

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

THE USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY BY COUPLES IN LONG-DISTANCE
COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS.

BY

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Approval of Thesis

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LONG-DISTANCE COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS:
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Abstract

Little is known about the role that communication technology plays in the relationship of committed couples who are physically separated. This study used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experience of couples who identify as married, engaged, or common law, and their use of communication technology within the context of their relationship. A homogeneous sample of four couples were interviewed using a web-based group conference program which allowed the researcher and the two partners to meet together regardless of physical location. Data analysis revealed 17 subthemes situated within six superordinate themes: Advantages of Technology, Disadvantages of Technology, Relational Adjustment, Technology as Essential, Reaching Out, and Technology Medium. In addition, the couples' perception of the longevity of their physical separation is explored. Limitations of the research, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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The Use of Communication Technology in Long-Distance Committed Relationships: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Chapter I: Introduction

Partners in a committed relationship may be separated by geographical distance for a variety of reasons, including employment purposes, educational purposes, or military service (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013; Pistole, 2010). As this trend in relationships becomes increasingly more common, it is important for researchers to continue to explore the many facets of communication that exists within this unique population.

Long-distance relationships among couples who are romantically involved is a phenomenon that has evolved over time. Beginning with hunter-gatherers, couples in romantic relationships have been physically separated for extended periods of time. During this era, men would leave for unknown periods of time in order to provide for their families. Similarly, during the Mesolithic era, men enrolled in the military were sent to war, often with no method of communicating with their partner at home. These early war-torn couples would be separated for undetermined amounts of time, with no guarantee that the husband would even return home. Since this time however, communication in long-distance relationships has become progressively easier and more accessible. With the introduction of the postal service in 900 BC, couples were able to send letters or packages back and forth to each other. Once photography was developed, in 1814, couples had the ability to send pictures along with their letters to their partner. In 1843, the telegram was created, making receipt of communication between partners much quicker. Perhaps one of the most important contributions to long-distance communication was the invention of the telephone as couples were then able to hear each other's voices and communicate in real time. With the continuous addition of new forms of technology,

communication between partners in long-distance relationships has never been more accessible. Through the use of texting, phone calls, and video chats, couples are able to exchange messages almost instantaneously, thereby increasing the partners' accessibility to each other and making this element of the long-distance relationship seemingly more manageable.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of couples in long-distance committed relationships who use technology as a means of communication. Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative methodologies are appropriate for gaining detailed accounts of individual lived experiences. For this research, I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand and interpret how individuals in long-distance committed relationships use communication technology and how this method of communication impacts the relationship. Use of IPA allowed me to develop rich and detailed interpretive accounts of the participants' firsthand experience of the phenomenon.

Recent advances in communication technology have impacted every facet of human existence. It has changed how we work, how we learn, how we socialize, and how we form and sustain meaningful interpersonal relationships. The purpose of this research was to advance our understanding of how technology influences long-distance committed relationships. The research question which guided this inquiry was: how do couples in long-distance committed relationships make sense of their use communication technology within the context of a long-distance relationship?

Despite the prevalence of this phenomenon very little psychological research has been conducted in this area. Thus, it was hoped that the current research will not only increase our understanding of technology and long-distance relationships, but also stimulate much needed scholarly work. At a practical level, is anticipated that the findings from this research have

facilitated a better understanding of how couples in long-distance committed relationships use communication technology within their relationship, and potentially bring awareness to the counselling community regarding how these couples communicate, interact, and maintain these relationships. Furthermore, this study has afforded a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, shedding light on the potential positive and negative consequences that communication technology can have on committed relationships.

It is important to note that I have personal experience with the phenomenon that was studied as I was involved in a long-distance relationship with my spouse for a period of two years prior to marriage, and six months after becoming married. This experience has contributed to my desire to further explore this emerging phenomenon from the viewpoints of individuals in committed relationships. My personal experience in a long-distance relationship was successful, and through the use of communication technology my husband and I were able to remain connected and available for communication and support freely throughout the day. This positive personal experience lends itself to potential biases in this study and I am aware that my experiences have shaped the way I perceived the phenomenon. For this reason, it was important that I remained reflexive throughout this study. This process of reflexivity is discussed in the methodology chapter of this document.

Definition of Terms

Long-distance relationship. For the purpose of this study a long-distance relationship was defined as an intimate relationship between two committed partners who were geographically isolated from one another, and therefore, unable to meet on a frequent basis. In this study, participants were separated due to employment and resided in separate households while they were apart.

Committed relationship. The decision to use individuals in committed relationships was purposeful. Much of the research explored in the literature review section of this proposal was focused on the inclusion of couples in dating relationships and the exclusion of those who identified as married. For the purpose of this study, a committed relationship was defined as a couple who was married, engaged, or living common law for a period of at least one year prior to the onset of the study.

Communication technology. Communication technology was defined as any method of communication that involves the use of an electronic device (e.g., texting, video chat, emails, phone calls).

Chapter II: Literature Review

This study explored how couples in long-distance committed relationships use technology as a means for communication within their relationship. The purpose of this literature review was to examine and synthesize the existing literature related to long-distance relationships and the use of communication technology. In this review of the literature, I examined several topics related to long-distance relationships and the use communication technology by individuals on a relational level. First, long-distance relationships were compared and contrasted to geographically close relationships. Then, interpersonal communication and the use of technology in long-distance and geographically close relationships was explored. I examined the perceived accessibility that communication technology creates between partners in a relationship. Frequency of communication, expectations of communication, and the importance of nonverbal communication were highlighted. Lastly, relationship characteristics such as relational maintenance and intimacy were explored. Following this, a critique of the existing literature was provided.

Long-Distance Relationships Versus Geographically Close Relationships

Long-distance relationships are defined in the literature as relationships in which geographic distance limits physical togetherness (Billedo, Kerkhof & Finkenauer, 2015; Pistole & Roberts, 2010). These relationships are common and researchers have found that long-distance relationships are often more stable and more satisfying than geographically close relationships (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2013). Kelmer et al. (2013) studied culturally diverse, unmarried couples between 18-35 years of age who were involved in a romantic relationship with the opposite gender for a period of at least two months. Their quantitative study was based on the hypothesis that individuals in long-distance relationships experience better relationship

quality, commitment, and stability. Kelmer et al. found couples in long-distance relationships report better relationship quality and more dedication than geographically close couples; however, the hypothesis that couples in long-distance relationships would experience more stability was only partially supported. While many of the long-distance couples perceived a greater likelihood that they would eventually marry, during a follow-up interview, the researchers found that many of the couples had separated in the year following the study. The researchers noted that this could perhaps be attributed to the minimal amount of time (e.g., two months) that the couples had been together at the time of the study, and the couples' perceived level of commitment. Specifically, the researchers found that couples that identify with having a stronger connection and commitment are those who are more likely to be able to remain together through geographical separation. Kelmer et al. noted in their discussion that couples in long-distance relationships appeared to have greater optimism for the relationship's future when compared to geographically close couples.

In a similar study examining relationship quality, Dargie, Blair, Goldfinger, and Pukall (2015) used questionnaires to examine the relationships between adults 18 years of age and older, who identified as being either in a long-distance relationship or a geographically close relationship. Participants were eligible for this study if they identified as being in a relationship for a period of three months, and if they were not cohabiting or married at the time of the study. Approximately 70% of the participants were college students. The purpose of this study was to identify differences between long-distance and geographically close relationships, and to determine individual and relationship characteristics that may predict relationship quality. The researchers hypothesized that individuals in long-distance relationships would report lower relationship quality due to limited face-to face time. A second prediction stated that relationship

quality would increase in correlation to satisfaction with relationship certainty. Specifically, the researchers hypothesized that if individuals were more certain of their relationship with their partner, that there would be a greater report of perceived relationship quality. Lastly, the researchers hypothesized that subjective qualities, such as positive attitudes about the long-distance relationship, would yield greater relationship quality.

Results of this study, specific to the first hypothesis, indicated that couples in long-distance relationships did not report lower relationship satisfaction. This finding did not support the researchers' initial hypothesis of limited face-to-face time as a determinant of relationship quality. These results indicate that the circumstance of being in a long-distance relationship is not a predictor of negative relationship outcomes. Second, the researchers found that relationship certainty plays an important role in relationship quality. Specifically, individuals with more relationship certainty have a more positive outlook on the future and are better able to work together towards common goals. Third, the researchers found that positive attitudes towards the relationship were positively associated with communication and relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, the researchers found a negative association between positive attitude and relationship commitment that they were unable to explain. The researchers' acknowledged that long-distance relationships have been negatively perceived by the larger community for quite some time, and posited that this negative association could be attributed to this generalized negative perception.

Although these two studies differed in their hypotheses, the researchers' in both studies found that couples in long-distance relationships report equal to or greater amount of quality and satisfaction to that of their geographically close counterparts. However, follow up findings by Kelmer et al. found that many of these couples had separated after the study. These follow up

findings contradict the original findings and perhaps generate a possible question regarding the participants' ability to assess the relationship. Similar to Kelmer et al.'s (2013) study, the participants in Dargie et al.'s (2015) study were only required to be together for a short amount of time (e.g., three months) prior to participation. Perhaps this limited amount of time together contributes to the negative association between positive attitude and relationship commitment that Kelmer et al. found.

Communication in Long-Distance Relationships

Stafford (2010) studied how geographical separation is associated with couples' communication during the courtship phase of a relationship. Three hundred and forty heterosexual participants from two large universities in the United States participated in the study. The sample consisted of 172 individuals in geographically close relationships and 168 individuals in long-distance relationships. Participants in this study were required to be involved in a romantic relationship. As the study was specific to courtship, those who identified as married or cohabiting were eliminated from the participant sample. Stafford hypothesized that distance may have an effect on the communication goals of long-distance couples. Stafford further posited that couples in long-distance relationships would be likely to avoid certain topics of discussion in order to avoid conflict and sustain perceived relationship satisfaction. These hypotheses were confirmed, as Stafford found that couples in long-distance dating relationships "use forms of talk that compensate for the unique features of long-distance relating" (p. 276). Specifically, couples in long-distance relationships were found to have more intimate conversations, and were more likely to avoid taboo and conflictual topics. These results suggest that long-distance couples potentially narrow their types of communication and have goals specifically aimed at avoiding conflict.

Perception of Accessibility

In his qualitative study, Pettigrew (2009) examined how the use of communication technology, specifically texting, relates to feelings of connectedness between partners in an intimate relationship. Pettigrew found that the perception of accessibility, as created by communication technology, allows for a greater sense of connectedness in a relationship. Pettigrew suggested that this is due to the perception that those who use communication technology are virtually accessible at any time. He further found that couples' in a romantic relationship add another dimension to the use of communication technology, which is the importance of connectedness. Specifically, Pettigrew found that romantic partners use of text messaging promoted feelings of being relationally and emotionally connected to their partner. Additional research has supported these findings. Luo (2014) found that texting allows the partners to stay more connected to each other, and Hall and Baym (2012) found that texting is a communication tool that can be used to increase closeness within a relationship. Similarly, Licoppe (2004) explained that when one party is physically absent, communication technology allows him or her to become present.

Pettigrew's study focused on close interpersonal relationships and, therefore, included familial relationships outside of romantic couples. Pettigrew identified that the inclusion of these diverse relational pairs was a strength of this particular study; however, he further noted that it would be difficult to generalize the findings from this study to various populations due to the heterogeneity of this sample. In order to support a researcher's assumptions regarding the use of communication technology within specific relationship demographics, it could be beneficial to examine a more homogenous participant sample.

Jiang and Hancock (2013) conducted a diary study of 63 heterosexual dating university couples that compared relationship stability, satisfaction, trust, and intimacy involved in geographically close relationships to that of couples in long-distance relationships. Results of this study found that couples in long-distance relationships reported fewer interactions per day, but reported more mixed-mode communication (e.g., text messages, video chats, phone calls) than those in geographically close relationships. The findings indicated that couples in geographically close relationships, and couples in long-distance relationships, did not differ significantly in their reports of satisfaction, trust, and stability. The researchers found that couples in long-distance relationships generally experience greater intimacy on an interaction-by-interaction basis than couples in geographically close relationships due to an increase in self-disclosure during times of communication.

When considering couples who are separated by geographical distance, Jiang and Hancock (2013) found that it is important to discern whether the couple is able to communicate in real time, and if the partner is accessible while in transit through different locations. Couples who utilize video chat (e.g., Skype, FaceTime) and phone calls are able to communicate at the same time which could create a greater sense of accessibility. Conversely, the use of email and texting creates the potential for a delayed response, which could potentially decrease the couples' sense of accessibility. However, the researchers found that texting is inherently more convenient, as it can be accomplished in between and during other daily activities (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

Frequency of Communication

Pistole (2010) found that some couples reported that emails and text messages are an easy way to stay connected throughout the day without interfering with either partners' schedule, as technology provides couples with an efficient and convenient method of communication.

Research by Jin and Pena (2010) lends support to Pistole's assertion by finding that more frequent communication is associated with a partner's perception of a higher level of relationship satisfaction and security.

Jin and Pena (2010) conducted a survey of 197 college students in dating relationships, based on the hypothesis that greater use of voice calls and texting via mobile phones would be associated with higher levels of love and commitment. Results of this survey indicated that frequent cell phone use (specific to voice calls) with a romantic partner was associated with more feelings of love and commitment. In addition, frequent communication led to increased relational security. Jin and Pena did not find evidence to support the hypothesis that frequent use of text messaging was associated with higher levels of love and commitment and lower levels of relational uncertainty. Findings from this research suggest that among college students, voice calls are more effective for promoting feelings of love and commitment than text messaging. Additional findings indicate that the greater the voice call duration and frequency, the higher the relational certainty and the feelings of love and commitment. The researchers posit that it is the difference in the amount of information that can be communicated via voice calls that contributes to this discrepancy.

Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) conducted a descriptive study examining the frequency of interactions via cellphone and texting, and the effects that this type of communication had on satisfaction in romantic relationships. Participants in this study were engaged in heterosexual, committed romantic relationships, identified by the researchers as seriously dating or engaged/married. The results of this study showed that text messaging and cell phones were used more frequently than emails, and that texting was the strongest contributor to relationship satisfaction. The researchers also found that one of the primary uses of text

messages was to express affection between partners and that positive communication was related to overall relationship satisfaction. These researchers suggest that perhaps technology has increased the ease with which affection can be expressed. Coyne et al. also noted a difference in the frequency of communication of married couples in comparison to that of dating couples. The researchers found that married couples communicated more frequently and used more forms of communication technology than dating couples. Overall, Coyne et al. concluded that individuals' who use communication more frequently were more satisfied in their relationships. Interestingly, these researchers also found a relationship between the use of texting and negative communication to hurt one's partner. For example, the researchers found that couples in their study reported using texting to send hurtful messages or broach confrontational subjects. These types of hurtful messages were found to have a negative effect on communication. As the data was collected included a self-report of the participants' relationship satisfaction levels, the researchers suggested that future studies could consider partner reports. Coyne et al. suggested that capturing partners' reports related to the positive and/or negative effects that the frequency of technology use has on the relationship would allow researchers to gain a more in-depth view of the relationship.

These studies (Coyne et al., 2011; Jin & Pena, 2010; Pistole, 2010) found that communication technology provides couples with an easy way to maintain connection throughout the day. The frequency of use of communication technology contributes positively to the level of relationship satisfaction. However, the results of Jin and Pena's study of dating college students and Coyne et al.'s study of couples in a serious, committed relationship were conflicting. Coyne et al. postulated that married couples have more issues to discuss throughout the day than dating couples, and that the accessibility of texting allows these issues to be

communicated with ease. It seems that the frequency and type of communication technology used is influenced by the type of relationship that the couple is in.

Importance of Nonverbal Communication

Partners who are separated by geographical distance have limited access to visual cues from their partner, thereby creating the possibility of confusion regarding the partners' expectations of behaviour in the relationship (Lee & Pistole, 2012; Pistole, 2010). The type of communication technology being used dictates what interpersonal cues are available to the communicative partner (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Phone calls allow for immediate feedback between partners and provide more cues, such as tone of voice, which gives more information to the partner (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013). Text messaging, on the other hand, provides script to the partner that is void of interpersonal cues such as body posture, tone of voice, and facial expression (Coyne et al., 2011). These types of nonverbal cues have been identified as an important aspect of communication (Kotlyar & Ariely, 2013).

Kotlyar and Ariely (2013) examined the importance of nonverbal communication in the development of online relationships. This study included 847 individuals who were using an online dating site to initiate relationships with potential partners. The individuals in this study used various forms of technology to communicate and establish relationships. The researchers identified that a limitation of text-based communication is the restricted ability to convey nonverbal elements of communication. Such elements include facial expressions, eye contact, body movements, physical proximity, and physical contact. The researchers' aim was to determine if enhancing basic text chat with nonverbal cues could facilitate positive romantic outcomes. In this study, participants used avatars to supplement text-based communication. In the text-based chat room, each individual had an avatar which mimicked the physical profile of the individual.

During discussion with potential partners, the avatars supplemented the textual message by giving cues such as nodding, smiling, winking, laughing, rolling eyes, and blowing kisses. Results of this study found that nonverbal cues facilitated positive perceptions of others, increased information disclosure between individuals, and enhanced the desire for online couples to meet in person.

McGinty, Knox, and Zusman (2003) examined the verbal and nonverbal communication of involved and casual dating relationships of college students. Two hundred and thirty-three undergraduate students completed an anonymous survey that measured their views of the importance of nonverbal communication and their motivation to use such behaviour. Findings of this study revealed that couples' who identify as being in an involved relationship value nonverbal communication more than those who identify as being in a casual relationship. The researchers further found that involved couples work harder at nonverbal communication and are generally happier than casually dating couples.

There is a great deal to consider when utilizing various modes of communication technology. Nonverbal cues provide partners with information about the message that can be useful in understanding the sincerity and the meaning of the message. Lee and Pistole (2012) and Pistole (2010) highlighted that lack of nonverbal cues could lead to confusion in a relationship. Jiang and Hancock (2013) and Morey et al. (2013) found that different forms of technology allowed for different types of cues with phone calls providing the greatest amount of nonverbal feedback. The information presented by Kotlyar and Ariely (2013) and McGinty et al. (2003) supports the suggestion that nonverbal cues are an important supplement to the written, or spoken, message.

Expectations of Communication

Communication technology enables partners to develop a pattern of communication that is specific to their relationship (Licoppe, 2004). This unique pattern serves to reaffirm feelings of closeness through the use of phone calls and text messages (Licoppe, 2004). In their quantitative study of 247 participants, Hall and Baym (2011) used dialectical theory to study the effects of texting on the relationship expectations and perceived obligations of close friendships. The researchers found that people have individual expectations for communication interactions and that these expectations are negotiated within the relationship. Specifically, individuals in close relationships use a variety of different types of communication technology and the expectations associated with each media medium is determined by the individuals in the relationship. The researchers found that with increased expectations of communication interactions came the increased feeling of obligation within the relationship. This in turn led to feelings of entrapment and overdependence. Hall and Baym's study examined the expectations of interactions between friendships, and while the results of this study are specific to this population, it is possible that these findings could be generalized to other populations, such as couples in dating or committed relationships.

Relational Maintenance

Merolla (2012) conducted a study of his proposed relational maintenance model for long-distance relationships. This study was conducted in three phases and examined undergraduates use of relational maintenance beyond face-to-face interactions. Merolla's model suggested that relationships are maintained through individual cognition (e.g., positive thinking), dyadic partner talk (e.g., prior to, during, and after separations) and third-party interactions (e.g., personal support networks). This study yielded rich data; Merolla found that couples who were future oriented and engaged in proactive imagined interactions between themselves and their partner

reported more relationship satisfaction and intimacy. Proactive cognitions were found to assist couples' in visualizing the types of interactions they would like to have upon reunification with their partner. Merolla posited that such positive, future oriented thinking can help couples to anticipate and navigate potential conflict and resolution. Merolla further found that relational awareness and the ability to assess the relationship is beneficial to couples in long-distance relationships as it helps the couple to determine methods of relational maintenance which later contribute to relationship satisfaction (Merolla, 2012).

Relationship Intimacy

Morey et al. (2013) described romantic relationships as one of the most intimate relationships that adults can have. The authors further commented that technology has become an integral part of the way that people communicate with one another. In their study, Morey et al. examined two cohorts of undergraduate psychology students. When combined, the two cohorts totaled 280 participants, with an age range of 18-27 years, who identified as being engaged in a committed dating relationship. Through the administration of an online survey, participants reported on their use of communication technology in terms of frequency and type of message delivery system (e.g., texting, email, or social networking site). The authors found that the type of communication technology used was linked to the reported relationship satisfaction. Specifically, phone calls and texting provided for more immediate and intimate communication exchanges compared to emails. In addition, the researchers found that modes of technology that provide more richness and a greater number of cues, such as phone calls, were related to higher relationship quality as there is a greater sense of intimacy perceived by the partners.

Researchers examining intimacy in long-distance couples (e.g., Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Morey et al., 2013) have noted that these couples are likely to engage in adaptive behaviours that

serve to transform the situation and sustain the relationships' intimacy. Specifically, Jiang and Hancock (2013) found that when there were fewer cues available to the communication partner, greater behavioural adaption such as a higher rate of self-disclosure and partner idealization occurred. Through the use of such behavioural adaptations, couples perceive their relationship with more satisfaction. Furthermore, these researchers shared that couples' in long-distance relationships have described experiencing greater intimacy on an interaction by interaction basis, which could be due to the behavioural adaptations employed by the couple.

Critique of the Literature

In many cases, the results of the studies presented in this literature review are inconsistent, and therefore, the use of communication technology by couples in long-distance committed relationships warrants further exploration. Specifically, the following overarching limitations to the current body of research should be considered.

First, despite the high prevalence of long-distance committed relationships, there is very little extant research on this topic. Specifically, committed adults who are separated due to employment reasons are underrepresented in the current body of literature, thereby limiting the knowledge that counsellors have of this specific population. In the studies that did include couples who identified as being in a committed relationship, this type of relationship was defined by the researchers as specific to dating (Coyne et al., 2011; Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Jin & Pena, 2010; Merolla, 2012). To date, no study has explored the experiences of couples in long-distance relationships who specifically identify as married or living common law. Jiang and Hancock (2013) posited that this type of relationship is understudied due to public belief that couples require geographic proximity and face-to-face contact in order to maintain a meaningful relationship. Furthermore, the use of technology as a communication tool is a constantly

evolving phenomenon. Researchers have only begun to explore the potential positive and negative effects of using communication technology and how the use of such technology affects an individual's experience of their relationship. Exploration of the use of communication technology in specific relation to couples in long-distance committed relationships (e.g., married, engaged, or common law) has not been completed; therefore, the experiences of this particular population remains unknown.

Second, the limited demographic of the sample population in the existing literature presents an issue when seeking to understand the relationships of couples who are married, engaged, or common law. Aside from Coyne et al.'s (2013) study, no other study in this review included participants who were married. Dargie et al. (2015) identified participant sampling as a limitation in their study and explained that it is possible that different relationship patterns exist within older married couples which may impact the nature of the long-distance relationship. Similarly, as her study only focused on courtship, Stafford (2010) excluded participants from her study whom identified as married or living together. The utility of the findings of these studies is narrow in its reach. For example, while Morey et al.'s (2013) study provided important information regarding intimacy, the sample's narrow range of participants, which includes only college students in geographically close relationships, may not generalize to a larger population. This inconsistency in the literature fails to provide a clear understanding of the unique phenomenon of long-distance committed relationships. Therefore, additional research would be necessary in order to determine if these results can be generalized to couples in different age categories and couples in long-distance relationships.

Lastly, many of the studies reviewed in this proposal collected data using online surveys, thereby limiting the opportunity for rich and nuanced narratives given by the participants. The

use of surveys as a data collection method poses potential limitations when exploring this particular phenomenon. Surveys are helpful for examining large populations, and tabulating and summarizing the results to provide statistical information about the topics being studied (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). However, limitations arise as there is potential for participants to skip questions that they do not understand or are unsure of how to answer (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Questions on a survey may evoke emotion from a participant that would go unmitigated due to lack of personal involvement from the researcher. When exploring how couples make sense of their use of communication technology within the context of their long-distance committed relationship, it could be beneficial to explore additional methods of data collection such as participant interviews. Interviews with a small, homogenous sample, would allow the researcher to gather qualitative information specifically related to the participants' experience of the phenomenon.

Summary of the Literature Review

Couples in long-distance relationships represent a unique phenomenon. Despite the perception that these couples are likely to experience more negative effects than those in geographically close relationships, research is finding that long-distance couples have the potential, and the likelihood, to flourish. Couples in long-distance relationships have been found to have important subjective qualities, such as positive attitudes, that contribute to the quality of their relationship (Dargie et al., 2015). Such positive attitudes contribute to the level of communication satisfaction that is perceived by the couple, and in turn allow the couple to work towards important relationship goals (Dargie et al., 2015). In addition, couples in long-distance relationships appear to have greater optimism than those in geographically close relationships, and are likely to identify as having a stronger connection to their partner (Kelmer et al., 2013).

Communication between partners can take place in many forms. Ultimately, regardless of physical proximity, couples will use a variety of communication mediums throughout in the context of their relationship. However, couples in long-distance relationships have unique communication goals (Stafford, 2010). These goals, as well as communication expectations, are navigated by the individual couple. Specifically, the couple determines the frequency of communication and which mediums of communication will be used (Hall & Baym, 2011). It is recognized that access to nonverbal cues play an important role in couples' communication (Kotlyar & Ariely, 2013; McGinty et al., 2003). Perhaps it is for this reason that couples in long-distance relationships use more forms of communication technology than couples in geographically close relationships (Coyne et al., 2011).

The exploration of couples in long-distance committed relationships is underdeveloped. The research represented in the current body of literature describes university couples in long-distance and geographically close dating relationships, who are separated due to educational reasons. For those studies that did include couples who identified as committed, this relationship was defined by the researchers as specific to dating. Only one study included married couples in the participant sample, however; this study was specific to couples in geographically close relationships, and therefore, the transferability of these findings to couples in long-distance relationships is undetermined (Coyne et al., 2011). The purpose of the proposed research was to contribute to a more balanced body of literature by exploring the use of communication technology by couples in long-distance relationships who identify as married or common law and are separated due to employment reasons. My research question asked: how do couples in long-distance committed relationships make sense of their use of communication technology within the context of their relationship?

Chapter III: Methodology

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology that focuses on the examination and interpretation of how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Researchers using IPA are concerned with the significance of the particular experience to the participant and look at where, and how, an ordinary experience becomes an experience of significant meaning as a participant reflects upon the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretive phenomenological analysis is concerned with how a phenomenon comes to be understood through exploring the meaning that individuals assign to it (Smith et al., 2009). Through the implementation of IPA, this study focused on the exploration, interpretation, and written description of the way in which the research participants make sense of their use of communication technology in the context of their long-distance committed relationship.

The development of IPA research has been guided by three key areas of philosophy: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2011). In what follows I describe these three areas and indicate the ways in which together they form the basis of IPA.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement that focuses on the lived experience of individuals and how they make sense of their experience with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 2011). Interpretive phenomenological analysis has been guided by the works of phenomenological philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl focused his descriptive phenomenology on the philosophy of stepping outside our everyday experience in order to turn inward and examine our perception of the

experience (Reiners, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). A process that he referred to as moving away from our “natural attitude” towards our “phenomenological attitude” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Husserl believed that in order to be phenomenological, we need to move away from an activity and towards the experience itself. Specifically, Husserl believed that we should focus on everything in its own right, and by doing so we can come to know our experiences in a way that identifies the essential qualities of the experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre each built upon Husserl’s work by moving towards a more interpretive position focusing on our involvement with the lived world (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology posits that no two individuals will experience a phenomenon in the same way (Glesne, 2016). Thus, phenomenological inquiry is an interpretative process whereby individuals focus their attempts on making meaning out of a lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger believed that a person is always a person-in-context, and therefore, IPA researchers recognize that an individual’s relatedness to their contextual world is a fundamental part of their constitution (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

While Husserl believed that bracketing is necessary in order to concentrate on our perception of the experience, Heidegger believed that bracketing is not warranted due to the impossibility of setting aside our experiences of the phenomenon. Instead, he believed that an awareness of the personal experience is a necessary element to phenomenological research (Reiners, 2012).

Hermeneutics

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is phenomenological with its focus on an individuals’ perceptions of experience, while still recognizing the need for the researcher to interpret the individuals’ perception of the experience through hermeneutic traditions (Smith,

2004). Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and acts as the second major theoretical underpinning of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer are recognized by Smith et al. (2009) as the most influential theorists in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics emphasizes that experience requires engagement and interpretation on the part of the researcher (Smith, 2011). Heidegger described hermeneutic phenomenology as moving beyond the description of an experience and into the embedded meaning of the experience itself (Reiners, 2012). The IPA researcher holds a dual role in his or her aim to not only interpret the experience, but to also interpret the participants' interpretation of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). This unique process in IPA, whereby the researcher interprets the participants' interpretation, is often referred to as a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2011). As IPA is concerned with examining how a phenomenon appears, an IPA researcher needs to interpret the participant's account in order to facilitate and make sense of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer posited that researchers, when engaged in comprehensive analysis and interpretation of an experience, are able to offer meaningful insight which exceeds the narrative of the participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Idiography

Smith (2004) described the researcher's idiographic commitment to the case as the heart of IPA. Idiography is concerned with the particular, and Smith et al. (2009) further described IPA's commitment to the particular by highlighting two levels. Firstly, IPA focuses on the detail of the particular experience, which prompts an in-depth analysis that must be systematic and thorough (Smith et al., 2009). Secondly, IPA is committed to the exploration of the participants' perspective of the phenomenon in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, it was

important to engage participants in a way that evoked a comprehensive and detailed account of their experience using communication technology, while still being mindful of the context of the experience specifically related to their long-distance relationship.

Research Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions

Research questions in an IPA study are grounded in an epistemological position. Researchers in an IPA study assume that the reality of participants is created via their interpretation of the meaning of their experience. This underlying ontological assumption places IPA research within the constructivist paradigm. Creswell (2013) describes constructionism as a values laden approach where researcher bias is present. Axiologically speaking, the researcher brings values and biases to the study, and it is the duty of the researcher to acknowledge and describe these biases in order to remain transparent in the research. It is understood in the constructivist paradigm, that while values and biases can be bracketed, they cannot be fully removed from the research.

The primary goal of IPA research is to understand and interpret an individual's experience with a phenomenon. Through this methodology, the researcher collects and analyzes data specific to the individual perception and interpretation of each participant in the study. Researchers who use this methodological approach are concerned with the development of a thick description of each participants' account of the phenomenon, and not the generalization of the research findings.

Rationale for Using IPA

As IPA focuses on the participants' experiences and understanding of a particular phenomenon, the focal point for this research was the perceptions and views of the committed couples in long-distance relationships (Smith et al., 2009). Qualitative researchers do not attempt

to confirm a hypothesis in relation to the research question (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2016; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Instead, the researcher develops a broad research question that guides the collection of expansive data (Smith, 2004). Rather than assuming that couples who utilize communication technology are able to sustain a healthy and intimate relationship, this study focused on the participants' interpretation of their experience and sought to develop a thick description of how the participants make sense of their use of this type of communication system in their relationship.

In an IPA study, the research question is grounded in an epistemological position (Smith et al., 2009). Reiners (2012) explained that interpretive phenomenology is used when a researcher aims to discover the meaning of the phenomenon under study. As the research question for this study was directed toward the discovery of the meaning of the phenomenon (e.g., the use of communication technology), and was situated within a specific context (e.g., long-distance committed relationships), IPA was an appropriate methodology for this thesis.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Researchers who use IPA recognize that participants are the experts of their experiences and that by telling their own experiences in their own words, they offer researchers a profound understanding of their thoughts and feelings in relation to the experience (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). To ensure that this study would reveal the richness of the experience for each of the participants, purposive sampling was used. In this study, purposive sampling involved selecting a group of participants based on their experience of the phenomenon and their ability to offer meaningful insight. Researchers who use IPA purposively select a homogenous sample of participants as it is essential that all participants have personal experience with the phenomenon

being studied. Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) explained that looking for comparison between a control group and a study group is difficult to achieve within an IPA study. Instead, IPA researchers look at the convergence and divergence within the homogenous participant sample by examining the participants' individual experience with the phenomenon. Researchers using IPA recognize that though the sample is homogenous, there are similarities and differences between participant accounts that needs to be explored.

Smith et al. (2009) suggests that a reasonable sample size for an IPA study is three to six participants. In light of this suggestion, and the recognizing of sample size being a limitation of previous research, this study included four couples. Participants for this study were 23-40 years of age and engaged in a committed relationship that was geographically separated due to employment reasons. Participants used communication technology to communicate with their partner and were therefore able and willing to offer rich and detailed access to their personal accounts of this phenomenon.

Given the focus of geographical separation in this study, participants were recruited from across Canada through the use of social media. A Facebook profile page unique to my role as the researcher was created and shared by numerous contacts enabling a snowball effect. Details of this study, including the study's purpose and criteria for participant selection, were outlined on this Facebook page. My contact information was provided, which allowed potential participants to express interest in the study in a confidential manner.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through the use of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews are the typical method of data collection in IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009). This flexible approach to data collection helped ensure that the participant

played an active role within the interview and research process (Smith et al., 2009). The relationship between the researcher and the participants is significant in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). My use of a semi-structured interview allowed for the elicitation of rich data and the opportunity for the participants to be authentically heard, thereby contributing to the development of a strong, collaborative alliance between myself and the participant (Smith et al., 2009). This method of data collection allowed the participants and I to engage in meaningful dialogue guided by the research question, and was easily modified to fit the direction of each individual interview. Participants in this study resided in a different geographical location from myself, and therefore, the interviews took place through the use of the video-conferencing app Zoom. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. In this study, the couples were interviewed together to alleviate any concerns with confidentiality between partners in the study.

An interview schedule comprised of 14 questions was developed (see Appendix A). I used this schedule to guide the conversation with the participants. By using open-ended questions, I strived to maintain a balance between guiding and being led by the participants (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). This schedule assisted the interview process by setting a loose agenda for the interview, while also helping to minimize the imposition of my held assumptions onto the participant's experience (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). The interview schedule helped facilitate a comfortable interaction with research participants which, in turn, led to the evocation of detailed accounts of the participants' experience with the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

During the interview, questions were modified in light of the participants' responses, so that I was able to explore any additional areas of meaning to the participant. This fluidity of a semi-structured interview is significant to IPA research as simply answering the interview

questions alone will not evoke enough rich data necessary for analysis (Smith et al., 2009). As such, the time allotted for the interviews was modified as needed. The interview conversations for this study varied from 45 minutes to 90 minutes in length depending on the detail of the stories being shared by the participants.

Written notes were taken during each of the interviews. Specifically, I noted body language, tone of voice, and metaphor used by the participants. These notes were used to help facilitate further exploration during the interviews as well as help to guide the process of thematic discovery during data analysis. Rather than form assumptions it was important that I explore the meaning behind the participant's expressions. Therefore, when appropriate during the interviews, I shared my observations with the participants which prompted the participants to further explore their account of their experience.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in an IPA study is both linear and iterative (Smith et al., 2009). An IPA researcher approaches the data with the goals of understanding the participants' world, describing what it is like, and then developing an overtly interpretive analysis (Larkin et al., 2006). Through the process of data analysis, I returned to the data frequently in order to examine it from new and different ways. Smith et al. (2009) describes this as a hermeneutic circle as it allows for a shift in the researcher's relationship with the data and the opportunity to engage with the data in a dynamic way. Data analysis in IPA research required me to engage in flexible thinking through a complex and arduous process of reduction, expansion, and revision (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. have outlined six steps involved with the data analysis process in an IPA study including; (1) reading and re-reading transcripts; (2) initial noting; (3) developing

emerging themes; (4) searching for connections across emerging themes; (5) moving onto the next case; and (6) identifying patterns across cases.

Step one: Reading and re-reading. Ensuring that the study participants became the focus of my data analysis was an important first step. To achieve this, I became fully immersed in the original data collected by reading the interview transcriptions numerous times while forming initial interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Reading the transcriptions repeatedly allowed me to enter a phase of active engagement with the data. Through this active engagement, I was able to enter the participant's world and begin to gain an understanding of the participants' experience. Throughout the process of this research study, I used a methodological journal to record any thoughts or feeling that surfaced, as Smith et al. explained that the process of data analysis can often feel overwhelming.

Step two: Initial noting. My intention during this phase of analysis was to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes (Smith et al., 2009). This was the most time-consuming step of the analysis process as it required that I become completely absorbed in the data (Glesne, 2016). It was important that I conducted a close examination of the language used by participants and the context of the participants' interpretations of their experience. During the process of note taking, I remained open minded and unbiased, and recorded notes on anything of interest within the transcription by identifying descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009).

Exploratory comments. In the process of making descriptive exploratory comments, I analyzed the data and recorded key words or phrases expressed by the participants. These words or phrases reflect what matters to the participant such as key objects, events, or experiences; as the data analysis unfolds, I was able to develop richer accounts of the meaning of these

descriptions (Smith et al., 2009). As the participants for this study were recruited from across Canada, cultural and demographic influences that shape their understanding of their experience needed to be considered. It was important that I understood that the participants' answers to the interview questions in the context of their world, and how they made sense of their experience varies according to their cultural context (Larkin et al., 2011).

Linguistic comments. While making linguistic comments, I noted pronoun use, functional aspects of language, and the use of metaphor (Smith et al., 2009). In this IPA study, it was important that I made note of a metaphor verbatim so that I could include these in the write up of the study. Verbatim comments add depth to the participant's description, allow for the reader to feel connected to the experience, and contribute to the rigour of the study.

Conceptual comments. Lastly, I developed a critical and conceptual commentary of the participants' personal descriptions of the phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) explained that conceptual coding often requires a shift in the researcher's focus, from the content of the data to the overarching interpretation of what matters to the participant. Here I focused on what it meant for the participants to express their thoughts and feelings about their experience of using communication technology within the context of the long-distance, committed relationship. During the process of conceptual commenting, I engaged in an element of personal reflection, as the interpretations that were made at this phase of the data analysis were influenced by my own personal experience (Smith et al., 2009). Although Smith et al. encourage researchers to use their personal experience as a touchstone, I needed to be cautious not to form conceptual themes based more on personal experience than the experience of the participants.

Step three: Developing emergent themes. The outcome of the analytic process in IPA is a set of themes that are organized within an interpretive structure (Reid et al., 2005). This

process of thematic identification required me to return to the initial notes and map the interrelationships, connections, and patterns that were evident in the exploratory comments (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) liken this process to the interview becoming a set of parts that eventually form a cohesive whole to answer the research question.

Step four: Searching for connections. Researchers in IPA use various forms of pattern identification, and it is the discretion of the researcher as to which form is the most suitable for data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, I used the process of *abstraction* (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009, p. 96), abstraction entails “putting like with like” to arrive at super-ordinate themes. Thematic analysis, using the process of abstraction, led to the identification of commonalities and divergence across participant accounts which is explored in the discussion section of this research.

Step five: Moving on to the next case. Steps one through four were repeated for each of the participant accounts. It was important for me to treat each participant account as its own case, thereby remaining congruent with the idiographic nature of IPA. To allow for the emergence of new themes during this step, I used a methodological journal to document and bracket any ideas that emerged from the previous interviews.

Step six: Looking for patterns across cases. In this step, I looked for themes across participant accounts. In some instances, themes or sub-ordinate themes, found in an individual case were also identified in the accounts of the other participants. This phase of analysis led to reconfiguring or relabeling the initial themes as I identified convergence and divergence between accounts.

Following thematic analysis, I brought the results together through the development of this final research document. Smith et al. (2009) stressed that there is not one specific way to

write up an IPA research study, and that the balance of participant accounts and emergent themes is reflected in the researcher's creative approach to writing (Reid et al., 2005). In IPA, the reader is an important piece of the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009). In the discussion section of this thesis, I give a detailed account of the data as well as offer an interpretation that is comprehensible, systematic, and persuasive so that the reader is able to develop her own interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon.

Reflexivity and Rigour

In IPA studies the researcher must be reflexive about his or her role, and transparent with how this role shapes observations and interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2013). Given my personal experience with the phenomenon being studied, it was important that I maintained a research journal to help bracket my current and previously held assumptions (see Appendix D for research journal summary). In this research journal I made note of personal thoughts, feeling, and connections that emerged during the interview process or while interpreting the data. Researchers' written work is a reflection of their own interpretation based on their social and cultural position, and therefore, the writing cannot be separated from the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Continuous reflection on my role as researcher during the interview, data analysis, interpretation, and writing phases helped me to remain open, mindful, and reflective of my position and the personal context that was brought to this research. With this in mind, I also accessed peer and mentor support while conducting this research as a means to facilitate reflexivity during each stage of the process. Smith et al. (2009, pp. 180-183) suggests Yardley's (2000) four broad principles for the assessment of quality of an IPA study; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity of context. Sensitivity to context is present in the study through the entire research process. The researcher's decision to use IPA, and the commitment to the idiographic nature of this methodology, displays sensitivity to context from the onset of the research. During this study I remained sensitive to the context of the study by purposively selecting a homogenous sample that reflected the phenomenon being studied. Here, I remained cognizant of the cultural implications present in the participant sample and the phenomenon itself (Smith et al., 2009). Qualitative research aims for depth, not breadth (Whittemore et al., 2001). The use of a small participant sample, carefully selected semi-structured interview questions, and an approach that was sensitive and responsive to the nature of the phenomenon, ensured that I gained answers of value (Larkin et al., 2006).

Commitment and rigour. The researcher achieves commitment and rigour by remaining attentive to the participant during the interview and subsequent stages, and by conducting a thorough and systematic analysis with sufficient idiographic engagement (Smith et al., 2009). Conducting a thorough IPA interview requires commitment and investment from the researcher to attend closely to what the participant is saying. This attention to the participants' stories accounts for both commitment and rigour, and sensitivity to context.

Transparency and coherence. I aimed to display transparency in the written discussion by clearly describing the stages of the research, including how participants were selected, how the interview schedule was developed, and how the data collection and analysis were completed (Smith et al., 2009). The coherence of the written document is judged by the reader, and therefore, it is important that researchers read their draft thesis from the perspective of the intended audience. Coherence is also demonstrated through the alliance with the underlying

theoretical assumptions. Therefore, in IPA, it is expected that the study is consistent with the phenomenological and hermeneutic influences.

Impact and importance. Finally, by presenting the reader with findings that are interesting and meaningful, I demonstrated the impact and importance of this study (Smith et al., 2009). The significance of this study was evident in its exploration of a phenomenon that has not yet been researched. Specifically, by exploring the lived experiences of couples in long-distance committed relationships who use communication technology, I have contributed to the current body of literature and provided the field of counselling psychology with information that could enhance their understanding of this population.

Strengths and Limitations of IPA

As qualitative research is not specifically aimed at providing findings that can be generalized towards a wider population (Creswell, 2013; Whittemore et al., 2001) my intention in this study was to develop an understanding of what this experience has come to mean to the participants. It was thought that by shedding light on the unique experiences of the individuals in this study, the findings can potentially be transferred to other individuals in similar relationships. At the same time, I remained cognizant of the potential limitations to this transferability. For example, the findings may not be transferrable to couples in long-distance relationships who have children.

There are both strengths and limitations to IPA's inclusion of a small, homogenous participant sample. For example, by only interviewing four couples, the breath of the findings may be limited. However, the depth of the story and the meaning derived from the analysis and interpretation of the findings can potentially be profound.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers must be vigilant to possible ethical issues that may arise prior to or during the completion of the study (Creswell, 2013). Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB). Even though the REB approved this study, it was imperative that I remained attuned to ethical obligations throughout the ongoing process of research (Gibson, Benson, & Brand, 2012). Additional ethical considerations included the process of informed consent (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; Government of Canada, 2014). Prior to beginning an interview, I informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time during data collection and before the process of data analysis. Participants gave consent voluntarily, and therefore, had the right to withdraw from the study up to the point of data analysis. If a participant withdrew from the study, the data collected from their interview would have been destroyed. In IPA, informed consent must be not only for participation during data collection but also for the outcomes of data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, as IPA data analysis involves verbatim participant extracts being published in the final document, it is important that I highlighted this during the informed consent process.

Participants were also made aware of any risks and benefits associated with the study. Potential risks and benefits were outlined in the participant consent form (see Appendix B) and it was explained that while participation in this study may elicit a new understanding of the participants' experience of the phenomenon, there was a small chance that the interview questions could evoke emotion due to the sensitive nature of the information being sought. The limits of confidentiality within the study were discussed with each participant. As the couples were interviewed together, the concerns regarding confidentiality were limited. Specifically, as

the couples are shared their story in the presence of each other, there was not a concern around my ability to maintain confidentiality across partners.

Data collected in this study was stored securely at the researcher's home office. Paper data was kept in a locked file cabinet; audio recordings were kept on a password-protected computer. All data will be destroyed five years following the completion of the research. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Summary

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative methodology whose purpose is to bring understanding to how people make sense of their experiences (Larkin et al., 2011). As qualitative research is not aimed at providing a generalization towards a wider population, the intention in this study was to develop an understanding of what the experience of using communication technology within the context of a long-distance committed relationship means to the participants involved. Reflexivity and rigour were facilitated through consistent and open communication with my thesis supervisor and the use of peer consultation. My ultimate goal was to produce a piece of quality publishable work that will serve to inform the field of psychology and give meaning to the lived experiences of couples in long-distance, committed relationships who utilize methods of communication technology.

Chapter IV: Results

The analysis of the interviews yielded 17 sub-themes within six superordinate themes: *Advantages of Technology, Disadvantages of Technology, Relational Adjustment, Technology as Essential, Reaching Out, and Technology Medium*. Each superordinate theme consists of a number of subthemes which are outlined in detail in the discussion that follows. Lastly, I discuss the participants' views on the longevity of their long-distance relationship. All identifying characteristics have been replaced from the participant excerpts. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality.

Advantages of Technology

This superordinate theme encompasses the following subthemes which describe the participants' views of the advantages of using communication technology within their relationship: *Instant and Easy, Facilitating Openness, and Facilitating Connection*.

Instant and easy.

The continuous evolution of communication technology focuses on advancing a device's ease of use. Leading technology companies boast the user-friendly nature of their devices in order to attract users, while wireless networks promise consumers light speed networks, high bandwidth, and far ranging network coverage. Therefore, it is no surprise that the ease and speed of communication technology is an advantage to its use within a long-distance relationship. Catherine and David, an engaged couple, discussed how the ease of use and the advancement of technology has made their communication virtually hassle-free.

[Catherine] *Yeah we have more like constant, consistent communication with each other.*

Without it being a big hassle.

[David] *I don't have to write a letter...I know for sure I take it for granted.*

With communication technology couples can send messages to each other throughout the day, regardless of whether or not they will get an immediate response. It seemed that for some of the participants, the advantage here was more directed at the ease of sending a message rather than the instant gratification of receiving a message back. Perhaps, for some partners trying to withhold communication until the other partner is available is difficult. It seems that being able to communicate with one's partner consistently throughout the day via technology removes the barrier of having to wait until partners are together before they can communicate. Andrew and Beth, common-law partners, explained that the ease of technology coupled with the instantaneous delivery of a message allows them to connect with each other at a moment's notice.

[Andrew] *the communication just makes things instant. If something's going on, uh or something cool happens during the day, we could just send off a quick text, or just see how each other's doing throughout the day.*

[Beth] *we can keep connected um on sort of a more regular basis. So if we're thinking about something instead of waiting—and, you can just message it off.*

Facilitating openness.

For some individuals, openness to sharing feelings fostered a sense of vulnerability. It seems that communication technology provided participants with a sense of protection that is not available in face to face communication, which, for some, helped facilitate candid expression of feelings. Rebecca and Daniel, an engaged couple, described how communication technology provided a safety barrier for the expression of intense and vulnerable emotions. Rebecca described how Daniel would wait until they were apart to share his feelings and thoughts with her via text:

[Rebecca] *we would spend time together and we would hang out and then as soon as he left he would send me this big long message about like all the things that he was feeling and thinking and all that... I think early on there was a few things that, it was easier for him to express when he was able to write it down.*

Further to this perceived safety barrier, it appeared that the use of communication technology could deepen participant relationships through the facilitation of more intimate conversations. Rebecca and Daniel further described how communication technology facilitated the acceleration of their feelings towards each other. They explained that the amount of communication that took place electronically, due to the long-distance aspect of their relationship, was greater than that which would have taken place if the couple were in a geographically-close relationship:

[Rebecca] *we would just talk about everything, and, and it was easier to be more open with each other because there was a little bit of that barrier that we could, it—there wasn't that immediacy of like feeling embarrassed or you know, talking about intimate things or stuff like that. It was just, we, we got quite close quite quickly.*

[Daniel] *it helped having those online communications. It just probably would have taken slightly longer to get to the point that we did because it calculated the equivalence of about six months' worth of a normal relationship.*

Similarly, some couples discussed how the safety barrier of the screen allowed them to be more open and blunt with their partner regarding emotionally laden topics without the added impact of physically seeing their partner's emotional reaction. Perhaps communication technology, regarded as having a limited availability of emotion, is viewed as advantageous for

this reason. Louise and Scott, a married couple expecting their first child, described how they found it easier to discuss sensitive topics via technology.

[Louise] *And I think to a point, it's—you know, it's maybe easier to express your problems on the phone.*

[Scott] *I think there's less emotion. Less emotionally attached. You can be more blunt. It's easier for me to be more blunt and to the point on the phone than when I see Louise's reaction.*

Facilitating connection.

Being geographically separated from one's partner can foster feelings of disconnection. Events and activities take place in our lives that couples who reside in the same physical location are able to attend together and experience a sense of shared enjoyment. When couples are separated by distance, the ability to be present in daily life is eliminated. Communication technology helps to ease the effects of physical separation by facilitating a sense of connection between partners. Rebecca and Daniel explained how having consistent access to each other creates a feeling of being involved in each other's lives, and how technology makes the difficult physical separation bearable:

[Rebecca] *I think it allows us to feel like we are still kind of part of each other's everyday lives this way... Yeah long distance takes its toll. It's, it's, it's bearable because of the things in place and the way we communicate... And technology*

Lastly, participants described how using technology mediums that include a video element created a sense of connection not present with other forms of technology. This highlights the importance of being able to see one's partner so that communication is not just one

dimensional and textual. It seems that this visual feedback helps create feelings of connection to one's partner and allows couples to feel present:

[Catherine] *I get to see his face more than you know, like once every four months.*

[Rebecca] *And we both notice, we— when we haven't Skyped as much we're both noticeably irritable... having that type of technology, having that opportunity definitely makes a difference because it, it gives an emotional connection in a different way than texting ever can, because you know, it—it feels a lot more like you're in the room with the person and that they're there with you instead of half a world away.*

Disadvantages of Technology

This superordinate theme includes the sub-themes *distraction*, *overuse*, *miscommunication*, and *technology failure*.

Distraction.

Ensuring constant connection with one's partner can be a consuming endeavor. Couples want to ensure that they are continuously available to each other and it seems that this comes with the cost of potentially disconnecting from other people and from daily responsibilities. Rebecca and Daniel described how being in constant communication with each other led them to be distracted from other people in their lives:

[Rebecca] *I definitely got some backlash from family members sometimes that it's just like you're always on your phone and you always have your phone with you. I have to be conscious of sometimes because it—I do feel sometimes that I'm not being present with people that I'm with.*

Andrew and Beth described how in the beginning of their long-distance relationship their focus on being available to each other and ensuring connection caused them to be distracted from other responsibilities in their lives such as work and school:

[Andrew] *yeah at the beginning of this distance I was really bad at that. And I'd have my phone available or I'd have What's App on my computer while I was trying to do other things. Um like schoolwork and editing and what not. And um I was just not as productive.*

[Beth] *and as much as it was really important for me to have these conversations with Andrew and let him know what was going on, I wasn't um focusing on what I needed to be focusing on.*

Overuse.

Communication technology is advantageous as it creates a sense of constant connection; however, couples in this study reported that consistently communicating with their partner throughout the day led to overuse that contributed to a lack of focus and diluted the content of their conversations. Furthermore, seems that constant communication throughout the day detracts from the desire to have a longer, more sustained, conversation later in this day:

[Beth] *we over communicate and it means that we're not able to focus and we need this time to focus on the things that we need to get done separate from communicating with each other...the other point is, is that if we communicate all day and we get to the end of the day, you can't really say, okay well what did you do all day?*

[Louise] *Well and you probably, we'd probably lose our, lose things to say. Right? Like you can only talk for so long.*

The potential for the overuse of technology was a consistent theme in all of the interviews conducted; it seems that there was a tendency among participants to allow communication with their partner to become all-consuming, leading individuals to potentially lose sight of other tasks throughout the day.

[Rebecca] *We have to have space. We have to have other things going on in our lives, or else it's going to—it, it gets unhealthy. It gets all consuming.*

Miscommunication.

Communication technology is void of important non-verbal elements of a conversation that allow partners to interpret and understand the context and intent behind their partner's words. Therefore, with technology as their primary method of communication, partners in long-distance relationships risk unintentionally upsetting each other due to the misinterpretation of one's message. Specifically, it seems that a partner's choice of words can have a significant impact on how their message is delivered:

[Beth] *I can be very wordy if I'm stressed or trying to work something through. Um and it won't come across as the way I want it to come across. Or my point will be miss heard or miss read.*

[Louise] *sometimes it's not always easy, you know, it comes out the wrong way, I guess. You know, especially texting. You can never really understand quite what they're going for.*

[Scott] *one way or the other, a lot of times I know that I upset Louise when I haven't meant to at all. But it's the way I worded things.*

[Rebecca] *you have to think about what you're typing. And so you have to think about how you want to say it. And, and how you want to put that message across*

[Daniel] *occasionally you get your wires crossed and you don't necessarily get the, you know, the emotional sincerity.*

In addition to the need to be cognizant of the words that are being used to communicate a message, couples are aware that most forms of communication technology are limited in tone of voice and emotional inflection. Catherine and David described how texting can inhibit their ability to convey emotion and they sometimes find themselves in a position of having to guess what the other person is thinking or feeling:

[David] *you can't express emotions through text messages.*

[Catherine] *yeah there's a lot of assuming, like the tone behind something just because you're reading words, you're not hearing anything.*

[David] *you can't express if you're mad, happy, upset, right? ...like there's a lot of like, are you okay?*

Furthermore, communication technology, such as texting, was perceived by these couples as far less personal than technology which allows the couples to hear each other's voices.

Ultimately, voice calls allow for the communication of vocal elements, such as tone of voice, that are absent in textual communication, and the participants described how not having access to their vocal cues can create a sense of miscommunication:

[Beth] *text is not as personable as calling, where you hear the tone and that sort of stuff too. So it just, it's kind of takes away from the connection you can have, and the responses you can have in a verbal conversation.*

[David] *like a phone call you can tell if someone's angry or mad or anything.*

Technology failure.

Even though updated wireless networks are able to provide far more service coverage to remote areas than in previous decades, there is still the potential for technology to fail.

Technology failure due to limited access to network service, reduction of battery life, and limited access to Wi-Fi enabled devices causes frustration due to the limited partner access that has been imposed. Catherine and David and Louise and Scott described how working in a remote area means that access to a service network is unpredictable and out of their control:

[Catherine] *so for like, eight to ten hours a day, it was like, there would just be no way to contact him. So sometimes I found it frustrating if there was something I needed to ask him, or if I was just having a bad day and I just couldn't talk to him.*

[Scott] *I don't have internet or anything at camp that I—so it's either cell phone or that's about it and when I don't have service then I can't call her.*

[Louise] *If we have no service, then I don't really have a choice, right It's just what it is. And usually I'll just text him and just tell him, you know, hey, give me a call when you're not busy. Or when you have service again.*

Rebecca and Daniel and Andrew and Beth discussed the importance of a stable internet connection as they use video chat as one of their main forms of communication. When there is an unstable connection it can lead to frustration:

[Rebecca] *For the most part it is just the quality of the connection... it feels like you're talking to a pixilated blob because it's just like, I can kind of see your face but not really.*

[Andrew] *sometimes it just wouldn't work. Like that was frustrating.*

[Beth] *my tolerance for technology that's not working is very low.*

Relational Adjustment

Long-distance relationships by nature, are contextually different than geographically close relationships. As such, there appears to be a period of adjustment that occurs when couples embark on this type of relationship. Specially, participants in this study described an *adjustment to expectations* and an *adjustment to communication*.

Adjustment to expectations.

Participants explained that in the beginning of their long-distance relationship there was an expectation regarding the response immediacy of their partner. Specially, it was expected that one's partner would reply to a text message instantaneously or there would be cause for upset. Andrew and Beth described how they became aware that the expectation for an immediate response contributed to the sense of distraction and created feelings of frustration. Once aware of this, Andrew and Beth communicated about the need for an adjustment to their expectations of each other's response time:

[Beth] *there were conversations and decisions to be clear about when we're available to talk. And to reduce the expectations of getting a response immediately.*

[Andrew] *Now I'll send her messages just to give her an update but I don't expect a response any more. So I know I can just focus on my schoolwork or whatever I'm doing that day.*

Similarly, this couple described an adjust to their expectation regarding the frequency of communication. For these participants it appears that once they had undergone an initial period of adjustment, the urge to communication consistently subsided. Specifically, Andrew and Beth described a conversation that took place in their relationship which prompted them to reduce the

frequency of their communication throughout the day which led to an increase in their relationship satisfaction as they felt less distracted throughout the day.

[Beth] *I think a big change is actually in the amount of time between our messages now.*

Um previously we would go almost every hour of the day with a message... And now we'll go up to six or seven hours probably without messaging each other. And that's perfectly fine.

Adjustment to communication.

All of the participants in this study described a sense of adjustment to their own and their partner's communication. Given that face to face communication is exceedingly less frequent than communication at a distance, it seems understandable that couples would need to adjust their communication styles, their expressiveness, and their ability to be descriptive. It seems that using more descriptive words to convey meaning and intention is important and necessary to solve problems in this type of relationship. Specifically, there is a need to be more purposeful in text and verbal communication due to not having access to visual and non-verbal cues.

Louise and Scott explained how they have become better able to voice their thoughts and feelings over the phone with each other in order to navigate problem solving within their relationship:

[Scott] *Well we're really good at actually voicing our problems to one another because we have to deal with it over the phone or text message or whatever. Otherwise it's not going to get dealt with. You know, you don't see each other enough.*

[Louise] *Yeah that has been something we've gotten better at... if he doesn't tell me how's he's feeling then I have no way of knowing...we deal with our problems a lot, a lot more verbally, than we normally would have.*

Catherine and David described a shift in their interpretation of each other's messages. They explained that in the beginning of their long-distance relationship they would assume the intention and meaning behind the other person's message, often incorrectly. Validating emotions and checking with each other regarding the intention behind the message is an adjustment that this couple made:

[Catherine] *because this has been a long-distance relationship for an extended period of time now, we're both pretty good at, like we'll read something and if we're thinking, like it's coming off as that person's angry or frustrated or whatever—like we'll say to each other, like, are you mad about something right now?*

Communication technology has been described as limited in its ability to convey emotion. Therefore, the participants in this study needed to make an adjustment to the way they communicated feelings. Andrew and Beth explained that they needed to become more descriptive in their textual messages and increase their expression of their thoughts and feelings:

[Beth] *especially in the beginning of our relationship, really we had to train ourselves to be more detailed and more expressive when we were communicating.*

[Andrew] *And like I'll let her know when I'm stressed. Gotten a lot better at that.*

Technology as Essential

All of the couples declared that technology was essential to their ability to sustain their relationship. For many of the couples, their relationship either began as long-distance or became long-distance shortly after they began dating, so their reliance on technology to communicate was apparent. Furthermore, it became clear during each of the participant interviews that without the ability to communicate with ease, the couples expressed that it was unlikely that their relationships would have endured the physical separation. This subtheme of *technology as a*

foundation for the relationship was present in each of the interviews. Additionally, each of the couples discussed the *importance of technology*.

Foundation of the relationship.

Modes of communication have shifted greatly over the decades and it seems that previous modalities such as letter writing would not have been sufficient for couples in the present time. All of the couples in this study expressed that they would not be in their relationship if not for the advancements in technology that allows them frequent and instantaneous contact with each other. It seems that the inherent lack of communication that would occur without the availability of technology would have led to the relationship not being viable:

[Beth] *I don't think we would have been in a relationship without technology.*

[Andrew] *I don't even know if our relationship would have been a thing if there was no technology, quite honestly.*

[David] *I don't think it would have lasted any longer than college...like if this was 20—ten years ago—we wouldn't be, I don't think we'd be in this relationship, just based on the lack of communication.*

[Louise] *It probably wouldn't work.*

[Rebecca] *I really don't know. I don't know how, how we would have managed because this type of technology allows for that instant gratification. And that, like that immediacy that you just, you couldn't get when you were writing letters and waiting for a month to get a response back.*

Importance of technology.

The importance of technology to each of these relationship was clearly presented throughout the interviews. For some, technology acts as a lifeline between the partners, creating

an important sense of connection that would not be present otherwise. Louise and Scott discussed how, due to his remote location, their primary access to communication with each other is via telephone. Therefore, without the availability of a phone and a landline signal it is likely that they would not be able to communicate:

[Louise] *It's kind of like, the phone is kind of like the lifeline between you, right? So it's like, I feel like, phoning him is the only way of involving him in you know, what's going on at home. So if you didn't have that involvement every day, it, it would just be like living alone, really.*

[Scott] *Even if it was like where I am, there would be no landline telephone. So there would be no contact. I would go away from the time and come home and that would be it.*

Catherine and David described the importance of technology specific to having consistent access to a device. In the event that a device was unavailable, it seems that the priority for the couple would be finding alternate methods of communication:

[David] *Like if I were to break my phone right now, the first thing I would be doing is finding some alternate way to be able to reach Catherine, right?*

Andrew and Beth discussed how technology has been ever present in their relationship. Even through times of reunification, this couple commented on the presence of technology in their everyday communication with each other:

[Andrew] *Technology's kind of been the foundation of our relationship since day one. So it's definitely important. I think it will continue to be so...technology will always be a part of our relationship in terms of just sending texts or WhatsApp throughout the day. Um I don't think that'll ever change.*

Reaching Out

For some couples there is motivation to reach out and connect at variable times throughout the day. It might be when something exciting happens, if one partner is feeling the need to share emotion, or reaching out may be dependent on the schedule and availability of each partner. Certainly, for all couples there was a clear driving motivation that guided their initiation of contact with their partner. *Schedule, partner availability, and seeking connection* are the subthemes discussed in this superordinate theme.

Schedule.

When couples are separated by physical distance there is the possibility that they will be residing and working in different time zones which leads to variable daily schedules. For these couples it seems that the presence of a communication schedule and an understanding of each other's expectations seemed to alleviate frustration that resulted from not being able to have consistent access to their partner. Catherine and David described the differences between their work schedules and how this determined when they would be able to communicate. Additionally, it seems that their expectations of response time shifted throughout the week in conjunction with their individual schedules:

[Catherine] *cause there's usually a two-, three-hour time difference between where he is and where I am, it's usually when he's off work.*

[David] *So when, 10 o'clock is my time, I know Catherine's on lunch. And then 2 o'clock comes around and I know Catherine's either at home or on her way home.*

[Catherine] *most days I'm not around my phone all day, so I don't have access to it. So I can't be constantly in contact with him.*

[David] *it totally depends on time and day...like a Saturday, like I, yeah I do expect a response, probably within five minutes.*

Andrew and Beth discussed how they developed a schedule involving the best times of the day to communicate based on their individual schedules. It seems that this communication schedule reduced the expectation of constantly being available to each other which was contributing to their sense of distraction in their individual lives:

[Andrew] *we learned to make it more like specific times of the day where we would know maybe we would be available, and then the times we wouldn't... we just had a lot of conversations about it, just to kind of be more clear with one another, um what, like we did know each other's schedules.*

[Andrew] *I know if Beth is at work it's a great... I'll send her messages just to give her an update but I don't expect a response any more. So I know I can just focus on my schoolwork or whatever I'm doing that day.*

Lastly, there appeared to be a schedule regarding dependable communication times. For some couples their initial communication occurred first thing every morning and last thing before bed. These initial and final communication times mimic those that would be present for a couple that reside at the same physical location, and perhaps these dependable times allow the couples to be connected at these routine times of the day. For others, it appeared that their communication remains ongoing throughout the day and night never beginning nor ending.

[Catherine] *First thing in the morning, we always text each other.*

[Rebecca] *I think all of our long distance communications over What's App have kind of flow in a sense that there was never like an ending—but sometimes I think we happen, I think we sometimes don't like say, tend to say good night to each other.*

Partner availability

In addition to the presence of a schedule between partners, there was a sense that partner availability influenced the degree to which partner's reached out. Rebecca and Daniel are separated by a great distance and therefore must account for the dramatic time difference between their locations. It appeared that there was importance placed on a mutual understanding that due to the time difference partner availability was rather limited during certain times of the day. However, for this couple the limited partner availability was not a deterrent to the initiation of communication:

[Daniel] *Because obviously we're living under different time zones so she's suddenly busy at certain points of the day when –and then I am as well.*

[Rebecca] *we have lives and can't, you can't expect that somebody's going to be constantly available to you at all times... but I don't really get concerned about waking him up and, and we explicitly said that, like don't worry about that. If, if I'm needing to sleep than I'm not going to respond, but if you do want to text me it's not going to be a problem. So it's never really been an issue that way, that we have to like keep certain times.*

Catherine and David explained there was an expectation regarding partner availability and having to alter this expectation based on the reality of each other's accessibility was difficult:

[Catherine] *Even with technology, like just because he's got his phone doesn't mean he can actually talk to me. That was hard to get used to.*

Seeking connection.

The most consistent motivation of when to reach out to one's partner involves the need for connection. There are times throughout the day when one partner misses the other, when one partner is stressed and needs support, or when one partner needs to express emotion to the other. These are the times that the participants were most motivated to reach out to each other regardless of their partner's schedule or availability:

[Catherine] *Like I would be lonely more often and that's when I would be more needy and be bothering David more, because it was just me.*

[Louise] *If you're grumpy and you're alone and you don't have anyone to talk to, then you know, then you start—you know, you're, you're going down that path of grumpiness. Instead of somebody turning you around, I guess.*

[Beth] *Generally if I'm stressed and I need to get my thoughts out on a piece of paper, I will text that to him.*

[Andrew] *I just want to let her know what's going on with my day.*

[Rebecca] *In terms of just like, you know, should I—it's never really, it's never really a question of it being convenient or that we're bothering each other. It's just kind of like, ah well, I'll just do it.*

Technology Medium

There are many factors to consider when choosing a technology medium with which to communicate. For some couples the decision was made based on *preference* and *finding the right fit* for their relationship. For others, the *importance of voice* contributed to the selection of technology medium.

Preference.

The participants' preference for technology medium appeared to be influenced by convenience and sustainability. Andrew and Beth described their preference as texting, whereas Rebecca and Daniel expressed their desire to use video chat. Alternately, Catherine prefers phone calls while David prefers texting. For all couples, preference of technology medium guided their selection of medium for communicating with their partner:

[Beth] *Generally, my go to is texting right now because I know that in the middle of the day I'm not going to get a hold of him necessarily.*

[Catherine] *He doesn't really like talking on the phone, so yeah, texting...I'd prefer to talk on the phone more.*

[Rebecca] *And Skype once or twice a week.*

Finding the right fit.

Aside from expressing their individual preferences the couples explained how they embarked on a journey of finding which medium of technology was the best fit for their relationship. Availability of a service network, connection to Wi-Fi, and the financial implications of long-distance communication were important factors that the couples considered when determining which modality to use. Rebecca and Daniel described how their chosen medium was based largely on their desire to avoid long-distance charges but also on their chosen mediums ability to include voice, picture, and textual communication:

[Rebecca] *It was more because of cost and stuff like that... What's App was just cost free and simple and easy to use...and it's easier because it, it goes over wifi connection so it doesn't necessarily have to, we don't have to wrack up a bunch of bills and stuff. It's the best and the easiest available, I guess. And it was, and it does allow us to keep in fairly*

constant contact. Like we—we text every day and multiple times a day. So it's just seems like we are in each other's lives a lot more... And you can send pictures and, and audio clips.

Andrew and Beth described a journey where they tried a variety of technology applications before settling on their chosen medium:

[Beth] *it was like part of the journey to kind of find the best medium just to stay connected... It was a progression.*

[Andrew] *there was definitely a time when we were kind of just figuring out what was the best medium for us to use, whether, whether it was just text messaging or WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. Or Skype, while Beth was traveling.*

Catherine and David discussed the convenience of owning the same model of cellular device as this particular model allowed them to communicate using a Wi-Fi connection instead of cellular data. This suggests that the model of smartphone was an important consideration for this couple when choosing not only their model of application but also their cellular device:

[David] *luckily we both own Apple iPhones so we were able to use iMessaging, but if say I had owned some sort of Android or Catherine had an Android, like we would have had to go to something very, like wifi based chat messaging.*

It seems that accessibility of the technology medium is a factor that must be considered when the couple is finding the right fit. Louise and Scott discussed having limited options regarding technology medium due to Scott's remote location. While it appeared that this couple would prefer to have access to other mediums, they have chosen to utilize the medium of technology that is most available to them:

[Louise] *We want to Facetime. It would be nice to be able to see each other to do it, if we had the internet. But we don't have it, so we make do with what we have.*

Importance of voice.

For many couples, texting was the primary modality used to communicate. However, all couples highlighted the importance of hearing each other's voices and explained that including voice calls or video chat at least every week was a part of their communication routine. Perhaps there is a balance between textual communication and voice/video communication that couples seek in order to meet their needs for an emotional connection. Rebecca and Daniel emphasized the importance of video chat to and explained that this medium gave them more of a personal connection than simply texting:

[Rebecca] *[Skype] having that type of technology, having that opportunity definitely makes a difference because it, it gives an emotional connection in a different way than texting ever can, because you know, it—it feels a lot more like you're in the room with the person and that they're there with you instead of half a world away.*

[Daniel] *Yeah the texting really does help, but it's not, it's definitely not a substitute for you know, audio and visual interaction... And we both notice, we— when we haven't Skyped as much we're both noticeably irritable.*

Andrew and Beth and Louise and Scott also discussed the importance of being able to hear each other's voices. Given that Scott is in a remote location with limited access to texting, it is understandable that their frequency of voice calls would be higher than other couples. For Louise and Scott, it was important to speak at least once per day. For other couples, the frequency of voice/video communication appeared to be about once per week. Andrew and Beth

explained that voice calls were important not only for hearing each other's voices but sometimes for ease of communication as talking was more efficient than texting:

[Louise] *We usually speak like at least once a day.*

[Andrew] *Um just to hear each other's voices. And also it's so much faster than sitting there texting.*

Reunification

All of the participants discussed their desire for the person living away to move home and eventually end the long-distance aspect of their relationship. The participants explained that their intention for their relationship was to be together and that indefinite physical separation was viewed as unsustainable:

[Louise] *it's not the best way to be, you know, living apart and living away from each other... We're in this relationship to be together, so why aren't we together?*

[Rebecca] *when you, when you love somebody, and you know that they are additive to your life, and that you complement each other, then you want that person with you.*

Most of the participants discussed physical separation as being a means to an end. Specifically, some of the couples highlighted that the financial gain outweighed the temporary discomfort of physical separation. However, all the couples noted that if not for access to communication technology, they likely would have made different choice regarding their decision to live apart:

[Beth] *But like we just want to live together again.*

[Catherine] *So we're trying to get him back here.*

[Louise] *I don't think we've ever planned that Scott would stay working away forever.*

[Rebecca] *I think it just became a feeling that we, like we knew that this was too hard to continue just in infinity.*

[Daniel] *But it's like, it might very well have turned out that we would have done things differently in a way that got us together a bit quicker.*

Perhaps communication technology only accounts for one element of ensuring that the relationship remains healthy and emotionally intact. Perhaps having the end in sight, so to speak, gives the couples another a vision of the future that they have ultimately planned for.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore a particular aspect of long-distance relationships by examining how these couples use technology as a means for communication within their relationship. The following discussion situates the results of the current study with those of the existing literature.

Popular sentiment holds that strong relationships can only be developed and sustained when two people live in close proximity. Research, however, challenges this belief. Dargie et al. (2015) examined the relationship quality of couples in long-distance relationships. The researchers hypothesized that couples in long-distance relationships would report lower relationship quality when compared to those in geographically close relationships. However, their findings did not support this hypothesis, as the results from this study indicated that for couples in long-distance relationships limited face-to-face time was not a determinant of relationship quality. Similarly, Kelmer et al. (2013) found that couples in long-distance relationships report better relationship quality and dedication than those in geographically close relationships. Results from the current study tend to align with these studies. Specifically, the couples in the current study did not report dissatisfaction with their relationship, rather, in keeping with the *relational adjustment* theme, the couples in my research indicated that adjusting their individual expectations and their communication prompted an increase in their relationship satisfaction. For example, the participants discussed adjusting the frequency of their texting communication to account for other daytime commitments which prompted a sense of relief that one was not falling behind in their daily responsibilities. As the couples in the current research were selected based on the criteria of being engaged, married or common-law, a certain level of dedication and pre-existing relational satisfaction was implied. Even still, it is not uncommon for

long-distance relationships to fail. The results of the current research suggest that couples did remain satisfied with their relationships when living apart and that technology played a key role in enabling this outcome.

Relationship intimacy is an element of exploration in much of the previous literature. Likewise, the couples in this study discussed their level of intimacy in relation to their use of communication technology. Stafford (2010) explored communication in long-distance and geographically close courtship relationships. She found that while couples in long-distance relationships seemed to engage in more intimate conversations, it also appeared that they tended to avoid conflictual topics. Findings by Jiang and Hancock (2013) indicated that couples in long-distance relationships generally experience more intimate communication due to increased self-disclosure. Results from the current study, as outlined in the *facilitating openness* subtheme of *advantages of technology*, support Stafford's and Jiang and Hancock's findings. Specifically, the participants described an increased intimacy of communication that was evident at the early stages of relationship development and continued throughout the relationship. The couples further explained that technology allowed them to express their feelings more openly than they could if they were face to face. The perceived emotional protection provided by technology enabled the partners to be more open with each other, which led to a greater sense of connectedness at an earlier stage of their relationship. Couples in this study explained that not only did technology provide the perception of a safety barrier which fostered a greater sense of disclosure of intimate feelings, but that perhaps the decreased amount of physical contact warranted a greater sense of disclosure in order to advance the relationship.

Interestingly, couples in this study did not report consciously avoiding conflictual topics, such as the participants in Stafford's study. Perhaps, couples who identify as committed are less

likely to avoid such conflict as managing conflict and working through relationship problems is an essential element to relationship success.

Studies by Pettigrew (2009), Hall and Baym (2012), and Luo (2014) found that texting among couples in long-distance relationships created a sense of connectedness that contributed to the couples' feeling of accessibility and closeness within their relationship. Results of this study, as discussed in the *facilitating connection* subtheme of *advantages of technology*, lend support to these previous findings. For three of the couples in this study, texting was reported as the easiest and most instantaneous mode of communication available. For the fourth couple, texting would have been a preferred medium of communication, however, limited access to a cellular network was a barrier to this form of communication. As discussed in the *technology medium* superordinate theme, texting alone was not conducive to an increased feeling of connectedness. Instead, couples in this study emphasized the importance of finding a balanced repertoire of technology mediums, which included textual, video, and voice elements.

There is much to be said about a couple's chosen medium of technology. Couples in the present study discussed the convenience and sustainability of their chosen technology, and emphasized the importance of varying forms of technology to account for various forms of verbal and non-verbal feedback. Elements of nonverbal communication were explored by Morey et al. (2013) and McGinty et al. (2003). These researchers, along with Lee and Pistole (2012), Pistole (2010), and Jiang and Hancock (2013), highlighted the role that nonverbal communication plays in the communication satisfaction of couples in long-distance relationships. Similar to Morey et al.'s study which found that couples who use technology mediums that provide a greater number of nonverbal cues report a greater sense of relationship satisfaction, couples in this study described the importance of varying their technology medium

to account for these nonverbal cues. Specifically, couples in the current study emphasized the importance of voice. All of the couples in this study highlighted the importance of hearing each other's voices on a regular basis (at least once per week) and identified limited vocal elements as a common proponent of *miscommunication* in the *disadvantage of technology* theme. It would seem that regardless of advances in communication technology which allow for easy and instantaneous connection, there is still no satisfactory substitute for the access to the emotional cues provided by a partner's voice.

Further to the importance of voice, the couples in this study also discussed access to pictures and video as an important consideration in their chosen technology medium. Similar to the results of Coyne et al.'s (2011) study, which found that couples in long-distance relationships use more forms of communication technology than those in geographically close relationships, each of the couples in this study, on average, had three to four different technology mediums in their communication repertoire. Varying their mediums of communication allowed couples to account for access to a greater amount of verbal and non-verbal feedback from their partner. A balance of technology mediums was explained as being important to the satisfaction of the couples in this study.

Expectations of communication frequency have been explored by previous researchers including Pistole (2010), Jin and Pena (2010), and Coyne et al. (2011). In Jin and Pena's study, it was found that the frequency of text communication between dating couples in college averaged 36 times per day while the frequency of voice communication averaged seven times per day. Jin and Pena's findings further indicated that couples who communicate more frequently experience higher relationship satisfaction. Coyne et al. found that married couples communicate more frequently than couples who are dating, and surmised that married couples likely have more

responsibilities requiring communication. Given these previous findings, I was anticipating that expectations regarding frequency of communication to be a prominent theme in this study.

Interestingly, while the couples in this study made a few brief comments regarding frequency of communication, it seemed following an initial adjustment period of living at a distance, they actually reported feeling satisfied with a decrease in communication frequency. In the *disadvantages of technology* superordinate theme couples explained that technology imposed a certain amount of distraction in their everyday lives that made it difficult to manage external obligations such as school, work, and familial and friendship relationships. Acknowledgement of this distraction, prompted an *adjustment to expectations* and an *adjustment to communication* (see *relational adjustment*) which led to the couples engaging in less frequent interactions. These results contradict Coyne et al.'s and Jin and Pena's results. In fact, many of the couples in the current study reported extended periods of time (up to 8 hours) between instances of contact. These couples indicated that the reduced frequency seemed to make their communication more meaningful and, therefore, did not have a negative impact on their relationship as one might assume.

Couples in this study further discussed the role that *partner availability* and *schedule* played in the frequency of their communication (see the *reaching out* theme). Specifically, partners seemed to create a schedule of communication that was unique to their relationship circumstance and accounted for hours of work, access to cellular network, and the time zone present with each partner's geographical location. Hall and Baym (2011) found that communication expectations and communication goals are navigated by the individual couple. Specifically, the couple determines the frequency of communication and which mediums of communication will be used. Results from this study seem to align with those of Hall and

Baym's study as each of the couples discussed developing an informal schedule of communication which influenced the frequency in which the partners reached out. These informal schedules were influenced by the couples' daily tasks and commitments as well as routine times of communication (e.g., first thing in the morning and in the evening prior to bedtime).

A finding from the current study that is not present in the existing literature, is the centrality of technology in the long-distance couple's relationships, as noted in the superordinate theme of *technology as essential*. Specifically, couples in this study emphasized that technology was critical to the viability of their relationship. Participants in this study were adamant that without access to communication technology their relationship would not have endured the physical separation. It seemed that technology served to solidify the couples' confidence in their ability to sustain the relationship. Interestingly, the couples in this study reported that without the use of technology it is likely that the decision to engage in a long-distance relationship would have yielded a different outcome. Specifically, most of the couples stated that they would have chosen to not engage in a long-distance relationship had it not been for the ease and availability of communication technology. Perhaps it could be said that in addition to increased bandwidth, farther reaching cellular service, and a greater repertoire of device applications, advances in technology have also fostered the sustainability of long-distance committed relationships.

In addition to their discussion regarding communication technology, the couples in this study revealed supplementary information that warrants discussion. Specifically, all of the couples in this study viewed their physical separation as a short-term means to a long-term end. For many, the decision to live apart was often based on financial implications and each of the couples expressed a desire to eventually reunite and reside in the same physical location. As

previous researchers did not explore participants' expectations regarding reunification, it is difficult to foretell the future aims of the couples who participated in past studies. However, it was clear that the participants in this study viewed their physical separation as temporary. Perhaps, this level of commitment leads couples in a married or common-law relationship to differ from those who are dating in terms of their eventual plans to end the physical separation.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Through this study I explored the use of communication technology by couples in long-distance committed relationships. The interviews that I conducted with the four couples allowed me to develop an understanding of the participants' unique experiences of this phenomenon. The findings of this study help the reader to understand that contrary to commonly held misconceptions, couples in long-distance relationships are able to maintain connection and increase their relationship satisfaction due in part to technology. Furthermore, this study revealed that couples in long-distance relationships make adjustments to their relationships and their communication that is unique to each couple's circumstance. Through these adjustments, the couples in this study developed their own routine and expectations that served to accommodate their individual schedules and communication styles. Each participant in this study described the role that communication technology played in their ability to communicate with their partner and highlighted that technology is essential in the sustainability of their relationship during physical separation.

The purpose of this study was to explore how couples in long-distance relationships experience their use of communication technology and provide readers with a rich and detailed interpretive account of the participants' firsthand experience with this phenomenon. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is concerned with the significance of a particular experience to the participant (Smith et al., 2009). The idiographic nature of IPA prompts an in-depth analysis which aims to situate the participants experience within the context of the phenomenon being studied. The use of IPA as a methodology for this study afforded an in-depth analysis which yielded 17 subthemes within six superordinate themes.

Limitations

Following the guidelines set forth by Smith et al. (2009) regarding a suggested sample size for a novice IPA researcher, this study included four couples. While this small, homogenous sample yielded a rich and detailed account of the participants experiences of the phenomenon, the small sample size potentially narrows this study's ability to generalize to other contexts of long-distance relationships. For example, the current results may not be generalized to couples with children or couples who are separated from their partner on a permanent basis. On the whole, qualitative research focuses less on generalizability than quantitative research. The goal of qualitative research is to provide the reader with a rich and contextualized understanding of the participants accounts of their unique experience of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, the results of this study could never be fully generalizable as the findings are situated within the context of this particular phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2010). In light of this, even though explicit generalization may not be attained, the results of this study have provided readers with information for contemplation when considering various contexts of long-distance relationships.

Participant recruitment was a challenge and took longer than anticipated. It was assumed that the creation of a snowball effect through the use of social media would yield numerous potential participants. However, only one couple was recruited through the researcher's Facebook page. Of the remaining participants, two of the couples were recommended by colleagues of the researcher and one couple was recruited locally. The exclusion of couples with children limited the amount of eligible participants as many of the respondents were married with children. Couples with children experience a vastly difference familial dynamic when compared to those who do not have children. As such, it is not only possible, but likely, that the communication between partners with children would, in part, focus on the children. Therefore,

the exclusion of couples with children was deliberate in order to ensure homogeneity within the sample.

Participation in this study was voluntary and interested couples were instructed to contact the researcher to express interest. It is possible that couples who experienced satisfaction in their relationship and believed that their relationship was thriving were more motivated to volunteer their participation. Therefore, a potential sampling bias is present in this study. A sampling bias exists when some members of the intended sample are less likely to be included than others (citation). It is possible that couples that view their relationship as unsuccessful were less motivated to share their story resulting in the sample being biased towards couples in successful long-distance relationships.

It is possible that the duration of the couples' separation had an impact on how the couple experiences the phenomenon. Each of the couples in this study were physically separated for varying amounts of time. For example, one couple saw each other every other weekend, whereas another couple only saw each other every 3-4 months. It is possible that couples who see each other more often will wait until they are physically present to discuss topic of sensitive nature or high importance. Conversely, couples who reunite less frequently (i.e., every 3-4 months) are more likely to have these types of conversations via communication technology. This variance could account for different communication styles between participant couples and could be viewed as a barrier to the homogeneity of the sample.

The use of IPA as a qualitative methodology affords some limitations. Firstly, IPA examines the participants' individual expressions of the phenomenon and therefore is subjective in nature. A key feature of IPA is the double hermeneutic which highlights the importance of the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interpretation of their personal experience.

Therefore, researcher bias is inherent to this methodology. As IPA is placed within the constructivist paradigm, it is acknowledged that researchers bring values and biases to the study. As such, it was important that I strove for transparency throughout the study. At the beginning of each of the participant interviews, I shared my previous experience with the phenomenon being explored and I highlighted how this personal experience guided my decision to embark on this research. During the participant interviews I made notes as a way to capture feelings or thoughts that arose as a result of any personal recollections that occurred.

Furthermore, throughout the study, I kept a research journal which prompted me to closely reflect upon my personal biases and previously held assumptions. For example, my personal experience of the use of communication technology in my long-distance relationship was that technology was paramount in the development of relationship intimacy and connection.

However, rather than assuming this was true for the participants in my study, it was important that I remained neutral and open to receiving each participant's story. Bracketing my biases through journaling ensured that I was able to do so. Further to the use of a methodological journal, I ensured the validity of this study by rigorously adhering to Smith et al.'s (2009) steps for data analysis and interpretation and Yardley's (2000) recommendations for the assurance of validity in qualitative research.

Future Directions

This study serves as a valuable addition to the existing literature in understanding how couples in long-distance relationships experience communication technology within the context of their relationship. The results of this study, and the limitations described above, inform the future directions of research focused on couples in long-distance relationships and communication technology. As this study included committed couples who did not have

children, it could be beneficial to widen the participant profile of future research to include couples with children. It is possible that couples with children would experience this phenomenon differently than those without, and future research could serve to gain an understanding of the use of communication technology within the context of the family. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare couples with children and those without to extrapolate the impact and the role of technology in the family unit. A mixed methods study would allow researchers to compare these two types of relationships while still affording the opportunity to gain rich narrative data.

Future research might also explore long-distance relationships where reunification is not an option (e.g., a couple where one partner is permanently relocated due to employment reasons while the other partner remains at home for their employment). Interestingly, all of the couples in my study had clear intentions for the partner who was living away to relocate and for the couple to live together in the same geographical location in the close future. It is possible that this intention has an effect on the couples' feelings of the relationship and guides their use of communication technology. Exploration of the effects of permanent separation and how this separation guides the couples' use of communication technology and contributes to their relationship dynamic would contribute to a richer understanding of this unique phenomenon.

Additional future directions for research could include examination of the role of gender, ethnicity, age, and culture. Dargie et al. (2015) posited that different relationship patterns exist within older married couples. Similarly, Coyne et al. (2011) found that younger couples were more likely to have shorter relationships and use more forms of technology mediums; conversely, it is surmised that older individuals may use more traditional methods of communication. Interestingly, one of the couples in the current study specifically expressed that

their age and perceived level of maturity contributed to their ability to sustain physical separation. Focusing on age as a specific measure in future research could serve to lend support to the implication that older couples are better equipped to sustain physical separation.

In two of the interviews, I noticed a marked difference in the amount of responding between the male and the female, noting that the females contributed longer and more detailed answers than the males. It is possible that gender not only influences the respondents answers but could also influence their experience of the phenomenon and the role that communication technology holds in the relationship. As none of the studies in the current body of literature specifically examine the role of gender, exploration of this element would prove groundbreaking.

Lastly, it is noted that none of the couples in my study discussed if and how communication technology was used in the context of their sexual aspect of their relationships. Perhaps exploring this in the future will expand on the results of such a study and increase our understanding of additional uses of communication technology in long-distance relationships.

Implications

These 17 subthemes within the six superordinate themes will guide readers in the advancement of their understanding of this phenomenon. Potential readers, such as individuals who have experienced or are experiencing this phenomenon, researchers, and counsellors could use this information gleaned from this study to inform their individual interests with this population.

Couples who are experiencing this phenomenon could use the information from this study to spark further communication within their relationship as they seek to navigate their own use of technology. For example, understanding the journey of how couples came to determine their chosen method of communication as discussed in the *technology medium* superordinate

theme, could assist those who are currently going through this particular process within their own relationship. Furthermore, knowledge of other couples' experiences could serve those in long-distance relationships by creating a sense of normalcy for a circumstance that is considered an exception to the norm for committed relationships.

As the use of technology is not unique to those in long-distance relationships it is also possible that the results of this study could be beneficial to couples in geographically close relationship who are seeking to gain an understanding of their own experience of technology within their relationship.

Counsellors could use the information from this study to contribute to their understanding of couples in long-distance relationships. Specifically, counsellors would be informed of the unique experiences that long-distance committed couples encounter in terms of adjustment to their physical separation. For example, in the *relational adjustment* theme, the couples explained that an adjustment to their expectations and their communication was necessary to maintain satisfaction both in their communication and their relationship as a whole. This knowledge could be helpful for a counsellor's work if the couple is experiencing a break down in their communication.

Furthermore, the results of this study shed light on the potential positive and negative consequences that communication technology can have on relationships. Awareness of these consequences (such as those discussed in the *advantages of technology* and the *disadvantages of technology* superordinate themes) could potentially better equip counsellors to support all couples in a therapeutic environment regardless of the physical proximity that defines their relationship.

For the current couples, it is possible that participation in this study elicited a deeper understanding of their own experience of the phenomenon. Specifically, all of the couples noted that prior to this study they had not given particular attention to the role of technology in their relationship. Each of the couples shared that through their participation in this study they realized that without technology their relationships would like not be sustainable.

The comprehensive and detailed analysis and findings of this research present an in-depth look at how couples in long-distance committed relationships uniquely experience communication technology.

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Appendix A

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AUREB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The AUREB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 22889

Principal Investigator:

Mrs. Kimberly Duret, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Master of Counselling

Supervisor:

Dr. Simon Nuttgens (Supervisor)

Project Title:

The Use of Communication Technology by Couples in Long-Distance Committed Relationships: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Effective Date: February 09, 2018

Expiry Date: February 08, 2019

Restrictions:

Any modification or amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

A Project Completion (Final) Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: February 9, 2018

Donna Clare, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
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Appendix B

Interview Guide

- 1) How long have you been together as a couple? Married/common law?
- 2) How long have you been engaged in a long-distance relationship?
- 3) Describe your long-distance relationship (e.g., how long are you or your partner away, how often do you or your partner return home?)
- 4) What types of communication technology do you and your partner use?
- 5) What makes you choose one form of technology over another (e.g., texting instead of voice calls)?
- 6) When do you feel the greatest urge to reach out and communicate to with partner?
- 7) Do you always follow this urge? What happens if you don't?
- 8) What would it be like to be in this relationship if this technology was not created (e.g., if it were 1977 and not 2017)?
- 9) What are some of the challenges associated with use communication technology in your relationship?
- 10) What are some of the positive aspects of using communication technology in your relationship?
- 11) Can technology be overused in relationships? How would you know that it is being overused? Can you tell me about such a time?
- 12) Can miscommunication occur when using technology? Can you provide an example of when this happened?
- 13) What is it like to be expecting an immediate response and then not get it?

14) What is it like for you when technology fails (e.g., you are out of range for a period of time)?

Appendix C

The Use of Communication technology by Couples in Long-Distance Committed Relationships: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM****Principal Investigator:**

Kimberly Duret
306-261-0967
kimberly.duret@gcap.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Simon Nuttgens
250-496-5143
simonn@athabascau.ca

You are invited to participate in a research study about how couples in long-distance committed relationships use technology (e.g., texting, emails, Skype, FaceTime, etc.) as a method of communication when one partner lives away from home.

My name is Kimberly Duret and I am conducting this qualitative study as a requirement to complete my Masters of Counselling degree at Athabasca University.

Purpose of the Study

Long-distance relationships amount couples who are romantically involved are becoming increasingly prevalent. As is the use of technology as a form of communication between individuals in a relationship. However, existing literature is limited in its representation of couples who identify as being married or living common-law. This research will examine how married or common-law couples, between the ages of 25-40, who identify as being separated geographically due to employment or educational circumstances, utilize communication technology within their relationship.

Who can Participate?

Couples between the ages of 25-40 years of age who are engaged in a long-distance committed relationship, and who use technology as a form of communication while one partner is away, are invited to participate in this study. For the purpose of this study, long-distance is defined as: an intimate relationship between two committed partners who are geographically isolated from one another and, therefore unable to meet in person on a regular basis. A committed relationship is defined as being either married or common-law partners, for a minimum of 1 year prior to the study. Communication technology is defined as any method of communication that involves the use of an electronic device (e.g., texting, video chat, emails, phone calls).

Your Role in the Research

As a participant, you are asked to take part in an audio recorded interview. You will be asked a series of questions designed to elicit your personal experience regarding the use of communication technology in your long-distance committed relationship. Participation in this interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time.

Involvement in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any questions or to share information that you are not comfortable sharing. You may withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection period by stating, to the researcher, that you wish to discontinue your participation in the study. If you choose to withdraw during the data collection phase, all of the information you have provided will be destroyed. There is no penalty for withdrawing from the study.

Risks and Benefits

There are minimal risks in participating in this research study. Discussion regarding personal experiences within your relationship may bring new understanding and/or identify areas for growth. Sensitive topics, such as personal feelings regarding the relationship, may be discussed. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please discuss this with the researcher.

Limits of Confidentiality

As couples will be participating in the study together, the concerns around confidentiality between partners is limited.

Verbatim excerpts will be presented in the final thesis document, however, all other elements of this research will remain confidential. In the event of publication or conference presentation, no identifying information will be made available.

Data Storage and Destruction

All data will be stored and secured at the researcher's home office. Paper data will be kept in a locked file cabinet; audio and video recordings will be kept on password-protected computers. All data will be destroyed five years following the completion of the research. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Results

Results of this study, including verbatim quotations from participants, will be published in my master's thesis, in peer-reviewed journals, and presented at research conferences. At your request, you will be provided with a copy of these published materials.

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Kimberly Duret or Dr. Simon Nuttgens using the contact information above.

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718 or by e-mail to rebsec@athabascau.ca

Thank you for your assistance in this project.

Consent

I have read the Letter of Information regarding this research study, and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I will keep a copy of this letter for my records.

My signature below confirms that:

- I understand the expectations and requirements of my participation in the research;
- I understand the provisions around confidentiality and anonymity;
- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time with no negative consequences;
- I am aware that I may contact Kimberly Duret, Dr. Simon Nuttgens, or the Office of Research Ethics if I have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research procedures.
-

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

By initialing the statement(s) below,

_____ I am granting permission for the researcher to use an audio or video recorder

_____ I acknowledge that the researcher may use specific quotations of mine, without identifying me

Appendix D

Research Journal Summary

Interviews

First Interview

- this interview was exciting and I was happy with the amount of information that this first couple provided. I was pleased with their openness and their willing to share their story. At the end of the interview, once all of the questions has concluded, I opened the floor for comments and additional information. Here the couples spoke about wanting to share with other couples the importance of adjusting their communication styles and expectations. This information is valuable and it will be important for me to represent this in my final write up.
- A few things that stood out to me included the partner's playfulness and ease with each other and the telling of their story, and their body language towards each other as they sat together for the interview. My interpretation of this is that they are happy and comfortable with each other and with sharing their story for others to hear.
- Personal reflection: I appreciated how this couple explained their journey of finding a suitable method of technology for them. It did remind of my own journey with this process and during the interview I made notes here to remind myself to reflect on this later so that during the interview I could remain focused on being present for the couple.

Second Interview

- This interview was shorter than the first and produced less data.
- In this interview the female did the majority of the speaking and I wonder if this is reflective of their communication styles in their relationship.

- Personal reflection: I did not have any personal recollections during this particular interview. Perhaps this was because this couple's context was different from my own.

Third Interview

- The partners were separated for this interview and it was difficult to hear one of the partners due to the internet connection. On a few occasions I had to ask for information to be repeated and I wonder if I was able to capture all of the story.
- This couple's desire to end their physical separation was evident and they discussed this at the end of the interview. It seems that the driving force behind their separation was the salary that the relocated partner would receive as a result of being in a remote location. Similar to my own experience here, the decision to live apart was driven by financial motivation and viewed as short term, so I find myself identifying with this couple in their decision to accommodate a separation in order to remain financially stable.

Fourth Interview

- This interview was the longest of the four interviews as the couple was quite expressive and detailed in their sharing of their story.
- I was able to relate to this couple in their story as they spoke in detail about the sharing of their emotions through text instead of face to face. There were a few times where I noticed I wanted to jump in to the story and join in. I had to be cognizant of this and hold my personal experience aside in order to keep the focus on the interview.
- Personal reflection: I was intrigued by this couple and their communication with each other. Their personal experience of sharing thoughts and feeling more freely via text message was similar to my own. Perhaps this prior personal experience caused me to feel like I understood their point of view more than I would have without my prior

experience. During the analysis I will need to be cautious of finding a balance between interpreting this transcript through my personal lens and that of a researcher.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of transcript #1

- During this process I found that I was trying to put myself in the couples shoes in order to interpret the meaning behind their individual expressions of their story. It really seems that this couple has worked hard to establish their personal communication styles that best suit their relationship and they are able to clearly articulate that experience. What stood out to me was the thought and process behind much of the couples stories. It seems that they are very open with their thoughts and feelings regarding their relationship and the nature their separation. It appears that this openness has contributed to their reported relationship satisfaction and sustainability.

Data analysis of transcript #2

- Themes produced in this interview appear to align with those in the previous interview. What stands out the most is the advantages and disadvantages of using technology. It is interesting how this couple uses many different mediums of technology to communicate, including social media, and not just one method.

Data analysis of transcript #3

- Analysis for this interview brought out some new information for the themes as limited access to cellular network is a key factor for this couple. They expressed that they would like to be able to use many other communications methods, however are unable due to accessibility.

Data analysis of #4

- This couple really spoke to their level of maturity being a factor in their relationship sustainability. He spoke of previous long-distance relationships and how these were different from this current relationship. It seems that this perceived maturity is quite important to him and how he sees the relationship.
- I reflect again on the similarities between this couple's openness with their thoughts and feelings via technology as they were similar to my own. However, I have found that I have been able to keep my personal experience separate from this as my focus is on the couple and their unique experience.

Overall personal reflections:

- During the interviews and analysis, I was constantly attending to my thoughts, feelings, and recollections to reflect on the impact that the research process had on me personally. In my reflections I found that the research did not impact me the way that I originally believed that it would when I chose a topic of relevant personal experience. I wonder if perhaps this is because my own experience with this phenomenon was many years ago and my relationship has changed a great deal since this time. Perhaps, I was able to bracket myself because of the passing of time. This is not to say that the research did not bring forth thoughts, feelings, and recollections, as it certainly did. The thoughts and feelings that I experienced during this research process were that of understanding and camaraderie with the couples. During the interviews I urged the couples to expand on their stories to really bring forth the essence of their relationship so that this could be celebrated in the written element of this project. Perhaps I was driven to fully capture their story because of my own experience. I wonder if someone without this experience would have explored this the same way that I did.

Appendix E

Tri-Council Ethics Certificate

