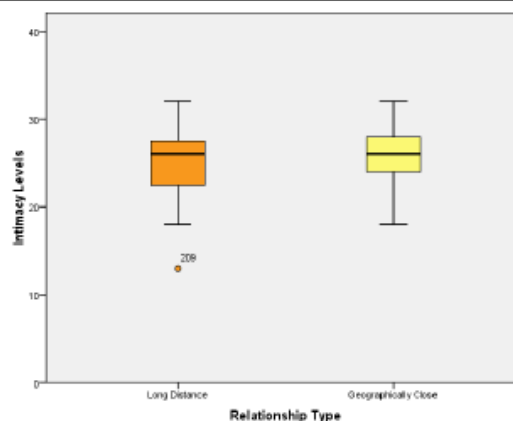
Of respondents reporting having ever been in a relationship, 40.8% of respondents were currently or most recently in a LDDR, while 59.2% were currently or most recently in a GCR (Figure 1.1). The mean intimacy levels for GCR and LDDR couples were 25.13 and 25.8 respectively, with standard deviations of 3.8 and 3.5. The minimum and maximum levels for LDDR couples were 13 and 32, and those for GCR couples were 18 and 32. Our margin of error for the LDDR mean ranged from 24.41 to 26.05, and the margin of error for the GCR mean fell between 25.18 and 26.42, meaning that in 95 percent of trials, the true mean would fall between these two parameters. According to our scale, both scores fell in the More Intimate category, ranging from 21-26.

**Table 1.1: Descriptive Statistics for LDDR and GCR Intimacy Levels**

	Relationship Type	Total	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Intimacy Levels	Long Distance	87	25.23	3.857	.414
	Geographically Close	126	25.80	3.510	.313



**Figure 1.1: Sample Demographics by Relationship**



**Figure 1.2: Hypothesis 1 boxplot**

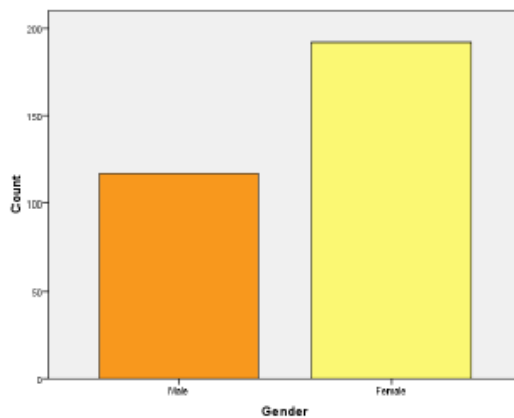
To test our first hypothesis, we performed an independent-samples t test comparing the mean intimacy levels of GCR and LDDR couples. No significant difference was found ( $t(-1.122)$   $p > .263$ ). This result supported our hypothesis which expected no significant difference in intimacy levels between these two groups.

*Hypothesis 2: there are gender differences in reported intimacy levels in LDDRs.*

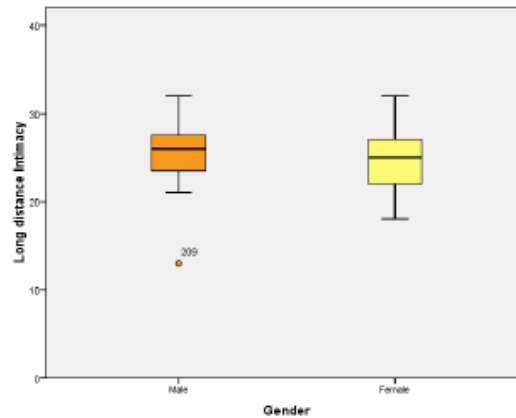
Of respondents reporting their most recent or current relationship as a LDDR, 23.8% were male and 76.2% were female (Figure 1.3). The mean intimacy levels for males and females in LDDRs were 25.72 and 25.42, respectively, with standard deviations of 3.46 and 3.7. The minimum and maximum levels for men were 13 and 32, and the minimum and maximum levels for women were 18 and 32. Our margin of error for the male mean ranged from 24.95 and 26.48, and that for the female mean ranged from 24.76 to 26.08, meaning that in 95 percent of samples, the true mean would fall between these parameters. According to our scale, both scores fell into the More Intimate category.

**Table 1.2: Descriptive Statistics for LDDR Gender Intimacy Levels**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Long distance Intimacy	Male	20	25.25	4.191	.937
	Female	64	25.09	3.745	.468



**Figure 1.3:** Sample Demographics by Gender



**Figure 1.4:** Hypothesis 2 boxplot

To test our second hypothesis, we performed an independent-samples t test, comparing the mean intimacy levels of men and women in LDDRs. No significant difference was found ( $t(158)p > .875$ ). We are unable to reject the null hypothesis that there are no differences in intimacy levels between genders.

## **Discussion**

### *Hypothesis 1*

Our first hypothesis was supported, as the mean intimacy levels for LDDR and GCR respondents were similar. We based our first hypothesis on results from previous studies (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing 1994) that found these intimacy levels to be indistinguishable, and our results further supported these findings. An underlying explanation for our results could be the occurrence of idealization in LDDR couples, a phenomenon that has been studied by Stafford and Reske (2002) and Stafford and Merolla (2007). Idealization results from the need to focus on the positive aspects of a partner during their absence to find merit in continuing the relationship. The consequences of idealization on perceived intimacy levels warrant further study. Another possible explanation for our results is social desirability bias. Social desirability bias occurs when respondents alter responses to fit in with social norms in an attempt to improve their appearance (Neuman 2006:176). In our study, respondents may have reported higher levels of intimacy than they experience in their relationship, to create the impression of a more desirable relationship.

### *Hypothesis 2*

Our results did not support our second hypothesis and contradicted the findings of Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing (1994), who found that men were less satisfied than women with respect to intimacy levels. A possible factor that explains our differing results from previous studies is the small sample size of LDDR males. This sample may not be representative of the population of males and therefore maybe less reliable. However, the results did support the findings of more recent studies by Stafford and Reske (2002) and Maguire (2007), which found no significant gender differences in relationship satisfaction. Evolving gender norms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be a factor behind the insignificant intimacy level differences we observed. For example, the feminist movement attempted to change the way people conceptualized gender differences and it challenged traditional gender roles.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of our study was to compare how individuals perceived intimacy in their long distance and geographically close relationships. Additionally, we investigated whether gender influenced these perceptions. We found no significant difference between the reported levels of intimacy of GCR and LDDR couples and no significant difference in intimacy levels between men and women in LDDRs.



Our study contributes to the overall debate concerning relationship satisfaction in LDDRs, since results of long distance dating studies have been mixed and often contradictory. Therefore, our study is relevant because recent research can only help to widen and solidify our understanding of dating dynamics. The results of our study can also have other practical applications, such as assisting college counselors advising students involved in relationships on and off campus.

Our study should be approached critically, keeping in mind both its strengths and weaknesses. The random selection of our sample, our large response rate, and the use of our intimacy scale are assets to our research. The narrow demographics of the St. Olaf population (disproportionately Caucasian and female when compared nationally) and the low number of male respondents in LDDRs are weaknesses and limit our study's scope.

For future research, we suggest comparing intimacy across a broader demographic spectrum, especially in regards to homosexual couples. Additionally, we suggest adjusting the conceptualization of intimacy to increase the reliability of our measures and incorporating interviews to provide more qualitative data.

<b>Multiple Linear Regression Model</b>				
Intimacy level = $B_0 + B_1 \cdot \text{St. Olaf romantic relationships} + B_2 \cdot \text{romantic relationships} + B_3 \cdot \log(\text{hook-ups})$				
Residual Standard Error = 3.18 on 105 Degrees of Freedom				
Predictor	Coefficient Est.	Standard Error	t-value	P-value
$B_0$	24.7	0.64	38.39	2.00E-16
$B_1$	1.17	0.34	3.41	9.29E-4
$B_2$	-0.44	0.16	-2.76	6.82E-3
$B_3$	0.52	0.31	1.69	0.094