

2016

Finding meaning through video chat communication in longdistance romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

FINDING MEANING THROUGH VIDEO CHAT COMMUNICATION IN LONG-DISTANCE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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This study explored meaning making through visually based computer-mediated communication in long-distance romantic relationships using Relational Dialectics Theory. Data was collected through 35 qualitative individual interviews. Contrapuntal analysis was conducted to answer the two research questions posed in the study. In answer to RQ1, two proximal tensions were discovered from the data. Those tensions include independence versus connection and certainty versus uncertainty. In response to RQ2, two distal tensions were gleaned from the data including “out of sight, out of mind” versus “absence makes the heart grow fonder” and private versus public. Based on the research presented in this study, future directions for scholarship on the topic of long-distance romantic relationships are provided.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2016

FINDING MEANING THROUGH VIDEO CHAT COMMUNICATION IN LONG-
DISTANCE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

BY

REBECCA JOHNSON
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis Director: Jimmie Manning

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Jimmie Manning, of the Communication Department at Northern Illinois University. Dr. Manning always made sure to answer my questions throughout the project and was a wonderful mentor during my time as a master's student. He allowed this paper to be my own work but acted as a helpful guide whenever I ran into trouble or doubted myself.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee members who were involved in guiding me through this research: Dr. David Gunkel and Dr. Andrea Guzman of the Communication Department at Northern Illinois University. I am gratefully indebted to their invaluable input on this thesis project.

Finally, I must express my upmost gratitude to my academic circle and closest peers, Bradley Carrera and Maureen Wieland. My fellow thesis writers were there by my side the whole way with lots of coffee and many long nights in the office, always helping me find the motivation to continue on when it seemed like it would never end. Thank you.

Rebecca Johnson

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner, Thomas Morgan, for the constant love and support you have given me even from afar and to my parents for always believing in me and helping me to achieve my academic goals.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Using Video Chat in Long-Distance Romantic Relationships

The general consensus about long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) is that it is easier to end them rather than set oneself up for heartache, but believing that LDRRs hardly ever work out is a common mistruth (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Stafford, 2005). According to studies that have compared the success of LDRRs with the success of geographically close romantic relationships (GRRs), the couples in long-distance romantic relationships have been found to succeed just as much—and in some cases even more—than couples in GRRs (Stafford, 2005; Stafford & Reske, 1990). With the prevalence of LDRRs and the wide variety of ways to communicate using various informational communication technologies (ICTs), it stands to reason that LDRRs are just as likely to succeed as GRRs if couples are willing to put forth effort to maintain those relationships. However, although there have been a handful of studies regarding the topic of long-distance relationships and computer-mediated communication (CMC), most of it has focused on text-based CMC (Houser et al., 2012). Many of these previous studies have looked at the ways in which long-distance romantic relationships are maintained using text-based CMC in comparison to how relationships are maintained face-to-face, with

some focusing on the topic of LDRRs and recent visual-based CMC such as Skype (Kirk, 2013; Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2011). Neustaedter and Greenberg provided an exploratory look into the maintenance behaviors of couples in long-distance romantic relationships via video chat (2011). This study seeks to build on work examining visual-based CMC. Specifically, and because of its ubiquity for young adults in the United States (Krapf, 2010; Smith, 2016), this study examines the meaning-making processes of video chat communication among couples in LDRRs.

Recent Scholarship on Long-Distance Relationships and Computer-Mediated Communication

Research regarding the topic of maintaining long-distance romantic relationships via computer-mediated communication has been sparse (Stafford, 2005) despite the fact that LDRRs are increasingly prevalent in such a highly mobilized society (Aylor, 2003; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Sahlstein, 2004). According to Jiang and Hancock, “[Long-distance relational maintenance] is understudied because the public and even many scholars firmly believe that geographic proximity and frequent face-to-face contact are necessary for developing mutual understanding, shared meanings, and emotional attachment in romantic relationships” (2013, p. 557). Although in the past, it is has been harder to maintain a sense of social presence with a partner using solely text-based ICTs (Stafford, 2005), Skype and other visual-based CMCs have made it easier to keep close intimate bonds and a sense of togetherness despite geographic distance (Kirk, 2013; Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2011). In other words, although it might have been more difficult or illogical to carry on a long-distance romantic relationship in the past, it is much easier now to do so because of all the technological resources allowing for connectivity.

Some studies have compared LDRRs and GCRRs and indicate that those in GCRRs are more likely to have a stronger bond due to a higher level of social presence, which, according to Biocca et al. (2003) can be defined as “being together with another.” This difference is based on the notion that they are able to spend more time together face-to-face as opposed to couples in LDRRs who, for obvious reasons, are unable to see each other in person as often as those in GCRRs. Social presence is important for romantic relationships as it helps to build a stronger and more intimate bond (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Despite its importance to long-distance interpersonal relationships for those who have access to it, in-depth research on how social presence is conveyed using Skype and other visually based CMC is scarce. Based on the social presence model constructed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976, “the critical factor in a communication medium is its ‘social presence’... This means the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 9). According to this model, “the capacity of the medium to transmit information about facial expression, direction of gaze, posture, dress, and nonverbal cues all contribute to the degree of social presence of a communications medium” (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 9). This line of thought indicates that video chat ICTs would allow for the most social presence after face-to-face communication.

For those who have access to video chat such as Skype, it could be argued that people in LDRRs now have the potential to maintain an equal level of social presence with their partner when compared to the perceived social presence that couples in GCRRs report. As mentioned earlier, social presence in relation to CMC has been studied looking mostly at text-based technology; only a handful of studies have been found regarding video chat and social presence. Although those studies have taken the first steps into understanding social presence and video

chat, the insights they provide are still limited. More extensive research is needed in order to form a deeper understanding of the ways in which social presence is created and maintained using video chat.

Since its release in 2003 (Aamoeth, 2011), Skype has made maintaining social bonds across distances easier than before because of its media richness and ability to create a sense of co-presence between the users. It was difficult to find research that explored video chat in relation to romantic interpersonal relationships, as it has mainly been studied in organizational and educational contexts. Much of the recent scholarship surrounding the maintenance of LDRRs and CMC looks primarily at phone calls and text-based technology such as the use of email and text messaging (Johnson et al., 2008; Ledbetter, 2010; Licoppe, 2004; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Although these studies have provided some insight as to how those tools can be used and why people choose to communicate using certain communicative channels, it is important to understand the implications of video chat as it has been revealed to be a primary mode of communication for couples in LDRRs (Kirk, 2013). According to Kirk's 2013 study on the topic of recent CMC and LDRRs, Skype, a popular form of visually based CMC, is one of the main modes of communication used by couples in long-distance relationships as half of the participants in her study reported that they use Skype for the majority of their communication with their partner when they are apart in comparison to the use of Facebook, Twitter, and email. Although Kirk's findings provide some insight as to which ICTs couples in LDRRs are using, she calls for a more in-depth exploration of Skype and how it can be compared to face-to-face communication when navigating long-distance romantic relationships (2013).

The exploratory research of the use of video chat as a maintenance tool for couples in LDRRs (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2011) brings up two concepts that pertain to visually based

CMC and long-distance romantic relationships. The first is relational maintenance. Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) approached their research from a computer science angle rather than a communication perspective, which allowed them to analyze the data they obtained in a more exploratory manner. Rather than sort the video chat behaviors that couples enacted into Canary and Stafford's (1994) relational maintenance typologies, they presented six unique categories for how LDRR couples exhibit relational maintenance using video chat. After conducting fourteen semi-structured interviews with individuals in long-distance romantic relationships and analyzing the data using open, axial and selective coding, Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) found six common themes among the ways couples communicate via video chat. Given their relevance to the current study, these themes are briefly explained here.

Visualization of Partner

Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) explain that, above all else, partners wanted to see one another's face so that they could feel more emotionally close. Video chat also helped them to avoid miscommunication because it is such a rich medium and allows for not only vocal cues but also nonverbal cues that help convey how the person reacts to what is being said. Participants in their study also reported that being able to see their partner allowed them to empathize more. For example, rather than getting a text from one's partner about how stressed out and tired she is, thanks to video chat one is now able to see, and better understand, what one's partner is going through. Having a visual mode of communication also allowed for partners to show off new belongings (i.e., modeling new clothes they might have gotten) as well as for glimpses into their partner's surroundings (i.e., getting a tour of his or her apartment). Overall, the main reason participants in the Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) study enjoyed video chat was due to the

social presence that video chat was able to convey that other modes of communication (i.e., non-visual media) are unable to give them.

Routine Elements

Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) mention that having a routine for video chat calls was typical of most couples they spoke to in their study. Having a routine meant partners were able to find the time to dedicate to longer video chat sessions as video chats usually last multiple hours. Neustaedter and Greenberg noted the routine video chat calls between partners were akin to a cohabiting couple, as they would “expect to see each other once they had arrived at home after work or school in the evenings, or early mornings, or at other key times during the day” (2011, p. 4). Time zone differences also influenced the couples’ routines.

Hanging Out

It was clear from the data Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) obtained that, if their schedule allowed for it, almost everyone would “hang-out” with their partner for hours at a time doing various activities. They found that there were two main behaviors associated with hanging-out over video chat: parallel activities and shared activities. Parallel activities refer to the partners being connected over video chat, but engaged in their own separate activities. For example, one partner might be cooking dinner while the other partner would be working on schoolwork. Shared activities refer to engaging in an activity together using video chat and do not include having a conversation. These activities included things like watching television or videos, sharing meals, playing video games, and spending time with others (i.e., calling in a partner during a game night). However, Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) note that most of the

participants in their study mentioned they would forego spending time with others in order to spend one-on-one time with their significant other.

Location and Environment

Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) found that most couples engaged in video chat from the comforts of their respective houses or bedrooms (if they shared a living space with roommates). They also found that despite the fact that most participants reported using a laptop or other movable device, it was almost always situated in one designated area and partners would turn the screen depending on where they moved throughout the space. Participants also discussed using video chat in the workplace, which was not too common but was necessary for some couples due to time differences and tight schedules.

Conversation and (Lack of) Idealization

Although previous research on the topic of long-distance romantic relationships shows that partners tend to converse in a more positive manner, Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) found that their participants did not avoid negative topics or potential conflict. The participants even reported that they would openly argue with their partners over video chat, with some noting that using video chat actually helped them to argue. Others stated that they explicitly made it off limits to argue using video chat, preferring instead to use text-based media if they ran into conflicts.

Intimate and Sexual Acts

Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) mention that participants found several ways to express intimacy to each other using video chat and they sorted these behaviors into three overarching categories: hugging and kissing, going to bed/falling asleep over video chat, and sexual activities and nudity. Only two participants reported regularly engaging in cybersex with their partners using video chat, and one of them expressed that despite it being enjoyable, it also highlighted the distance between them and made them miss each other even more.

Second, Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) point to the concept of presence. Many participants from their study reported using video chat because it gave them a sense of presence with their partner that other forms of CMC could not provide. This reported sense of togetherness using video chat adds another element to long-distance romantic relationships that couples in geographically close romantic relationships might not experience. Before delving into their analysis, Neustaedter and Greenberg make the following statement:

What we found remarkable with our participants was that each, regardless of the relationship's dynamics, was able to maintain large degrees of intimacy in their LDR because the video channel afforded unique opportunities to connect the partners' physical locations and created a shared sense of presence between the partners. (2011, p. 3)

Because video chat affords the users a wide variety of social cues and simulates face-to-face interaction, couples in long-distance romantic relationships find that it is useful for maintaining co-presence as Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) found in their study.

The research conducted by Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) is enlightening and provides illuminating surface-level detail of what couples in long-distance romantic relationships do when using video chat. Although their study is articulated from a reflective communication perspective, where communication occurs *because* of the existing relationship and views the

communicative process in terms of moving messages from sender to receiver, its focus on relational maintenance suggests that video chat interaction is not only a tool for maintaining the relationship but is something that *constitutes the relationship itself*. In other words, visually based CMC adds another element to these long-distance relationships – it is not just a maintenance tool but also an additional quality of the relationship. Additionally, the research – while valuable – does not illustrate *how* couples navigate video chat interaction. That is, it shows a benefit (relational maintenance) and a motivation (social presence) without actually exploring the deeper meanings created through the interaction that occurs on video chat platforms. To illuminate these aspects, I turn to two theoretical concepts: communication as constitutive of relationships and relational dialectic theory.

Theoretical Rationale

In light of the cursory analysis presented by Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011), it would be beneficial to look into these relationships even further and not only make note of the behaviors LDRR couples enact using video chat but also how meaning is made through the competing discourses that arise from the use of video chat in LDRRs. Two theoretical perspectives will be used to analyze the data: relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2004, 2007, 2011) and communication as constitutive of relationships (Baxter 2004; Manning, 2014).

Communication as Constitutive of the Relationship

To probe deeper into the themes provided by Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011)—and to help explain the data collected for the current study—one theoretical approach used is the communication as constitutive of relationships (CCR) perspective (Baxter, 2004; Manning,

2014). Even at face value, the theoretical perspective helps to illuminate how transmissive elements (i.e., the things discussed in the conversations over video chat) are involved with meaning-making processes for those in CMC LDRRs. Put in other words, in this study I focus more on the relationship in the communication (i.e., the long-distance relationship within the video chat communication) rather than simply looking at the communication in the relationship (i.e., the simple procedures or processes that make up the visually based computer-mediated interaction).

Taking a CCR approach means that the relationship is not the driving force for communication, but rather the communication between two people is what drives the relationship. CCR is a perspective that is inspired by the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) approach, which suggests that “the very interactions [within an organization] are the building blocks of organizational phenomena” (Kuhn & Schoeneborn, 2015, p. 299). After Baxter (2004) laid out the important arguments for ways relationships are constitutive, Manning (2016) applied these ideas directly to the study of relationships. In CCR, the communicative interactions that take place between two people are the building blocks of that particular relationship. One of the interesting and advantageous aspects that stems from CCR is the convergence of the theoretical traditions. CCR includes a myriad of theoretical perspectives in order to give a better sense of how the different communication processes can allow us to have a better sense of the topic and the meaning-making processes (Manning, 2014). That is, even if the perspective assumes that communication itself is what creates a relationship, it still draws from other perspectives (e.g., sociopsychological, critical) to develop a fuller understanding of how that communication functions. To that end, CCR is a particularly rich theoretical approach,

accommodating and accounting for the many different theoretical areas that combine to form the field of communication studies (Manning, 2014).

Relational Dialectics Theory

CCR is a major component of relational dialectics theory (RDT), which posits that “communication [is] constitutive of sociality, that is, both selves and relationships are constituted through it” (Baxter & Norwood, 2014, p. 287). RDT expands on the ideas of CCR in that it is not only the communication that takes place between two people that makes up a relationship but the dialectical tensions that are at play within that communication. RDT was developed by Leslie A. Baxter and is based off of the work by Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (Baxter, 2004). Bakhtin’s work is referred to as dialogism (in this sense coined by Holquist in 2002), which understands meaning as a construction born from the interplay of multiple discourses (Baxter, 2011). The term “dialogue” as it is understood today is not the way one should understand the term as it relates to Bakhtin’s ideas. Bakhtin’s dialogue “is a process in which unity and difference, in some form are at play, both with and against one another” (Baxter, 2011, p. 32).

Research on dialectical tensions understands meaning as animated within the tensions found between competing discourses (Baxter, 2011). According to Baxter and Norwood (2014), several dialectical tensions at play within a relationship act to shape, change, and constitute that relationship over time. These competing discourses are identified and labeled as three dominant, likely ever-present tensions: centripetal (brings together) versus centrifugal (pulls apart); synchronic (happening in the moment) versus diachronic (happening at a different time, either past or future); and proximal (between the two partners in the relationship) versus distal

(between the couple and their social environment) (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). These categories of competing discourses help to guide in-depth contrapuntal analyses of the meaning-making processes that stem from relational dialectical tensions within a data set (Baxter, 2011). Because of their importance to the theory, I explain each here in depth.

Centripetal Versus Centrifugal

In dialogism, centripetal forces refer to unifying and agreeable discourses (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood, 2014). In RDT, “centripetal discourses are those that are dominant, often centered in relational talk, easily legitimated, and frequently taken for granted” (Baxter & Norwood, 2014, p. 282). In other words, centripetal discourses are found in conversational agreement among relational partners. An example of centripetal discourse would be when two people agree on a particular set of ideas or have similar thoughts and speak among one another in affirming ways. On the other side of this coin are centrifugal forces, which refer to the different and competing discourses within relationships (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood, 2014). One example of centrifugal discourses is when a person sacrifices individual needs and desires in order to create a sense of community with his or her relational partner.

Synchronic Versus Diachronic

According to Baxter (2011), synchronic refers to a single moment in time and is characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of multiple discourses. For instance, if the topic of conversation revolves around what is currently happening at a given time, that is a synchronic discourse. Diachronic, on the other hand, means occurring across time and refers to bringing in competing discourses from a different moment in time, whether it is from the past or from the future. One such example of diachronic interplay would be when a person mentions his parents’

relationship or an instance from a previous relationship in a conversation with his current relational partner – he would be bringing in a discourse from a previous moment in time and relating whatever is happening in the current moment to that privileged dialectic. Although time is an important and ever-conflicting element of relational discourses, it is seldom considered in relational communication studies (Baxter, 2011).

Proximal Versus Distal

Proximal discourses refer to dialogue occurring between the two relational partners (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). These can be any dialogue that takes place between two relational partners. Distal discourses refer to the shared cultural discourses that the relationship is embedded within (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). Distal discourses also refer to any dialogue that occurs with people outside of the primary relationship. One example of a distal discourse might be the comments that a friend makes on the relationship (i.e., a partner's friend who might comment that they Skype "too much"). Another example would be a cultural script that is depicted in the media (i.e., people in long-distance relationships are depicted as more inclined to cheat on their partners).

In outlining the main features of the theory, Baxter and Norwood (2014) describe three propositions that constitute RDT. First, they argue that competing discourses create social reality. The power to determine what constitutes culture lies not with individuals or social groups, but within discourse, especially in centripetal discourses (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). One example of this idea provided by Baxter and Norwood (2014) is the discourse of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. By explicitly creating a dominant social dialogue, Hitler led the country into oppression and genocide. It should be noted that this truth that is created via discourse is not finalizable and is constantly in flux (Baxter, 2011). Each dialectical interaction

has the power to shape, change, and create social reality that is different from the social reality constructed in the previous interaction.

Second, they point to the emergence of meaning from different, perhaps opposing, discourses (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). Central to RDT is the idea “that meaning making is a dialogic process characterized by the simultaneous fusion and differentiation of discourses” (Baxter & Norwood, 2014, p. 282). The belief that discourse is what constitutes meaning is similar to how discourse constitutes social reality. Meaning is not made by un-uttered thoughts about a particular object or idea but is created through spoken language. In the Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) study, one such example of meaning-making that could be discerned from an instance of competing discourses would be when participants mentioned sacrificing time for themselves in order to video chat with their partners. This negotiation of how to spend one’s time is an example of the competing discourses of community and individualism, as most of the participants would give up some individual needs and desires to build a sense of community with their partner. According to Baxter (2011) there are three types of discourse markers when identifying competing dialectical tensions: negating, countering, and entertaining. Negating refers to a disclaimer, a discourse that is presented for the purposes of rejecting an opposing discourse (Baxter, 2011). Countering is when an alternative discourse is presented in opposition to a competing discourse (Baxter, 2011). Countering is different from negating in that it does not only reject the opposing discourse but also presents an alternative to it. Entertaining is a discourse that serves as an indication that a given discursive position is only one of several possible discursive positions (Baxter, 2011). Tying into dialogism, these discourses can also be identified as centrifugal or centripetal among other categorical labels for competing discourses.

Third, Baxter and Norwood (2014) note that discourse interpenetration simultaneously is synchronic and diachronic, meaning that every utterance is embedded within a larger utterance chain. Synchronic dialogue refers to discourse that is happening in the moment and diachronic dialogue refers to discourses that have happened or have yet to happen at a different point in time. According to Baxter, “From a dialogic perspective, an utterance is not conceptualized as an isolated communicative act that bears a one-to-one correspondence with a speaker’s inner motivations, thoughts, and feelings” (2011, p. 49). This idea means that all utterances stem from larger utterances that have worked to shape our social reality and each utterance adds another link in this chain.

As noted in the Continuum of Dialogic Struggle (Figure 1), on the other end of the spectrum from monologue there is what Baxter (2011) refers to as transformative dialogue. Transformative dialogue occurs when competing discourses come together to create a new understanding of meaning (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). These new meanings can take two forms as noted by Bakhtin: hybrid or aesthetic moment (Baxter & Norwood, 2014). According to Baxter and Norwood, a hybrid is when “formerly competing discourses are still identifiable yet are repositioned as compatible” (2014, p. 284) and an aesthetic moment refers to when “formerly competing discourses are merged in a way that profoundly alters each one” (2014, p. 284)

← Monologue----/Diachronic Interplay/-----/Synchronic Polemic Interplay/----Transformative Dialogue→

Figure 1. Continuum of Dialogic Struggle

Current Study

Based on the data used in the Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) study, it would appear that RDT, which examines language and contradictions, would be well suited for this study.

With these ideas in mind, three guiding research questions are used for the current research. As Manning and Kunkel (2014a) note, research questions give guidance to the data collection process and allow for a more focused study.

A close examination of the thematic categories provided by Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) in their exploratory study suggests that many of these categories might contradict or, to use the language of RDT, might compete in dialogic tensions. As Suter et al. (2014) note, one of the strongest potentials of RDT is to animate the meaning making that can occur from competing relational discourses. Based on the extant research, it appears that the relational tensions are likely proximal (i.e., between the couple) as well as distal (i.e., between the couple and their culture or social world). To that end, two research questions are offered:

RQ1: How do relational partner discourses animate proximal tensions regarding the use of visually based computer-mediated communication in long-distance romantic relationships?

RQ2: How do relational partner discourses animate distal tensions regarding the use of visually based computer-mediated communication in long-distance romantic relationships?

Study Overview

To answer these questions, this study employed a commonly used tool for studies engaging both CCR and RDT: interpretive qualitative interviews. The next chapter explains the rationale, methodology, and specific methods used for this study.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF METHODS

Qualitative Query

This study used an interpretive approach to understand how video chat communication between long-distance romantic partners constitutes the meaning-making processes within those interactions. Qualitative research methods were employed for the purposes of data collection. This chapter offers a brief overview of interpretivist qualitative research (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Manning & Kunkela, 2014; Tracy, 2013; Tracy & Muñoz, 2011) before explaining choices made regarding participants and procedures.

Interpretive

Using an interpretive perspective implies that there is no objective truth within the data, but that the results of the research are determined based on the interpretations made by the researcher. According to Tracy and Muñoz (2011), there are four factors of interpretive qualitative research. The first factor they point out is that interpersonal qualitative research takes an emic approach. An emic approach means that the research is driven by the social reality of the participants.

Secondly Tracy and Muñoz (2011) assert that interpersonal interpretivist research revolves around naturally occurring data. Naturally occurring data stems from online message boards, naturally occurring conversations, or other open-ended and discourse-oriented qualitative research such as interviews. Thirdly qualitative research is an inductive process, which means that the data is used to *build* claims, not to *test* ideas. Lastly Tracy and Muñoz (2011) state that interpersonal qualitative researchers get insights from words and/or images within their data. These words and images serve as examples for the researcher's inductive claims.

Participants and Procedures

After compiling the materials needed for this study and sending it off to the Institutional Review Board at Northern Illinois University, IRB approval was obtained to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the participants who volunteered to be interviewed. In order to ensure the proper analysis for relational dialectic theory the following methods were enacted.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited using a snowball convenience sample (Manning & Kunkel, 2014b). In order to procure a wider range of participants, I created a Reddit account and posted a recruitment message on three different subreddits, or online forums, dedicated to the topic of long-distance relationships. Those subreddits included r/LongDistance (29,417 subscribers), r/LDR (577 subscribers), and r/Long_Distance (104 subscribers). Participants who were recruited via Reddit were interviewed using Skype. The other method that was used to recruit participants involved reaching out to students in various communication courses at a large midwestern university with the incentive of extra credit should they meet the requirements and

choose to participate in the interviewing process. An alternate survey was offered to the students who did not meet the requirements and therefore could not participate.

Although many previous studies regarding the topic of long-distance romantic relationships have allowed their participants to determine for themselves whether they fall into the long-distance category (Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford & Canary, 1991), there were three requirements that an individual had meet in order to participate in this particular study. First, they must *currently* be apart from their long-distance romantic partner. Second, they must be away from their partner for at least a month. Finally, they must have access to visually based CMC and/or employ the use of video chat with their long-distance partner. The first requirement was to ensure that I got recent information on the topic that was fresh in the participants' minds. The second requirement was set due to the belief that couples who spend at least a month and half apart are more likely to use Skype or other video chat platforms to speak with their significant other than partners who spend less time apart. The third requirement was set for obvious reasons as this study revolves around meaning making within video chat communication.

Overall, 35 individual interviews were conducted – 17 women and 18 men. Although all participants were asked if they would refer their partner to participate in the study, only three partners participated, meaning that three dyadic couple interviews were obtained. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 28 years old ($M=18.1$) and came from various countries including England ($n=2$), France ($n=1$), Indonesia ($n=1$), and several regions in the United States ($n=31$). The majority of participants were currently working toward their college degrees and those who were not in college had all already obtained a college degree. Participants were Caucasian ($n=23$), African American ($n=12$), Hispanic ($n=1$), and Asian ($n=1$).

Procedures

To gather in-depth, quality data on the topic of visually based computer-mediated communication in long-distance romantic relationships, semi-structured one-on-one interviews (Manning & Kunkel, 2014b) were conducted and audio-recorded with each participant. An interview protocol was created with four sets of questions addressing various topics related to the participant's long-distance romantic relationship. The first set of questions was about gathering background information on the participant and his or her romantic partner/LDRR (i.e., "How long have you and your partner been together?" "Is this the only time you plan on spending time apart?"). The second set of questions dealt with the maintenance of the long-distance relationship itself (i.e., "How often do you talk with your partner using Skype or other video chat platforms?"). The third set of questions was related to social presence and visually based computer-mediated communication (i.e., "How do your conversations on video chat differ from the ones you have when you are face-to-face?"). Lastly the final set of questions revolved around how the participants handle the long distance relationship on a personal level (i.e., "Would you say that long-distance is hard?" and "What specifically makes it hard?"). For more information on the interview protocol the Appendix.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and initially analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a six-step process. First, the researcher becomes familiar with the data. The second step requires that the researcher make note of initial codes he or she sorts through the data. These codes could be salient patterns that the researcher notices while reading through the text of analysis or it could be repetitive quotes that tend to pop up frequently as the researcher reads, etc. The third step entails generating themes from the codes found in step two. In this third step of the process, the researcher might

note how certain codes might be connected to one another and how they might be combined into one overall theme. Fourth, the researcher should review the themes that were generated from the initial codes. Reviewing the themes allows the researcher to double check one's work and make sure the themes are sound. The fifth step is when the theme names are finalized and the researcher provides a full definition to allow others to understand the themes. The sixth and final step occurs when the researcher extracts examples from the data set that exhibit the essence of a particular theme. For instance, if there is a particular quote that encompasses a certain theme, the researcher will pull it out and use it to help explain how those particular themes emerged.

Second-Order Coding: Contrapuntal Analysis

When analyzing a text from a relational dialectic perspective, contrapuntal analysis is useful for a deeper understanding. Baxter (2011) describes the method of contrapuntal analysis in the sixth chapter of her book, *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective*, as a three-step process. First, the researcher must apply thematic analysis to the data set. Baxter describes two different kinds of themes that can be generated using thematic analysis: manifest and latent (Baxter, 2011, p.158). Manifest themes are those that appear directly, on the surface of the discourse or text of analysis. Manifest themes are usually obvious and clear to the researcher. Latent themes, on the contrary, are those themes that are hidden within the text. In other words, the researcher needs to read between the lines to dig out the latent themes within the data set.

Secondly the researcher should identify whether discourses compete. Baxter starts off her description of this step by emphasizing that “[c]ontrapuntal analysis presumes the native's point of view; that is, it is important to support the claim that the researcher's identification of competing discourses rings true to participants themselves” (2011, p. 165). In other words, it is

pertinent to the validity of the study that the researcher's observations of competing discourses are generally agreed upon by the participants in the study. Baxter provides three markers used to help the researcher with recognizing competing discourses within the text of analysis: negating, countering, and entertaining (2011, pp. 167-168). These markers were expanded upon in chapter one.

The third and final step of contrapuntal analysis is identifying the interplay of competing discourses (Baxter, 2011, p. 169). According to Baxter, "The task at this stage of contrapuntal analysis is that of determining whether the text enacts monologue, diachronic separation, or synchronic interplay" (2011, p. 169). Baxter points out that oftentimes scholars employing the method of contrapuntal analysis do not extend themselves further than identifying whether there are competing discourses and leave out this critical third step. It is not enough to merely identify the competing discourses; the interplay of the competing discourses needs to be determined as well. It is this third step that allows us to understand where the meaning is made within the competing discourses. Baxter warns scholars not to lose sight of the centripetal-centrifugal discursive tension as she asserts that it is the most significant for understanding how dominant and marginalized discourses might come into interplay with one another (Baxter, 2011, p. 169).

Conclusion

The qualitative research methods employed in this study generated valuable data regarding meaning making via visually based CMC in long-distance romantic relationships. By collecting a data set using qualitative methods such as semi-structured individual interviews, discourses were able to be adequately analyzed using contrapuntal analysis. Employing contrapuntal analysis is useful for understanding the competing discourses and the discursive

tensions, which allows the researcher to identify the meaning that is being made and the interplay of discourse where the meaning is being made. More specifically, not only are the competing discourses identified, but the researcher is also able to pinpoint exactly how discursive tensions are clashing to create certain meanings. This process is explained further in the next chapter where the observations drawn from the data set are discussed.

CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS

Relationships, Meaning Making, and Video Chat

To address the two research questions of this study, contrapuntal analysis was conducted to find the interplay between discourses and determine the meaning created via the discursive tensions. The first research question asked how relational partner discourses animate proximal tensions regarding the use of visually based computer-mediated communication in long-distance romantic relationships, with the third research question addressing more distal tensions. Themes became saturated after 12 interviews were analyzed.

According to Baxter (2011), proximal discourses are those that occur among the people within a given relationship. In this case, the proximal discourses are those that occur between the long-distance romantic relational partners. Distal discourses then refer to the cultural discourses that the relationship is embedded within (Baxter, 2011). For example, Manning (2013) examined how distal discourses such as media representations and comments from other people helped family members to converge around their non-normative identities. Other distal discourses could be religious doctrine, laws, or even a conversation overheard in a grocery store. To better understand the meaning making taking place in computer-mediated long-distance romantic

relationships, the proximal discursive tensions will be presented first with the distal tensions following.

Proximal Tensions

In response to the first research question driving this study, two proximal tensions were discovered after conducting contrapuntal analysis: *independence vs. connection* and *certainty vs. uncertainty*.

Independence vs. Connection

Independence vs. connection, also referred to as “me” time vs. “we” time, was the most consistent and obvious tension throughout the data as several participants noted the need to balance between giving themselves time to be alone and the need to give their partners attention and maintain a strong sense of connection. This tension involves negotiating the time a person dedicates to one’s partner and the time a person dedicates to one’s own interests. Interestingly, most participants, when asked if they had a set routine, responded that they do not set specific times for video chats, adding that having specific times for video chat sessions would only add stress. Video chat with partners was often woven in with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, not added on as another thing to cross off of the to-do list. As expressed by one participant, “We don’t really have a routine because I think we both feel that if there’s a routine, it puts pressure on things. So, whenever we can, we’ll talk.” Another participant mentioned, “No, [we don’t have a routine], it’s just kind of whenever we both have time. He’s tired a lot of the time so, you know.”

For the participants in this study, the most common way to engage in visually based computer-mediated communication was to message their partners inquiring as to whether they

were available to chat or not throughout the day. Others mentioned that they would just log on whenever they got home and call their partner when they came online as well. The majority of participants mentioned that they try to video chat every day if their schedule allows for it, but if not every day then *at least* every other day. It is such a common practice for them to come home and get on video chat that even without a set routine participants reported that often they would send their partner a message if they were not going to be available for video chat later that day, despite not having a set time or schedule for video chatting.

As one participant said, “I mean, we’re pretty much always talking to one another, like as long as we’re both up, we’re talking, so if someone is gonna be late because of work or something, that’s communicated.” This casual video chat routine allowed for the partners to maintain their personal lives as independent from one another but also gave them something to look forward to at the end of the day. It also was not uncommon for partners to be texting each other or communicating in other ways (i.e., Facebook messenger, phone calls, Snapchat) throughout the day. As one participant noted, “We video chat pretty much every day, or at least we try to, but... a lot of times like, when I’m at work, we can’t video chat so we just message each other. But, it’s every day. It’s from the time I wake up until the time I go to sleep, we’re messaging each other.” Therefore, although they reported the personal autonomy afforded by being in a long-distance romantic relationship, they also reported a sense of constant connection, similar to how Schon and Manning (2015) describe the connectedness mode of communication.

The connectedness mode of communication, as discussed earlier, refers to interaction between two people for the purpose of interaction itself. The communication that occurs between long-distance partners is not necessarily a means to an end, but the end goal *is* the communication. Long-distance romantic partners are able to develop and maintain their

relationship just as geographically close couples are able to by using informational communication technologies. Many participants mentioned that they were able to “hang out” using video chat. As one participant stated, “[During video chat] I’m doing homework, he’s doing homework, like we’re doing it together...and like even those times, we don’t really talk, we’re like doing our own thing, but it’s nice because we’re doing it together.” This accessibility to be perpetually connected to their partner despite physical distance seemingly leads to a lack of idealization and more opportunity to grow independently while keeping up with romantic connections.

Although this constant sense of connection was a common theme throughout the data, participants also stressed how much independence being in a long-distance romantic relationship afforded them and the fine line of balancing that sense of connection with their independence. Some participants mentioned how important it was for them to have time to themselves but how it could be difficult for their partners to understand this as it could be construed as being bored with video chatting or a sign that they do not miss them enough to spend time on video chat. Several participants who expressed the importance of “me time” told stories of how they had to explain to their partner that they just needed their space or that they did not feel like video chatting after a long and stressful day. As one participant explained, “Sometimes he doesn’t understand, like, I need my space and my time. Because even though we’re 4,000 miles away, it’s like he’s all up in my grill sometimes! Like, sometimes he’s just *right there*, in my ear, all the time. And I just tell him, I’m like, ‘I need *my* time to *myself*.’” While the ability to maintain such a strong sense of connection and togetherness across distances was comforting to almost all the participants, it was also more difficult to find time for themselves. As one participant related:

Well, you get this level of independence and, especially – he’s only 20, so, you’re still working on yourself but you get to go and do everything you need to do and live your own, complete life with your separate friends, which a lot of people in relationships lack; you get your own life and you work on your own stuff, but you’re still together at the end of the day and you get that healthy dependence.

As another participant said when discussing the balance between alone time and spending time with his partner:

I’m usually quick about moving from spot to spot whereas she likes to take her time, you know, so like, she would get back from class and I would be like – if it was me, I’d get on Skype right away, right? And then I’d do everything else after. But she likes to get back home, she’s making food or whatever, you know and hey, that’s like 10-15 minutes, you gotta optimize your time here, ya know? So, I don’t know what she’s doing, but I feel like I shouldn’t give her that much heat about that, because maybe she needs that time, she needs that time to be alone, maybe she needs that time to mentally get ready or I’m not sure, for me that’s not really a problem so, as long as I’m not too unkempt, I think I’m usually okay, I’m good to go! [Laughing]

As he mentioned in the above quote, he does not necessarily need as much “me time” as his partner does, but he is empathetic to his partner’s needs.

It can be determined that negotiating connection and independence is like trying to find a healthy balance in a geographically close romantic relationship thanks to the communicative technologies that have come about over the years and continues to compress time and space; the only thing seemingly absent is the ability to reach out and touch their partner.

Certainty vs. Uncertainty

The other proximal tension that was discovered while analyzing the data is certainty vs. uncertainty. In this tension, participants were often adamant that they were in the relationship for the long haul but not quite set on a date for when the long-distance romantic relationship would end and the geographically close one would begin. This tension refers to the discussions surrounding the future of the relationship and how long the distance will last. One of the major factors when it comes to long-distance romantic relationships is the level of certainty that the

partners have about their future together. Questions of the future often hang over the heads of couples in LDRRs: How long is this going to last? When will the distance be closed? Who will be moving where? These are some of the questions that might be asked.

Previous research has indicated that the more relational uncertainty there is in a relationship, the less maintenance behaviors will be enacted and it could lead to an increase in jealousy (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Dainton & Aylor, 2001). Relational uncertainty is largely understood as uncertainty about the future and/or the status of the relationship (Afifi & Reichart, 1996; Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Ficara & Mongeau, 2000; Knoblock & Solomon, 1999). The participants in this study were asked if they had made any future plans or discussed the future with their partners, and the responses generally landed somewhere in between being absolutely certain of what the future holds to having a general idea but not having settled on an exact date yet. No one interviewed for this study said anything about casual dating just to see where it leads, but only a few participants had set a date for closing the distance. However, not having a set date did not worry most participants as most were finishing up school and had at least two more years of distance to endure. Therefore, it was less stressful to focus on the next time they would be able to see each other in person (i.e., the next break they get) as opposed to figuring out when the distance would end for good since it is so far away for most couples.

As one participant mentioned, “She’s still finishing up school and I’m just starting out with my job, and so, I’ll be able to see her more often because I work now, I don’t go to school, and so when she’s done with school, then what? I’m sure *then* it will become more of a stressful thing.” This sentiment was echoed by several participants throughout the interviews as there was certainty about the relationship status but uncertainty about when they would close the distance – this was not so much a source of stress as a matter of timing and taking care of other matters.

Although most participants were certain about the status of their relationship, their biggest concern was getting what they needed to get done out of the way (i.e., finishing school) and *then* they would focus their attention on closing the distance. Another example of this appeared when another participant discussed his future plans with his long-distance partner:

Well...she's probably going to make a career out of this so it's gonna be like 20 years in the navy, but we're gonna get married in the next few years and she has a few days that she wants to share what she actually wants to do and again I don't really care, I'm just happy to be with her, but if we get married before she goes to her next assignment, I can live with her. Uh, on base. Or off base. And the military or the navy will pay for it. So, if we get married while she's in Spain, then I can go wherever she goes. But we would get married anyway, like I, I would've still proposed to her if she didn't go to the navy but it's kinda more practical to get married before she goes somewhere else because then they'll pay for me to move with her.

In relation to certainty versus uncertainty, many participants also noted that long-distance romantic relationships make it almost impossible for the relationship to just be casual, as no one would put so much effort into a relationship if they did not foresee a future for it. As one participant framed it, “You’re obviously dedicated toward [each other] and you know it’s not just talk and you know it’s not [just] about sex. Like, the best part about being long-distance is that you know they’re serious or they wouldn’t be doing this.” A common belief among participants was that if a person is willing to endure a long-distance romantic relationship it is a sign that they are committed to making it work, otherwise, what would be the point?

Distal Tensions

In response to the second research question, two distal tensions were found after conducting a contrapuntal analysis on the transcribed interview data. These tensions are labeled as “*out of sight, out of mind*” vs. “*absence makes the heart grow fonder*” and *public vs. private*.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind vs. Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

The cultural, or distal, discourse regarding long-distance romantic relationships is a rather pessimistic one. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked what comments, if any, have other people made to them about their LDRR. Most everyone responded that at some point or another they had gotten the comment that it would not work out for a myriad of reasons (i.e., “it is too hard to maintain,” “your partner will cheat on you,” “you will end up growing apart from one another,” “somebody will get bored with the other one so far away,” and the list goes on). A couple of participants noted that media representation of long-distance romantic relationships, as scarce as they are, are often heavily negative and have an impact on their own relationship and the ways in which others think about LDRRs. One participant noted:

There is a part [in *How I Met Your Mother*] where he is dating somebody and she goes to Germany and like a big theme – it’s mentioned a couple of times in the series – is that long-distance relationships *never* work. Like they say that in the show and it’s like, it kinda sucks because that’s for him, you know? Like, it’s just conveying that it doesn’t work and then that shows everybody else that might be in a long-distance romantic relationship that theirs isn’t gonna work either, so people don’t understand the influence that something like that has.

Going further on the topic of how LDRRs are portrayed in the media, the same participant discussed not only how it affects general societal attitudes toward long-distance romance but also how it affects his own relationship, saying:

It’s not [as hard as people might think], it’s easier than ever. You know, it’s...it’s kind of – I’m sorry if I’m off topic from your questions or anything like that but, she watches a lot of movies, like romantic, like rom-coms and things like that and then she’ll constantly be calling me – and she trusts me – but a lot of the movies that she watches are about guys that end up cheating on their wives or something like that and she’ll just call me and talk to me about me cheating and I’m *never* going to do that, like I am the last person that would ever do that, but it’s just in the media again, and it worries her because all these marriages fail and like guys cheat and...and it has nothing to do with me or us, you know? It’s just a movie. So I told her – it actually

happened yesterday – I said, ‘Why don’t you just, the next time you see a movie like that, just think, wow, I’m glad I don’t have to deal with that?’”

This perpetuation of the idea that LDRRs rarely work out is unfortunate and it seems all too common to believe that long-distance romantic relationships will only end in heartache, making the situation feel like an unfathomable and difficult journey from the start. However, according to participants in this study, it all depends on the people within the relationship – if a person has access to ICTs that allow for frequent and accessible communication across the globe, then all they have to do is put in a little effort. When one participant was asked for a reaction to people who say that LDRRs never work out or are doomed to fail, she responded:

Maybe they just haven’t found the right person. Like, I feel like those people are the ones that want the instant gratification, like they see a person, they want to be with that person like right there, at that moment, they’re not willing to put the work into it, and so it’s also like...maybe they’re kind of lazy too. Like, if you really, if you really want something, you’re gonna work for it.

Another participant stated, “If you want something to work, you’ll make it work.” Participants often reframed the discourse surrounding LDRRs from the “long-distance always fails” state of mind to “it depends on the people within the relationship.” Having the belief that LDRRs never work is not so much about the situation itself, but more of a reflection of who a person is, according to participants.

A lot of participants also quoted the well-known phrase, “absence makes the heart grow fonder” and similar sentiments. As one participant expressed:

[The people that say that it will never work out] don’t understand because it’s like, it would be easier to just break up and have him go to Michigan and me stay here or whatever, but like he’s worth the long distance and I want to make it work – like it’s still really early, but like I can see a future and I want to at least *try* to make it work.

Again, the participants reframed the societal discourses about long-distance romantic relationships from “it’ll never work out” to a discourse that centers on the people *within* the relationship rather than the context of the relationship itself.

An interesting aspect that came about in regards to this tension was that several participants noted that they had people in their lives who served as an example of how LDRRs actually *can* work out. These references to other relationships are also distal discourses as they bring in examples from other relationships and use them to inform their own long-distance romantic relationship. One participant mentioned having an uncle who was long distance with his partner for a while, back before video chat and all the other ICTs people so often rely on today. Another participant referred to the fact that since she is working in the military, she is surrounded with others who are going through similar situations of long distance mentioning “Everybody here that I’m friends with, they’re military, and a lot of them, they have to Facetime all the time too, they have to call home, whether it’s their parents or their boyfriend/girlfriend, their kids.” For those who had these models in their lives that show that LDRRs could actually be successful, it seemed to be significant for them, something they could turn to when others were too negative or even when they themselves were struggling with the distance; these long-distance relational role models would help them realize that the distance does not last forever.

Public vs. Private

The second discursive tension refers to the decision to impart knowledge about the long-distance romantic relationship to other people. Throughout the course of the interviews, it became clear that balancing relational privacy and disclosing information about the relationship was something nearly all participants discussed and was something they had to think about,

especially so being in a long-distance romantic relationship and engaging in frequent video chat communication. As mentioned in the previous section, nearly every participant noted that at some point they had received negative comments about being in an LDRR, so it is no surprise that deciding what to tell and whom to talk to are no easy decisions for long-distance couples. When asked if she felt comfortable using video chat as a reason for not doing something else, one participant noted:

I don't talk about [Skyping] that openly because I feel like people think, 'Oh, you're just *always* talking to your boyfriend,' you know? They think – or if I'm going on a Skype date – like my dad jokes that I'm having Skype dates or whatever, but [laughing] – sometimes, I'll say, 'Well, I'm tired,' and he'll know what that means, but my dad gets it, but like I don't tell other people. I make up other excuses.

Although some participants mentioned they had people in their lives whom they could turn to for advice and as models of how to engage in a successful long-distance romantic relationship, others found the responses from their peers to be frustrating and unsympathetic.

Participants reported that it could be hard to discuss their long-distance romantic relationship with others, especially when those people do not understand what it is like to be *in* one. When asked why she refrained from discussing the LDRR with others, one participant responded that she feels a bit judged, “because they don't understand” what exactly being in a long-distance romantic relationship entails. However, another participant noted:

Yeah, I would [feel comfortable using Skype as an excuse to not do something]. I don't care what people say...because in the beginning, I definitely did [care what people said], but now, like, I just don't care, I don't.

This carefree attitude was mostly expressed by people who had been with their partners for a longer period of time, as similar sentiments were added throughout the course of the interviews.

One participant framed it in the following way: People in geographically close romantic relationships go home to their partner every night, they see each other every day, so why is it

weird for people in long-distance romantic relationships to set aside time for each other every day using video chat?

Another issue that goes along with privacy and publicity regarding video chat communication and long-distance romantic relationships is sexual intimacy. Those who lived with roommates did not necessarily mind if their roommates were around when they were video chatting, but they also mentioned being more inclined to stick to their bedrooms when doing so in order to have more privacy should they decide to engage in cyber sexual behaviors or even if they just wanted to discuss intimate topics that are personal to their LDRR.

Conclusion

The qualitative research methods employed in this study spawned rich data regarding visually based CMC and long-distance romantic relationships. In response to the two research questions, four tensions were discovered: the proximal tensions of independence versus connection and certainty versus uncertainty and the distal tensions of “out of sight, out of mind,” versus “absence makes the heart grow fonder” and privacy versus publicity. This study yielded several different directions for potential future research in long-distance romantic relationships and computer-mediated communication, including revisiting the idea of idealization, verbal communication as compensation for the lack of physical/non-verbal communication, and LDRRs as non-normative. Though this was a fruitful study, there is still so much more to be discovered. The study’s limitations, future research possibilities, and other considerations are discussed in the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

General Observations on Video Chat and Long-Distance Romantic Relationships

The data set collected for the purposes of this study yielded a deeper understanding of how meaning is made using visually based computer-mediated communication in long-distance romantic relationships. After discussing the themes and discursive tensions that pertained to the two initial research questions, it is also pertinent to note some other interesting findings that were gleaned from the qualitative interpretive interviews. Three noteworthy findings that emerged include the seeming lack of idealization, verbal communication as a compensation for the lack of nonverbal/physical communication, and how those in LDRRs communicate about and engage in long-distance sexual behaviors.

As noted in Neustaedter and Greenberg's (2011) study, idealization did not appear as salient as it has in previous research gathered on long-distance romantic relationships (Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford & Reske, 1990). Idealization typically occurs when partners are unable to engage in frequent communication, as Stafford and Reske noted: "The centrality of communication in relationships has been noted by many, and Parks (1982) has argued that a pervasive assumption is that frequent communication and high levels of self-disclosure are equated with relationship development and intimacy" (cited in Stafford & Reske, 1990, p. 274). Thanks to more recent

developments in CMC, long-distance romantic relationships are able to develop their relationships in a similar fashion to a geographically close romantic relationship. It is also important to note that the participants in this study did not define their LDRR in unrealistically positive terms the way that idealized couples have been found to do (Stafford & Reske, 1990).

This finding lines up with the previous in-depth work on video chat and long-distance romantic relationships by Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) as they too found that there seemed to be a reduced sense of idealization among their participants. In their work they found that “video affords a unique opportunity for couples to share presence over distance, which in turn provides intimacy and reduced idealization” (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2011, p. 1). To explain further, idealization behaviors typically include speaking unrealistically positively about one’s partner, avoiding topics that may potentially lead to conflict, and acting on one’s best behavior when interacting with one’s partner (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2011). However, similar to what Neustaedter and Greenberg (2011) noted in their own research, most of the participants in the current study did not exhibit such idealized behaviors. For instance, when asked whether they fought with their partners over video chat, most of the participants answered that conflict was not something they shied away from and even that it happened frequently. They also did not report getting dressed up before Skyping with their significant others and often noted that they see each other often enough that it does not matter what they look like. This lack of idealization is something that could be interesting to look into in future research. A quantitative study on idealization in LDRRs (both those that use video chat and those that do not use video chat) and GCRRs would be conducive for shedding light on the phenomenon.

Another interesting phenomenon that emerged from the data is that of an increase in verbal communication when couples are apart to make up for a lack of nonverbal/physical

communication. This theme emerged in several instances when discussing long-distance romantic relationships with the participants, from long-distance sex to general video chat conversation. What this means is that participants often reported that a big difference in how they communicated when they were together (in person) versus apart is that they found themselves talking more when they were apart. This communicative difference could be for several reasons. One that comes to mind in regards to long-distance sex is that because partners are unable to touch each other in order to sexually satisfy their partner, they resort to dirty talking, something that was brought up by some participants as something they did when they engaged in “Skype sex,” but not often employed when they engaged in the real thing. Another reason for the increase in verbal communication is that generally when long-distance romantic partners talk to one another via Skype or other video chat platforms they are catching each other up on their days and discussing their reactions to things that they saw throughout the day or world events, or even as one participant noted, talking more about their relationship and the next trip they have planned to see each other. These sorts of topics, while still nice to discuss in person, are not as necessary for geographically close romantic couples because they are existing in the same physical environment and are able to engage in activities together as opposed to playing games together online or working on activities with video chat up on the screen.

Last, long-distance sexual behaviors are severely understudied in interpersonal scholarship, and with the ICTs at people’s disposal in today’s society, there are several opportunities to engage in what has come to be known as “Skype sex” as well as sexting, which is defined as “the interpersonal exchange of self-produced sexualized texts and above all images (photos, videos) via cell phone or the internet” (Doring, 2014, p. 2). The participants in this study had plenty to say regarding the topic of sex in long-distance romantic relationships, with the

majority of people expressing how “Skype sex” makes them feel “awkward,” among other things. In Neustaedter and Greenberg’s (2011) study on video chat and LDRRs, they found that only two of their 14 participants regularly engaged in cyber sexual behaviors. Similar findings emerged from this data set as well, as the majority of participants noted that they tended not to perform sexual behaviors across video chat for a few reasons, including the awkward feeling of being watched or engaging in a voyeuristic behavior, that doing so only seemed to emphasize the distance and make them miss their partner more, and that it “just isn’t as satisfying” as the real thing. However, for those who did engage in cyber sexual behaviors, they reported having to get more creative due to the lack of physicality. For instance, a couple of participants mentioned employing more dirty talking when engaging in cyber sex, something they would not normally do when having sex in person. Another participant related that due to the nature of long-distance sex being purely visual, he and his partner would separately watch a porn video, mark the time that they reached orgasm, and send it to the other partner to let them know what gets them sexually fulfilled visually as opposed to physically. That way they have a better understanding of what to do over video chat in order to sexually satisfy their partner to the best of their abilities when they are apart.

Limitations

There are always ways to improve a study and this thesis project was no exception. Although the initial idea for this research was to try and interview both relational partners, only a few true dyadic interviews were obtained. Instead of relying on interviews with only one relational partner, it would be more beneficial to do in-depth interviews with both sides of the dyad, as the data would reflect both relational partners and not just one side of the relationship.

Another limitation of this particular study is that it only collected data from the participants at one moment in time. Future studies on long-distance romantic relationships would do well to collect longitudinal data over an extended period of time as that could yield a more in-depth understanding of meaning making and show how meaning is always in flux and continually being created and recreated.

Future Possibilities

As noted by Manning and Kunkel (2014a), sometimes a researcher will notice that the data they collected for their study highlights several different directions for future research possibilities; this is especially so with interpretive research. The two research questions used to guide this study allowed for a collection of data that yielded interesting findings, not only in relation to the current research but for the future of visually based computer-mediated communication and long-distance romantic relationship research as well. According to Manning and Kunkel (2014a), there are four key aspects of interpretive qualitative research that pertain to relational scholarship: 1) qualitative relationship research offers a view of meaning making in action, 2) qualitative relationship research allows for marginalized voices to emerge, 3) qualitative relationship studies evoke senses of feeling, emotion, experience, and latitude, and 4) qualitative relationship studies serve as a constitutive form of sense making across interaction levels and methods of inquiry. One of the primary qualities of interpretive research is transferability. In this section, some practical implications of the data will be discussed in conjunction with how it could be applied in future research.

One interesting future avenue of scholarship could be gender and sexuality research because the findings in this study, as in Neustaedter and Greenberg's (2011) research on long-distance intimacy, also shed some light on gender differences in sexting behaviors. Despite the

majority of participants reporting no regular cyber sexual behaviors, almost all of them noted that they sext with their partner, mostly sending nudes, sometimes texting about sexual things they would like to do with their partner. Although nearly everyone mentioned sending nudes at some point or another, it was women who reported sending the majority of the nude pictures. There were no clear reasons given for why this might be. A few participants hinted that dicks are not as sexy as the female figure and that there were only so many ways to take pictures of a penis. Since this was not the focus of the study, I did not press for reasons as to why this might be; the reasons that were reported were given only if the participant wished to give one. Future studies might look at these sex and gender differences as well as how long-distance romantic couples do sex in a general sense.

Another potential avenue for future research is family communication and long-distance romantic relationships. One of the qualities of this particular research sample is that these folks are not in families and so, based on research regarding privacy and families (Petronio, 2010), I think it would be framed differently if there were kids around. Not only would it be an interesting phenomenon to look at regarding family communication and privacy as it relates to CMC, but research on how families use video chat is lacking in interpersonal studies. The differences among pre-marital long-distance romantic relationships and couples in LDRRs who are already married or have children might be vastly different to how the participants in this study expressed their experiences.

The other area of research that could be of interest is technological development and how it impacts the way that people experience long-distance romantic relationships as well as how it influences meaning making in LDRRs. As it was mentioned earlier, the final barrier in long-distance romantic relationships it would seem is the physical barrier – the lack of physical

presence. However, recent advancements in technology are finding ways to solve this, at least researchers and developers are trying to. Microsoft recently patented a robot that simulates hugging a loved one even when they are miles away (Bishop, 2012). This sort of thing has been looked at by researchers in a comparison study that tested how relationally satisfied participants who used the hugging-simulating robot were compared to participants who did not use the hugging robot (Breazeal, 2010). It was found that those who employed the use of the hugging robot reported a higher sense of relational satisfaction when compared to those who did not use the touch-simulating robot (Breazeal, 2010). As technological developments advance, it would be pertinent for interpersonal communication scholars to understand the influences and uses of computer-mediated communication.

Conclusion

This study identified how meaning is created for 35 long-distance romantic relational partners and extracted four discursive tensions from the qualitative interpretive data. This study is particularly useful in that it highlights several avenues of future scholarship and provides insight into how meaning is created through video chat communication in long-distance romantic relationships. I hope that this research will spur other scholars to explore how recent informational communication tools impact our interpersonal relationships and continue to look at how all these forms of communication constitute our relationships.

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APPENDIX
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

LONG-DISTANCE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP AND SKYPE COMMUNICATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Let me start by saying thank you for taking the time to talk to me today. It really means a lot that you are participating in this study. I think we'll be able to cover a lot today and it'll be beneficial to everyone in a long-distance relationship as they work to maintain it. Before we go any further, I just want to make sure that you understood everything you read through on the informed consent form. Are there any questions about that?

(Respond to questions)

Okay then, now that we've gone over that, let's go ahead and start the interview. Just to remind you, everything that we talk about today will be reported anonymously. No matter what you tell me, I won't tell it to anyone else in a way that will identify you. So feel free to be completely honest with me, okay?

(Wait for affirmation)

Okay, so before I get to the more in-depth portion of the interview, I would like to know a few things about you and your relationship.

(Go through the background info questions)

Background Information on Interviewee:

- How old are you? How old is your partner?
- How long have you and your partner been together?
- How long do you typically spend apart from one another (how long until they see each other face-to-face again)?
- Is this the first time spending a lot of time apart?
- Is this the only time you plan on spending time apart or are there sequences of distance?
- What is the reason for the distance?
- Is there a time difference between where you are and where your partner is?
- Which communicative channels do you use to communicate with your significant other?

(Skype, phone calls, Facebook/other social network sites, text messages, emails,

Snapchat, FaceTime, Gaming Apps/Online games, any other type of CMC they can think of)

So I'll get to know you a bit throughout the interview today, for now, could you tell me a bit about your partner?

Alright, thank you for going over the basics with me. Now let's go ahead and move into the second part of the interview. These questions mostly deal with your use of computer-mediated communication and how you use it in your relationship.

(Start going through the CMC/LDR questions)

Questions related to the maintenance of their LDRR:

- How often do you talk with your partner using Skype?
- How long do your Skype sessions typically last?
- What would you say are the main reasons you use Skype? What do you typically talk about when you use Skype?
- What activities do you do together using Skype?
- Do you "get ready" for Skyping? (Do you make sure you look nice for your partner?)
- Do you have a routine for using Skype? Has your partner ever broken the routine and if so, what was your reaction?
- A lot of people believe LDRRs to be harder work than it is worth. What would you say in response to that regarding the use of Skype?
- Have you ever gotten into an argument over Skype?
- Have you ever engaged in "Skype sex"?
- Is there a particular place where you Skype or do you Skype wherever you happen to be at the time? (For instance, do you only Skype when you are in your room?)

- Do you ever use Skype as an excuse to get out of doing something else? (For instance, do you ever tell the people around you that you are busy because you are Skyping with your partner?)
- What do other people say to you about your Skype habits with your significant other? Do people think it's weird or cute, etc.?
- Do you fall asleep together on Skype?

Awesome, thanks so much for that talking through that with me. Is there anything else you might like to add before we move onto the next set of questions?

(Wait for a response)

Okay, great! The next portion of the interview has more to do with social presence using Skype. Just to give you a bit of background before we dive into it, social presence can be defined as “being together with another” kind of the co-presence of togetherness you have with someone. Does that make sense or are there still any questions about what I mean when I refer to the concept of social presence?

(Wait for confirmation of understanding and then explain further/move into the next set)

My next set of questions deal with social presence using Skype.

(Start going through social presence and Skype questions)

Questions regarding social presence and Skype:

- Would you say that you are still able to maintain a sense of co-presence with your partner when you are apart? How so or why not?
- Do you feel like the conversations you have on Skype are as “real” as the ones you have when you are together? How do your conversations on Skype differ from the ones you have when you are face-to-face?
- Do you text/call throughout the day? What are those texts typically about? Are they just letting you know they miss you or sending affirmative messages to let you know they care?

- How would you say you communicate when you are apart versus together? Is there any difference?
- What are some things you do to feel integrated into each other's social networks when you are apart? (For example, my partner is back home where our families live and he hangs out with my brother and runs races every now and then with my mom, while I mention him in conversation with my peers to keep him in my social circle even though he is physically absent.)

Thank you so much for going through those with me. We only have a few more questions to go through and then you are free to go. Before we wrap it up though, is there anything else you would like to talk about that you feel might be important to the study?

(Wait for response)

Alright then, onto the last set of Qs!

(Start going through questions regarding personal experiences and LDRR)

Questions about how they handle long-distance romantic relationship on a personal level:

- Would you say long-distance is hard? What specifically makes it hard?
- Would you say it is easier than people assume it is?
- What are some pros about your long-distance relationship?
- What are some cons about your long-distance relationship?
- Does being long-distance put some stress on your relationship?
- Okay, and is there any aspect of being long-distance that makes your relationship less stressful?
- Do you and your significant other have a set future or a plan to move closer at some later date?
- Does having (or not having) future plans make things easier or more stressful?

Based on the stuff you've shared with me throughout this interview it sounds like you would agree that Skype helps maintain a sense of social presence when you are apart. I have one more thing I would like to ask before we conclude:

- Some previous studies have compared maintenance behaviors of couples in long-distance relationships and couples in geographically close romantic relationships. These studies mainly looked at ways that people maintain their relationship using text-based communication (not video chat). Some of those studies claim that those in LDRs are unable to maintain a strong sense of social presence as those who are able to see each other face-to-face more often, but with the use of video chat, social presence is much easier to convey than in text-based CMC. Would you say that using Skype (or other video chat sites) has allowed you and your partner to maintain a strong sense of social presence? Is video chat bridging that gap between LDRs' and GRRs' bond of togetherness?

Awesome, well that ends our session. Thank you SO MUCH for being a part of this study. I know that this data will be put to good use. Is there anything you would like to add or are there any questions you have for me regarding this study?

Okay, Then I'll go ahead and turn off the recorder. Thanks again for coming and have a great rest of your day!