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# Six Feet Apart: Relational Turbulence Theory and Coping with COVID-19 within Long-Distance Relationships

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## Citation

Six Feet Apart: Relational Turbulence Theory and Coping with COVID-19 within Long-Distance Relationships

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**Abstract**

Among research that currently exists, no studies thus far combine elements of COVID-19, long-distance relationships, and Relational Turbulence Theory to explain how each of these elements impacts the others, if at all. Previous research does exist on each of these elements individually, although research regarding the long-term effects of COVID-19 on relationships is minimal considering the pandemic is ongoing. Long-distance relationships have been studied using Relational Turbulence Theory in previous studies within military relationships but have not been studied in connection with either COVID-19 or among college students. This study was conducted by way of qualitative, one-on-one interviews to determine the presence of turbulence in long-distance relationships resulting from separation due to the COVID-19 pandemic and how couples cope with unexpected turbulence. A sample of nine participants aged 18-30 engaged in long-term, long-distance relationships were interviewed. After interviews were completed, the responses were then coded and analyzed for thematic similarities and differences. Results of this study show that interviewed long-distance couples did not experience more turbulence in their relationships resulting from COVID-19, but instead felt as though their relationships progressed. Although progression was reported by most participants, turbulence was still expressed as well as the use of protective buffering among couples while distanced. Maintenance strategies utilized by long-distance couples during the pandemic were explained to aid in maintaining physical and emotional intimacy while separated as well. This study is a thematic analysis of relational turbulence theory and how turbulence affected long-distance couples facing a global pandemic. As more research regarding the effects of COVID-19 is published daily, more studies might be conducted to better discover relational turbulence and coping strategies used within romantic, long-term relationships to better prevent turbulence in the future during other unprecedented, unexpected events such as the pandemic.

## Acknowledgements

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To Alec—thank you for being my place to land when I need grounding and my biggest fan. I love you forever. You know the rest.

## Dedication

To my mom—you have always taught me that your education is the one thing no one can ever take from you. Thank you for allowing me to pursue my education and for supporting me to obtain that 'one thing.' You are my smart girl, always.

To young female academics—YOU CAN DO IT, TOO! Never let anyone tell you that you are not smart enough, not capable enough, or anything less than you are. You are bold, brilliant, and brave. Knock 'em dead.

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**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introduction**

COVID-19, the global pandemic that now has altered and reinvented all that once was typical, stable, and safe has not discriminated against whom and what it has and will affect. This includes those within romantic relationships. COVID-19 created unique circumstances communities were asked to abide by to prevent the spread and contraction of the virus. These circumstances include social-distancing and isolation periods as well as prolonged physical distance from loved ones. The long-term effects of COVID-19 are yet to be decided as the pandemic seems to have no end. The unique circumstances generated by an unprecedented global crisis such as forced distance between partners, the development of new routines and patterns with the termination of others, among other factors seems to bring existing stressors and cracks within romantic relationships to the surface. Intimate relationships suffered due to the distance; however, relationships also prospered after adapting to the 'new normal' of pandemic life, both physically and emotionally. Roles also have been called into question as norms and stereotypes shifted, creating new roles within households as well as reworking original roles to better suit current lifestyles for furthering relationships and enabling relationship maintenance. As roles shift, the stability and quality of relationships are called into question and placed under a microscope of sorts. Relationships of "higher quality," or those appearing more stable might better be equipped to weather the storm of COVID-19. When exploring stability and the quality of relationships, the idea of stress becomes unavoidable. Relationships having intense outside and internal stressors caused by the relationship itself are put to the test when forced into long-distance relationships resulting from quarantine periods, isolation, work-factors, and more. With this, relational turbulence is seen as chaos arises both within relationships as well as outside of

them. Relational turbulence can be avoided with the maintenance of routines and patterns, especially while couples remain interdependent, but this is challenging to say the least. Turbulence becomes especially challenging to avoid within romantic relationships when faced with unanticipated stressors, a global pandemic being the perfect example of this. As the pandemic progressed, some relationships progressed along with it, but others have not. Relationships already facing turbulence or internal stressors now have the impact of external stressors caused by the pandemic affecting the future of these relationships. Loss and stress are only two of the external factors causing relational turbulence and change. Losses, such as the loss of a job, financial downturns, deaths of close friends and family members resulting from the pandemic would create turbulence within relationships as well as individually. Just as vaccines, mask mandates, and quarantine periods try to keep COVID-19 at bay, coping mechanisms used by couples for relationship maintenance during the pandemic as well as long after still are being researched as the pandemic continues to rage on.

The purpose of this study is to analyze long-term relationships that existed prior to the onset of the pandemic to discover changes, if any, that occurred as the pandemic progressed. This study offers findings about how relationships experienced greater stress and turbulence, how they were maintained communicatively to continue attachment, and progressed in specific ways resulting from social-distancing as well as other aspects of pandemic-culture, including these "new normals" created due to their being forced to adapt within unprecedented, unexpected situations.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Review of the Literature**

**External Stressor: COVID-19**

COVID-19 offers a specific set of stressors including social isolating and social distancing, quarantine periods, confinement at home, a major lack of control, the loss of economic and relational norms that once existed, among many others (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). These concerns now have become even more important than prior to the pandemic since most relational norms, as well as social norms, were lost or taken away, at least to some degree (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The disruption of routines, losses, both financial and otherwise, certain family tasks or chores, and employment tasks and changes all are major stressors and factors to consider during the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Those changes, to nearly every aspect of life it seems, caused couples to feel that it is much more challenging to maintain independence from their partners while also still maintaining that closeness and connection they share with their partners (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

*Separation.* The World Health Organization (WHO) first coined the term "social-distancing" to describe times when individuals are to be separated from others for preventing the spread of COVID-19 (Maiti, et al., 2020). The WHO later moved to change the term to "physical distancing" because "social- distancing" came to represent extreme, both emotionally as well as physically, taxing changes brought on by the pandemic (Maiti, et al., 2020). Having never faced a pandemic in this lifetime, most of the population, especially those in the US, felt there was tension in complying with federal, state, and local policies asking the public to remain vigilant in socially distancing, mask-wearing, and other preventative behaviors (Shufford, Hall, Braunstein, O'Brien, Mickelson, 2021). There were, and still are, groups complying with these policies and

mandates, and those who did not and wished for the normalcy of their lives to remain unchanged (Shufford, et al., 2021).

Separation was created between individuals and their "important others" as well as their "support groups" because of the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, p. 3). "Important others" include family, close friends, and even coworkers. This includes those that an individual might see every day, frequently talk to, or interact with on a regular basis, while "support groups" consist of those sharing commonalities with one another or perhaps those in which an individual interacts with every now and then, but not as frequently as their "important others" (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). While separation is a major theme throughout the pandemic, unfortunately loss also is prevalent (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

*Loss.* The loss of childcare, healthcare, financial and employment losses, the loss of time and both physical and mental health, as well as space losses all affected individuals during COVID-19 (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Losses occurred in the forms of deaths and illnesses throughout the pandemic, but losses also are felt economically (Ogan, et al., 2021). The destabilization of the economy that COVID-19 caused, in turn, led businesses to permanently close their doors, resulting in record unemployment rates (Ogan, et al., 2021). In understanding the impact of loss within relationships as well as externally, the quality of the relationship may be called into question in to predict just how loss and other shifts might affect these relationships.

**High Quality Relationships**

Relationships are not one-size-fits-all, but rather vary in their characteristics, with no two ever being the same. What constitutes a relationship considered to be "high quality?" A "high

quality" relationship is one that "protects health and well-being during challenging life events," which would imply relationships that are more stable are obviously more desirable (Overall, Chang, Pietromonaco, Low, & Henderson, 2021, p. 3). In terms of marriage, stability is defined by staying married, whereas an unstable marriage is then only defined by separation or divorce (Maiti, et al., 2020). Communication occurs through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors and exchanges in which a message can be taken and understood. In fact, how one communicates with one's partner is directly associated with marital satisfaction, and likely associated with relational satisfaction (Haris & Kumar, 2018). High quality relationships, although typically strong, have the potential to be influenced by factors within and outside of the relationship that can contribute to relational turbulence or relational dissatisfaction such as distance and other forms of relational stress. In understanding high quality relationships and their characteristics, the concept of intimacy can further be explained and defined within romantic relationships.

**Intimate relationships**

Relationships are not built on one factor alone, but rather many dynamics and characteristics, the first of these being intimacy. The primary task in a romantic relationship is to accomplish relationship development—to do this, a relationship first must be initiated, then moved to a place where intimacy and bonding occur; then relationships must be able to stay in that place of intimacy and bonding (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). Communication skills are needed by one or both persons involved within the romantic relationship at all stages of development (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). Communication skills first are necessary following the initiation of a romantic relationship leading to intensifying the connection propelling the initiation, then the relationship requires further communication skills to move its status to one of both intimacy and bonding (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). After communication skills are set in

place to both take the relationship from the initial stage to greater degrees of intimacy and to maintain that level throughout the relationship, decisions must be made to determine whether the relationship should continue or terminate (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003).

Throughout relationship development, intimacy is bound to increase and decrease at times, but communication truly is the "vehicle" that carries relationships through evolving stages of intimacy (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010, p.116). Interpersonal communication and the role of communication between people is what dictates how relationships "decay, develop, persist, and falter" (Soloman, et al., p. 116). Sexual activity often is what comes to mind when aiming to define intimacy and although it is not the only or most important factor in determining successful or unsuccessful statuses of intimacy within relationships, sexual activity between partners can be what initially escalates that emotional intimacy (Rubinsky, Cooke-Jackson, McMahon, Roldá, & Aragón, 2021).

*Emotional intimacy vs. physical intimacy.* Strictly sexual relationships are different from romantic ones in that romantic relationships might involve sexual connection and interaction, however strictly sexual relationships usually do not involve romance or emotional connection (Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006). Although they are not one in the same, both sexual relationships as well as romantic ones involve both attachment and emotional connection (Gonzaga, et al., 2006). Intimacy is not only physical, it also is personal as well as emotional (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). For this reason, emotional intimacy requires mutual investment, meaning it cannot be one-sided or only desired by one party within the relationship (Reese-Weber, 2015). Emotional intimacy also requires constructive communication strategies, occurring only when mutual investment is happening (Reese-Weber, 2015). These strategies aimed at developing and increasing constructive communication include behaviors intended to

"nurture" a relationship like listening to one another, the showing of both respect and affection, the ability to negotiate during arguments to come to a consensus or agreement, among others (Reese-Weber, 2015). On the other hand, communication strategies leading to more destructive outcomes include nagging or blaming, and criticism (Reese-Weber, 2015). The duration of relationships and their success relies on the importance of emotional intimacy within the relationships, and how that significance is viewed from both sides, as well as the importance of conflict management and avoidance of aggression between the partners (Reese-Weber, 2015). Traditionally, emotional intimacy increases in a linear fashion the longer relationships persist (Reese-Weber, 2015). Even if relationships progress in terms of physical or emotional intimacy, change must happen within the relationship.

Defining intimacy within the COVID-19 era is complicated to say the least with increased likelihood of potential distance between couples. When considering quarantine periods, work-related separations, and travel bans, intimacy would be more difficult to accomplish within romantic relationships during the pandemic. Both physical as well as emotional intimacy allow relationships to progress and grow, so without opportunities for intimacy, relationships might suffer.

**Changes within Relationships and Dyads**

Close relationships are "communal," meaning both parties genuinely care for the other's wellbeing (Mills & Clark, 2001). Close romantic relationships also are typically formed initially from strong mutual attraction between people (Mills & Clark, 2001). Physical attraction usually drives the communal relationship or initiates it in the first place but is not always what drives the relationship to continue (Mills & Clark, 2003). Communal relationships can vary in strength or stability, meaning that not all fall on the same level of either wanting or needing to meet the

needs of the other (Mills & Clark, 2001). To understand this idea, one also must take cost into consideration—what is the cost, personally, of wanting or needing another or being there for them in ways they need or want? If the cost is understood, then the reward can be considered (Mills & Clark, 2001). Essentially, the question becomes--is someone willing to go the extra mile for their partner? The communal relationship between partners should be equal in a close, romantic relationship (Mills & Clark, 2001). Partners must mutually be motivated to meet the needs of the other within the relationship (Mills & Clark, 2001).

Not all relationships are strong communal ones. For a moment, consider married couples remaining married for the sake of children, financial reasons, or other factors (Mills & Clark, 2001). Also, consider abusive relationships. In these relationships, the motivation is not equal or as high from each partner, but instead is one-sided where one person is benefiting at the other's expense (Mills & Clark, 2001). A communal relationship is strengthened by partners understanding one another's needs, although this can sometimes be the downfall of a relationship instead of propelling it toward success (Mills & Clark, 2001). The process to make a romantic relationship one that is communal requires partners to reach diverse levels of intimacy, dependent on both the physical and emotional needs of each partner and the needs of the relationship (Mills & Clark, 2001). In this process, commonalities must be found in which the needs of the relationship and those persons involved are discovered as well as the mutual goals for the relationship (Mills & Clark, 2001). The communication of needs between partners must be initiated and then maintained throughout the relationship to sustain that communal status (Mills & Clark, 2001).

Most research regarding romantic relationships centers around the development or decline of those relationships; thus, the research focusing on the skills needed to accomplish

relational development is rather sparse (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). What is known is that although sexual or mutual attraction typically are experienced during relationship initiation, truly falling in love with another requires an "expansion" of oneself to include one's partner into the self-identity (Gonzaga, et al., 2006). This explains why those relationships not considered to be communal or when the hopes of maintaining a relationship solely rely on sexual desire typically do not last or progress to higher levels of emotional intimacy and mutuality (Gonzaga, et al., 2006). Sexual relationships and sexual desire also can separate a short-term relationship from a long-term relationship.

*Relationship length.* Short-term relationships may be dating someone more than once without the expectation or intention of initiating either a short or long-term relationship (Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000). A long-term relationship may be dating someone for a long period of time with the possibility of, but no promise of, marriage (Stewart, et al., 2000). To go even deeper, these types of relationships can be defined further. A "hookup" is a casual sexual encounter that takes place between two individuals occurring outside of a romantic relationship (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016). A "date" is described as a form of "partnering" that takes place in a public place and involves the potential to become a long-term relationship (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016). A long-term relationship, as described by Kuperberg and Padgett (2016), differs from the definition created by Stewart, et al. (2000). Kuperberg and Padgett state that long-term relationships are romantic and sexual, and typically monogamous with the potential to lead to marriage, cohabitation, or both.

**Relational Stress, Distance, Causes of Distance, and Turbulence**

Each couple involved in a romantic relationship faces stressors such as changes with one's physical or mental health, employment status, as well as economic changes and directly

can affect people individually, which might in turn affect couples' relationships and relational

satisfaction (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). The management, or lack thereof, of those external

stressors often depletes the available energy to manage internal relational sources of conflict and

stressors (Overall, et al., 2021). Dyadic processes within relationships are those considered

"normal" and allow relationships to function well (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Stress has

the power to undermine dyadic processes because it can leave less available valuable coping

resources needed to engage and interact constructively with partners (Pietromonaco & Overall,

2021). Couples facing these stressors also are more likely to interact in damaging ways with their

partners (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). This includes behaviors that are overly critical,

blaming, as well as even becoming unresponsive or silent altogether (Pietromonaco & Overall,

2021).

   *Support gaps.* Higher levels of reported stress may be correlated directly with skewed

perceptions between partners of both support given and support received (Pietromonaco &

Overall, 2021). These are called support gaps (Holmstrom, Shebib, Boumis, Allard, Mason, &

Lim (2021). Support gaps can occur when an individual receives either more support than

desired, or less support than desired, however, support gaps are associated with negative personal

and relational outcomes (Holmstrom, et al., 2021). Stress and romantic relationship functioning

are said to have a "robust" connection or correlation (Ogan, Monk, Kanter, & Proulx, 2021, p.

2945). In other words, the two essentially go hand in hand. Both relationship dissatisfaction as

well as instability within a relationship can be an expected result of external stressors (Ogan, et

al., 2021). When these external stressors present themselves, couples become more likely to see

problems both with their partners as well as their relationships, which then causes a lack of

willingness between these partners to engage in conflict management or behaviors increasing

conflict resolution (Ogan, et al., 2021). These gaps of support might be further affected by instances of forced separation COVID-19 has caused. Forced distance resulting from COVID-19 might cause couples to give excessive support to compensate for the lack of physical interaction. On the other hand, individuals within romantic relationships might view the distance as almost a break of sorts from offering support to their partners, when the partners are seeking increased support to buffer the blows COVID-19 has brought. In either scenario, the gaps of support could create added turbulence and stress to an already stressful and unpredictable situation.

*Relational routines.* The predictability and routines of relational partners is paramount to maintaining those relationships, so when those routines and the predictability are threatened, the relationship has the potential to be in jeopardy as well (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Examples of relational routine within romantic relationships might be one partner completing a household task religiously, such as taking out the trash or doing the dishes, while the other partner completes annual tax forms or completes yard work. They may seem simple, leading to them being looked over oftentimes by researchers. Routines are interesting to note when exploring constraint commitment and dedication as well (Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2013). Dedication is an individual's desire to continue a relationship, to incorporate the relationship into one's future plans, to prioritize the relationship, and to have a sense of shared identity with one's partner (Kelmer, et al., 2013). Dedication, when examining relational routines, assumes an individual in a romantic relationship can see a future with their partner allowing for the adoption of that partner's existing routines as well as the desire to create new routines together. Constraint commitment, on the other hand, consists of both internal and external pressures serving as barriers or obstacles to ending a relationship (Kelmer, et al., 2013). Constraint commitment

reflects an individual's perceptions about the social, emotional, moral, or economic costs associated with ending the relationship (Kelmer, et al., 2013).

**Long-term and Long-distance Relationships**

A "steady, long-term" relationship is defined as being at least six months in duration (Krapf, 2018, p. 321). Long-term relationships are important to understand when exploring both physical and emotional distance within relationships. Long-distance relationships (LDRs) occur when "communication opportunities are restricted (in the view of the individuals involved) because of geographic parameters and the individuals within the relationships have expectations of continued close connection" as opposed to being solely geographically and physically distant (Stafford, 2004, p. 4). LDRs reject the notion of firm, exact definitions, or barriers as well; therefore, they can be defined loosely or dependent on the context of each individual instance (Stafford, 2004). There are culturally appropriated assumptions regarding LDRs. According to Stafford (2004), these include the assumption that frequent face-to-face communication is necessary to support close relational ties; that geographic proximity is necessary to have close relationships; that family members, couples, parents, and young children must share a residence; and lastly, that shared meaning must be a part of close relationships. These assumptions and notions, of course, are socially constructed, therefore they are not always true or relevant to every romantic relationship.

LDRs are important to study because they may provide evidence of more trust or stability than geographically close relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). This is something that is up for debate, as not all researchers interested in communication within LD or geographically close relationships (GCRs) agree about their inherent levels of trust and stability. Relational maintenance, or those behaviors and actions facilitating normal or typical feelings of satisfaction

within relationships, may differ in LDRs from those geographically close (Aylor, 2003). For instance, relational maintenance strategies for LDRs include:

- Recognizing the prevalence of LDRs

- The development of support systems for separated partners

- Creating alternative ways to communicate

- Discussing and creating mutually agreed upon rules and expectations from the relationship prior to separation

- The use of face-to-face time wisely by addressing affection and other needs that can't be satisfied while separated

- Openness and honesty

- The focus on positive aspects of separation rather than the limitations or negative aspects of separation (Aylor, 2003)

Routines are significant in studying the success or demise of LDRs. The interference of one partner's daily pattern or routine can cause increased reactivity to relationship-related events or conversations (Soloman, et al., 2010). As partner intimacy grows, the openness between partners also grows in allowing one another to participate in routines, however those routines sometimes cease to remain autonomous (Soloman, et al., 2010). Routines, as seemingly unimportant as they may seem, tend to aid in supporting degrees of normalcy among individuals, especially in times of chaos or stress.

*Relational maintenance.* Relational maintenance is necessary regardless of stressors at work within those LD or GC relationships, therefore the stressors for each type of relationship are going to be different (Pistole, Roberts, Chapman, 2010). The relational stressors for LDRs

might include travel expenses, separation anxieties, and added expenses related to travel or other needs (Pistole, et al., 2010). Face-to-face interactions within LDRs are scarce, making the relational stressors more likely to be related to what happens during face-to-face interactions for GC couples and relationships (Pistole, et al., 2010). GC relationships typically are assumed to have shared meaning, communication, emotional attachment, as well as intimacy. LDRs typically are viewed as void of those characteristics (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). The factors contributing to GC relational stress might be much smaller in magnitude than that of LDRs (Kelmer, et al., 2013). For example, with GC relationships, there is less pressure from social groups and friends to stay together after making large purchases, like houses, furniture, and pets (Kelmer, et al., 2013). Also, there are fewer material constraints for those geographically closer, meaning LD couples are more likely to feel less "trapped" by their relationships (Kelmer, et al., 2013). Although GC relationships seem to be at a lower cost to both individuals involved when compared to LDRs, research shows that LDRs tend to be more desirable prior to their conception to individuals who consider themselves to be more committed to relationships generally, which might imply that individuals particularly attracted to LDRs are also most likely to intentionally avoid large purchases together and other issues that might impact the success of the LDR (Kelmer, et al., 2013).

Since LD couples tend to be individuals who are more committed, it seems reasonable to assume they stay committed due to their not having to deal with the day-to-day hassles confronting GC couples (Kelmer, et al., 2013). The question then becomes, is there not a benefit, if few benefits, coming from dealing with those day-to-day hassles together? Perhaps those in LDRs do not consider that question because relational stability, trust, and closeness are measured equally, if not greater, in LDRs than GCRs (Jiang & Hancock, 2013, p. 557). Although physical

intimacy might be hindered since it is not occurring as often as it might in GCRs, LDRs allow for intimacy to adapt since that face-to-face interaction for closeness is not always an option (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). More self-disclosure and the sharing of communication are evident when this adaptation occurs (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Couples must engage in behavioral adaptation and idealization as means for maintaining their LD relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Media use is one means couples use for relationship maintenance and is important in analyzing closeness and communication within these relationships. These types of behaviors enhance or improve LDRs, particularly when it comes to increasing intimacy (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Media usage and mediated communication within LDRs are paramount. Texting can be used to communicate shared tasks, social networking, and even the sharing of positive messages (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Through phone calls, however, couples are explicitly able to communicate with both openness as well as assurance in a way texting and other text-based communication cannot, such as email (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). During situations when face-to-face communication is not possible, mediated communication comes into play to facilitate the feeling of closeness and intimacy to which LD couples have had to adapt (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Communication skills are essential for maintaining any sort of relationship but are especially crucial in LDRs (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). The presence of effective communication skills can also include the ability to manage one's jealousy as well as sexual desires (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). As mentioned above, communication skills might include adapting to circumstances such as an LDR to continue interaction with one's partner via mediated channels when face-to-face communication is not possible. Burleson and Denton (1997) define a communication skill as "an individual's ability to achieve communicative goals during an interaction (see also Dindia & Timmerman, 2003, p. 686). Media use also may be a

method for persons to develop and continue their relational attachments. In exploring relational maintenance and how couples sustain their relationships by use of specific strategies, the understanding of attachment and attachment styles both within and outside of relationships is crucial. This proposed study aims to explore the impact the pandemic has on how LDRs adapted their relationship strategies.

 *Attachment theory*. Attachment theory explains the process in which relational bonds are formed and maintained. Bowlby's attachment theory initially was created to explain infants' attachment to their primary caregivers and how when separated from those caregivers, emotional distress occurs (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Shaver and Hazan (1988) since advanced the theory further to better explain and predict attachment styles within adult romantic relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Attachment theory presents three distinct attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Secure attachment within romantic relationships typically is associated with greater interdependence as well as greater trust, commitment, and overall satisfaction (Simpson, 1990). Both the avoidant as well as anxious-ambivalent styles were more commonly associated with negative emotions toward the romantic relationship (Simpson, 1990). Although initially attachment was thought to develop early in life, attachment can be formed and reformed within romantic relationships.

 Neglect or a past caregiving experience that was seen as negative or traumatizing in childhood often can cause attachment avoidance in adults (Overall, et al., 2021). Attachment avoidance leads to deep-seated beliefs concerning trust and can result in major distrust in adult relationships (Overall, et al., 2021). Avoidance can spill over from one partner to another; for instance, even if individuals do not consider themselves to be avoidant, if their partner is, they might be more likely not to contend or go along with their partners' thinking or beliefs, or even

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their distancing strategies, causing decreased intimacy and support (Overall, et al., 2021). This can create serious problems during conflict such as hostility or even withdrawal altogether (Overall, et al., 2021). Attachment in couples, as it increases, fosters lower problem-solving efficacy as well as general cohesion between partners (Overall, et al., 2021). Aggression can even come from the roots of avoidance (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Increased stress as well as discontinuity or disruption also can increase aggression (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Situational aggression occurs when arguments create the potential to become violent while controlling violence is used to subjugate a partner, especially during conflict (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Conflict management can occur using protective buffering, a strategy especially relevant to those within LDRs.

*Protective buffering*. This can occur when an individual "decides that a stressor is 'our problem' but 'my responsibility for the solution" (Joseph & Afifi, 2010, p. 414). It even can consist of "hiding one's concerns, denying one's worries, concealing discouraging information..." among other concerns (Joseph & Afifi, 2010, p. 414). Protective buffering also exists as the disclosure of these negative feelings can cause a shift in a relationship's status; for example, if a military spouse explains to his or her deployed partner that he or she feels the deployment is putting their marriage at risk, the spouse risks bringing that assumption to a realistic end (Joseph & Afifi, 2010).

LDRs can occur for several reasons—occupational, financial, or otherwise, however they also can be due to military deployment (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Military deployment is unique in that it is typically a forced sort of distance (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). LDRs, especially those separated by deployment, can have issues with communication privacy management (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). This occurs when military spouses, typically wives, feel that they must not disclose

negative, stressful, or disheartening feelings toward the separation or what occurs during deployment as to not cause their partners further distress (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). This process is called protective buffering, in which one partner feels they are protecting the other by withholding feelings that might be perceived as negative (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Military families deal with specific stressors that other LDRs or the typical GC couple might not, along with protective buffering and privacy management (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). The risks servicemembers face while deployed include injury, death, unexpected and periodic relocation, residence in foreign countries, as well as separation from their families (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Considering those risks and potential stress factors, protective buffering can be further explained.

*Addressing separations.* Attachment becomes apparent in adulthood when one's security or safety is threatened, which then causes those feeling threatened to seek out security or safety from others (Collins & Feeney, 2000). The bonds that are created by those who become attached and intimately connected with one another are deep and can be long-lasting, however physical distance has the potential to cause those bonds to waiver. This is important to understand in relation to LDRs because attachment is at risk of being threatened if factors affect travel plans, for example, or if other issues of inaccessibility come into play for those living distantly from one another (Pistole, et al., 2010). Intimate relationships are built upon security and trust gained through the attachment process within relationships (Collins & Feeney, 2000). When considering how intimacy developed based on attachment is threatened by distance, caregiving and supportive behaviors are forced to shift and adapt (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

*Managing distance.* If plans happen to fall through and that connection is disrupted, there are three types of behaviors that can be used to create meaning as well as bridge those gaps of separation: prospective, introspective, and retrospective behaviors (Pistole, et al., 2010).

Prospective behaviors address anticipated or future separation, such as telling a partner goodbye after being together face-to-face (Pistole, et al., 2010). Introspective behaviors can maintain connection between partners during separation, like phone calls, texting, and other forms of long-distance communication (Pistole, et al., 2010). Lastly, retrospective behaviors are those that may reaffirm or re-establish connection after separation once couples are reunited face-to-face (Pistole, et al., 2010). Instances in which distance can be caused or gaps of separation can be personal, but they can be environmental as well—this could include weather, occupational, or other issues (Pistole, et al., 2010). Environmental factors also can interrupt attachment processes for both GC and LDRs (Pistole, et al., 2010). Efforts to support attachment can be part of relational maintenance. In a study reported by Kelmer et al., (2013), higher levels of love, satisfaction, and more positive reminisces about partners in LDRs were recorded, as well as higher perceived agreement and better communication overall.

Although it seems that LDRs are typically more satisfied with their partners, there can be negative issues as well. Since those in LDRs have fewer face-to-face interaction opportunities, the risk of separation, or termination of the relationship is higher than those close in proximity to one another (Krapf, 2018). Thus, if the costs of travel or dealing with the day-to-day hassles without one's partner outweigh the rewards of being together physically, couples have a higher chance of breaking up (Krapf, 2018). The time spent traveling from one household to another can be taxing on LDRs (Krapf, 2018). The perceived higher satisfaction and higher agreement between LD partners might be the result of LD couples tending to romanticize or idealize partners more than those living together or are GC due to the lack of regular face-to-face interaction (Krapf, 2018). Typically, the greater the distance between LD couples, the higher

both the physical and emotional costs will be when or if the cohabitation of a household does eventually occur (Krapf, 2018).

Although LDRs are not specific to one age group, LDRs among college students widely are reported (Aylor, 2003). In fact, it seems college-aged individuals are satisfied while in LDRs due to their use of technology for maintaining relationships while distanced (Beckmeyer, Herbenick, & Eastman-Meuller, 2021). The "ambiguity" in college-aged persons' relationships might mean different perspectives in terms of the relationship; for example, one might feel the relationship is very serious and monogamous, while the partner assumes the relationship is open and is actively dating and seeking out other partners, making distanced relationships for this age group even more complicated, while also satisfying (Beckmeyer, et al., 2021). There is a sense of "ambiguity" for those college students maintaining relationships from afar, or uncertainty, that GCRs do not experience (Beckmeyer, et al., 2021). The ambiguity present in college-aged persons' LDRs also offers an opportunity for those within the relationship to avoid problems or issues occurring, which can lead to long-term negative effects on both the LDR as well as individuals' ability to remain engaged in their college activities (Beckmeyer, et al., 2021). LDRs have a specific set of concerns associated with them that GC relationships may not. These concerns include, but not limited to, relational maintenance taking physical distance into consideration using Aylor's (2003) seven maintenance strategies: addressing separations whether they are in the past or the future, and protective buffering which occurs for those couples that do not always get to have difficult or emotional conversations face-to-face. Relational maintenance and strategies necessary to sustain romantic LDRs, or really the lack thereof the strategies, can lead to relational turbulence within relationships, which is explained using the relational turbulence theory.

**Relational Turbulence Theory**

The Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT) is an effective theory to use when examining LDRs, GCRs, and the impact of COVID-19 on relational maintenance. The model describes relational turbulence as "a transition in an interpersonal relationship or a period of discontinuity between times of relative stability, during which individuals adapt to changing roles, identities and circumstances" (Goodboy, Dillow, Knoster, & Howard, 2021, p. 1801). These transitional periods occur for romantic partners when interdependence is disrupted by changing how the partners influence one another during daily routines and activities (Goodboy, et al., 2021). Transitions also are marked by increased relational uncertainty as well as those shifts of interdependence (Jones & Theiss, 2021). RTT aims to explain how couples react during times of change, either large or small (Knobloch, Nichols, & Martingale-Adams, 2020). RTT also focuses on how relationships and couples transition from one role to the next and how certain "moments" explain just how key interpersonal communication is to understanding and predicting relationship outcomes (Soloman, Weber, Steuber, 2010, p. 117). These transitions or "moments" are what reorganizes or redefines individual identities, roles, relationships themselves, or even behaviors altering how people view both themselves as well as their specific place within relationships (Soloman et al., 2010, p. 117).

*Turbulence.* The "turbulence" according to the RTT is used to label the "tumultuous experiences that might occur within relationships in response to a transition (Soloman et al., 2010, p. 117). Relational turbulence also can be defined as occurring when relationships are in a state of "flux" or change (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021, p. 3011). For example, the metaphor of a turbulent flight is used as pilots must adjust and adapt to the conditions they are in, respectively, to safely land the plane, so those within the romantic relationships are pilots of sorts

(Soloman et al., 2010). RTT research initially attempted to investigate and understand the transitions that take place within voluntary romantic relationships or among those reintegrating to their lives before military deployment (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). Couples experiencing turbulence within their relationships benefit from support, both from their partners as well as outside the relationship in their social circles; however, during these times of turbulence, support might be hard both to give as well as receive (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). Because of this, turbulence can be detrimental to one's well-being since it can be extremely stress-inducing and can even cause depressive symptoms (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021).

*Relationship parameters*. RTT includes two relationship parameters that shape people's abilities to renavigate and renegotiate their relationships: relational uncertainty and shifting patterns of interdependence (Knobloch et al., 2020). Relational uncertainty occurs when questions and uncertainty arise regarding the future of a relationship (Knobloch, et al., 2020). Uncertainty can be heightened within relationships when roles shift, as well, causing the reward of being in the relationship to become heavier or more weighted for one of the partners as opposed to being equally distributed (Knobloch, et al., 2020). The shifting of interdependence is defined as, essentially, how much partners need one another and how that need is perceived (Knobloch et al., 2020). This is especially important in observing partners' needs for one another for successfully accomplishing daily, typical tasks (Knobloch et al., 2020). The functioning of relationships can be affected following repeated volatile, hostile, or negative interactions because turbulence increases as the negative interactions become more frequent (Jones & Theiss, 2021) and when partners perceive their needs are not being met mutually.

*Uncertainty.* RTT consists of two major propositions (Jones & Theiss, 2021). The first of these propositions states that relational turbulence involves self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty,

and lastly, relationship uncertainty (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Relational uncertainty is the lack of confidence in people's perceptions of relational involvement and is reflected in "three interrelated sources of ambiguity" (Jones & Theiss, 2021, p. 3035). Self-uncertainty is doubt in one's own involvement within a relationship, partner uncertainty is doubt regarding one's partner's involvement in a relationship, and relationship uncertainty is doubt about the relationship as a whole and its future (Jones & Theiss, 2021, p. 3035).

*Interdependence.* The second proposition of RTT is that interdependence changes during transitions (Jones & Theiss, 2021). The theory argues that partners may influence one another both intentionally as well as unintentionally through daily tasks and decisions as reactions to life's transitions (Goodboy et al., 2021). RTT assumes that partners directly influence, or at least can directly influence, each other's lives. Such influence may have positive or negative implications, however, for individual goal accomplishment. (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Interference from partners occurs when a partner disrupts the other partner's routines and/ or goals, while facilitation involves influence from a partner aiding the achievement of individual goals or routines (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Interference directly correlates with higher levels of negative emotions as well as depressive or anxious symptoms (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Interference also creates the perception that a partner is unsupportive or irritating (Jones & Theiss, 2021). An increase in interference can lead to increased avoidance, indirectness, and withdrawal from one's partner during conflict (Jones & Theiss, 2021). RTT claims that interference from partners also increases "polarized communication," which can lead to further topic avoidance (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021, p. 3014). Oppositely, facilitation can "buffer the accumulation of relational turbulence" by increasing positive emotions rather than negative ones (Jones & Theiss, 2021, p. 3036). These positive emotions and reactions can include the appraisal of a partner's support or

supportive behavior and even a perception of decreased turbulence or conflict (Jones & Theiss, 2021). When it comes to interference and facilitation, it seems interference causes turbulence in romantic relationships while facilitation might mitigate or protect couples from turbulence (Jones & Theiss, 2021).

Interference as well as facilitation in romantic relationships has the potential to be present within the context of COVID-19. As routines and norms are threatened by social distancing, forced separations, and quarantine periods, couples could be impacted as well. Goals, both individually as well as together, might have been affected by the pandemic, meaning partners have the opportunity to hinder these new goals or to aid in helping them be accomplished. For example, due to a lost job because of COVID-19, partners who were once distanced might move in together as a means of financial benefit. This would mean a shift in routines of both partners as well as a shift in goals. Partners who plan to facilitate routines and goals during transition might encourage the partner who has suffered the loss of a job to seek employment only after the pandemic and offer to aid them financially as well as emotionally until that occurs. On the other hand, a partner who interferes during this transition might be critical, causing the perception that the partner is unsupportive, which in turn, has the potential to create turbulence during a time in which the partner without a job is seeking added affection and support. Turbulence caused by relational uncertainty and increased general uncertainty as well as a shift in couples' interdependence allows typical dyadic functioning within daily routines to be undermined (Jones & Theiss, 2021). RTT argues that "conditions of relational turbulence undermine dyadic synchrony and discourage abstract thinking in ways that challenge fundamental dyadic processes, such as collaborative planning, enacting social support, and making relational inferences" (Jones & Theiss, 2021, p. 3037). The perception of just how mild or severe one's

irritating behavior is as well as relational communication are the two features that help to explain

dyadic functioning creating vulnerability to turbulence (Jones & Theiss, 2021). In terms of

relational communication, there are two types: aggressive communication and open

communication (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Aggressive communication consists of "critical, hostile,

or demanding actions" toward one's partner asserting or creating dominance (Jones & Theiss,

2021, p. 3038). Open communication takes place when partners feel information can be

exchanged freely or without restrictions about assorted topics (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Relational

uncertainty can occur in association with both an increase in avoidance and decreased openness

(Jones & Theiss, 2021). Relational uncertainty also can create bias as messages are produced and

then interpreted, which then might lead to a reluctance to seek out support when it is needed

(Jones & Theiss, 2021). RTT supplies a framework for better understanding why people may

reactive more negatively to factors during unanticipated stressful events evoking significant

change such as the pandemic "by exploring relationship characteristics and the features of

interpersonal episodes that can contribute to turmoil and upheaval in romantic relationships"

(Jones & Theiss, 2021, p. 3034)

Married couples as well as unmarried couples likely experience the effects of turbulence

(Goodboy et al., 2021). Internal turbulence, those internal issues between couples, can be

affected and even worsened due to environmental or outside changes (Goodboy et al., 2021).

Avoidance of turbulence caused within relationships by these outside factors requires couples to

acknowledge that turbulence exists and is inevitable when considering unpredictable, outside

factors (Goodboy et al., 2021). In the case turbulence occurs, couples should adapt and create

new routines as opposed to trying to maintain older, now disrupted ones (Goodboy et al., 2021).

Understanding turbulence and the impact of both internal and external turbulence on relationships aids in understanding the impact the pandemic would have on relationships.

**Relational Change during the Pandemic**

In times of crisis, such as a global pandemic, in which individual safety is threatened, partner support can also be threatened (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020) creating more turbulence. Relationships can falter without support from partners during normal or typical circumstances, so the constant support and safety from partners is especially necessary during unforeseen, daunting times such as COVID-19 (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). "Individuals have a fundamental need to belong," meaning that belonging is desired from social groups as well as romantic partners (Shufford et al., 2021, p. 2907). In-person interactions prior to the pandemic aided in supporting individual well-being, so during the pandemic when in-person connection was not available, these support systems normally taking place face-to-face were forced to adapt (Shufford et al., 2021). The toll that physical health has taken, across the globe, throughout the pandemic has been devastating, but the physiological and psychological tolls that individual health have taken might have been even more calamitous (Maiti et al., 2020).

The WHO explicitly recommended that throughout the pandemic, individuals should try to maintain their normal routines and patterns as much as possible as they were prior to COVID-19 to maintain mental and physical health (Goodboy et al., 2021). General psychological distress increased intensely throughout the pandemic (Sachser, Olaru, Pfeiffer, Brähler, Clemens, Rassenhoffer, Witt, Fegert, 2021). The risk factors associated with the deterioration or downfall of psychological health included younger age, living with, or caring for children, lower income, and employment status (Sachser et al., 2021). Depression and depressive symptoms were more common during COVID-19 among those who had a lower socio-economic categorization as well

as those who had pre-existing mental or physical health conditions (Sachser et al., 2021). Also, those who did not consider themselves to have strong, available social support also were more likely to feel their mental health take a negative turn during the pandemic (Sachser et al., 2021).

The college-aged population especially is impacted by the stresses of COVID-19 (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). Young adults, aged 18-30, report the highest levels of psychological distress throughout the pandemic, including a rise in depression and anxiety, as well as overall stress (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). Higher education and the pressure of maintaining grades as well as social lives are the main contributors to the psychological toll taken on this population (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). Social media also is found to be especially distressing during the pandemic for young adults (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). Although most college-aged individuals returned home to their families when the pandemic hit, not all did, creating separation and isolation felt across the globe by those unable to do the same (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021).

Since face-to-face interactions were essentially halted for any outside of one's immediate family or household, communication and those who wished to maintain communication with friends and family living elsewhere also was forced to adapt to the changing times (Shufford et al., 2021). The development of that interpersonal connection and closeness, as well as sexual intimacy, was found to be possible through computer and telephone-mediated communication strategies during COVID-19, however, creating those connections as well as maintaining them was a bit more difficult this way (Shufford et al., 2021). Relationships faced with these shifts in normalcy were forced to either adapt or suffer resulting from the pandemic.

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Romantic Relationships**

Global pandemics like COVID-19 can be described as "discrete" and "disruptive," of course due to the unprecedented nature of their development, but also because these types of events directly influence relational uncertainty by challenging the perceptions couples have of their relational closeness (Lillie et al., 2021, p. 1847).

> The loss, isolation and separation accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic represent significant challenges for couples' relationships, interfering with adaptive relationship processes (e.g., increasing hostility, withdrawal), and risking relationship distress. (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, p. 10)

The pandemic has, very clearly, brought on increased levels of stress among individuals, which then directly impacts individuals in relationships when those stressors spill over to their partners, becoming the partner's stressors now as well (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Uncertainty during the pandemic regarding relationship involvement is prevalent because individuals are concerned that, rather than separation, increased exposure to their partners might cause their partners to grow tired of them (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Couples are also concerned about whether the increased amount of time spent together will allow for the relationship to survive this extremely unique and unforeseen set of circumstances (Jones & Theiss, 2021).

COVID-19-related stressors are negatively linked to relational quality and positively related to levels of romantic partner conflict as well (Johnson, Bostwick, Morissey, 2021). The heightening of stress during the pandemic was extremely harmful to dyadic functioning between partners in romantic relationships because partners' goals, as well as their individual routines, were disrupted since both parties were confined to a shared living space, that is, at least for those couples who did cohabit (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Interference of these routines and norms

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became unavoidable during the COVID-19 lockdown while couples shared living spaces as well as workspaces, dealt with changes in childcare, and adapted to a new lack of alone time (Jones & Theiss, 2021). On the other hand, those couples that reported more facilitation as opposed to interference became those who are much more likely to have established new expectations for the new household norms as opposed to attempting to maintain those they had prior to the beginning of the pandemic (Jones & Theiss, 2021). These new norms included the sharing of household tasks or chores, sharing the responsibilities of childcare when applicable, and recognizing and responding to the need for personal space or alone time (Jones & Theiss, 2021). During a pandemic, some factors having the potential to create "disharmony" include anxiety among one or both partners, faulty or ineffective communication patterns, partners suffering from psychological disorders, an overload at work, couples already considered to be "on the verge" of a broken relationship, couples who live apart or stay separated, unrealistic expectations, and a job loss or salary cut (Maiti et al., 2020).

The vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model explains that couples who consider themselves to already be vulnerable in some ways are those who are even more at risk or vulnerable during unprecedented circumstances, like the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). These markers of vulnerability can include social class, minority status, or even a specific stage of life (Pietromonaco & Monaco, 2020). COVID-19-related stressors such as the number of lives affected, the severity of the illness or symptoms, as well as enduring vulnerabilities, such as mental health or one's personality, also can increase vulnerability within relationships (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). These types of vulnerabilities contribute to the dyadic processes that are essential for maintaining quality of relationships, like hostility, withdrawal, and poor support (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). It was also found that those with children

were more likely to suffer from relationship problems as caused by pandemic-related stress and were less likely to be able both to create and maintain a healthy, stable home environment during COVID-19 (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

Attachment anxiety among romantic partners also is most likely a pre-existing vulnerability that only revealed itself when couples were confined in quarantine during the pandemic (Overall et al., 2021). Those partners who were found to be higher in attachment insecurity were those who also experienced more negative emotions, were more likely to seek out reassurance or support from others in strange or counterproductive ways, and those who are difficult or impossible to comfort when in stressful situations (Overall et al., 2021). Relationship quality also was shown to suffer among those who had higher attachment avoidance even prior to COVID-19 (Overall et al., 2021). Persons higher in avoidance as well as anxiety are more likely to disrupt proper relationship functioning throughout the pandemic because they have more adverse or unexpected reactions during stressful or chaotic situations (Overall et al., 2021). Other pre-existing vulnerabilities like attachment security or insecurity, depression, strategies used to regulate emotions, as well as neuroticism can hinder adaptation within romantic relationships as well (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Attachment insecurity during the pandemic can stem from attachment, or the lack thereof, within workplaces, families, or partners that do not share a household (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Since attachment potentially is threatened during unprecedented circumstances like a global pandemic, the seeking of excessive support or reassurance from one partner to another can cause extreme dissonance and conflict within a relationship (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Seeking support when attachment is threatened also can cause increased avoidance, especially among those who consider themselves to be personally threatened, such as by the looming COVID-19 (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

The degree to which COVID-19 and the culture shift during a pandemic has the potential to either harm or strengthen relationship stability (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). The quality of a relationship under these constraints depends on several factors, the first of which is the severity of what exactly each couple faces (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Couples can face major financial losses, the loss of dependable childcare, or job loss as well the added stress that is, generally, uncertainty and the fear of what is to come (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Another factor is that of pandemic-triggered stress and how that stress occurs resulting from and in connection with those pre-existing vulnerabilities discussed previously among couples who are struggling to maintain relational stability even prior to COVID-19 (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). The losses felt by these couples might carry more weight than those who were not as vulnerable before the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). In predicting how successful a relationship will be, the analysis of the vulnerabilities both prior to and during the pandemic is crucial (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020).

Stressors occurring outside of a romantic relationship, such as work-related stress or financial stress, are much more likely to affect relationship quality over time because these types of stressors increase one or both partners' criticism of one another, which can lead to increased blaming, or eventually unresponsiveness or withdrawal altogether from one another (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). This also has the potential to create a situation in which one partner appears to be "needy" to the other, exacerbating the stress (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, p.4). Relationships measured both before and during the pandemic were shown to decline during the pandemic regardless of employment or work-related shifts (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Also, couples only mildly affected, if at all, by economic loss during the pandemic saw quarantine and confinement with their partners as a means of spending more time together and as

pleasant time in which enjoyable activities could be done together, simultaneously promoting

relationship growth and stability (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). These couples who viewed

pandemic quarantine as a positive were those who also have ample access to technology so that

communication with those outside of their household was effortless (Pietromonaco & Overall,

2021).

The long-term effects of unprecedented effects on couples, such as the pandemic, are not

commonly researched in terms of how marriage or divorce rates are impacted (Pietromonaco &

Overall, 2020). As far as short-term effects in previous research, natural disasters like Hurricane

Hugo and terrorist attacks like both 9/11 and the Oklahoma City Bombing of 1995, marriage and

divorce rates differed. Following Hurricane Hugo, divorce, marriage, and birth rates all increased

briefly, then returned to their pre-disaster levels (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Following both

9/11 and the Oklahoma City Bombing, divorce rates immediately declined, but then returned to

pre-disaster rates as well (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). The terrorist attacks, specifically 9/11

which resulted in just about 3,000 deaths, created very widespread panic as well as uncertainty

and fear surrounding what the future would hold, which caused people to draw closer to one

another to fulfill that need for security, safety, and support (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

Following Hurricane Hugo, the effects of the hurricane itself and the communities it impacted

took much longer to rebuild than 9/11 did, although 9/11 resulted in far more casualties, which

caused more long-term, if not chronic stress on relationships that had to rebuild as well

(Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Health crises, like COVID-19, natural disasters, and acts of

both war and terrorism can lead to economic recessions, which then means loss in multiple forms

for those impacted (Karantzas et al., 2021).

Sexual intimacy and connection are threatened by the pandemic as well, especially for those who are single and not in long-term romantic relationships that were unable to quarantine with their partners, or who did not have partners at all (Rubinsky et al., 2021). Sexual text messages, otherwise known as "sexting" and the exchanging of sexual images were used often to manage the distance (Rubinsky et al., 2021). Sexting and other types of digital intimacy are not the norm or dominant form of intimacy but have become part of the "reinvention" of intimacy as called for by Covid-19 (Rubinsky et al., 2021., p.5). Although digital intimacy has become more prominent as caused by the pandemic, conflict developed between partners resulting from COVID-19 has reduced the prevalence of sexual activity between partners whether distant or geographically close (Rubinsky et al., 2021).

Conflict resulting from COVID-19, increased by 34% in romantic relationships (Rubinsky et al., 2021). As conflict increased, the quality of relationships throughout the pandemic decreased (Jones & Theiss, 2021). During the disruption of routines, tension between partners arises, which then leads to decreased relationship quality as well as greater relationship turbulence because the pandemic caused major relational transitions calling the stability of the relationships into question (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Arguments as well as discussions surrounding COVID-19-related content have the potential to lead to greater general familial conflict as well as tensions within the family (Johnson et al., 2021). Those who considered their partners to be highly responsive during conflict were less likely to experience stressors related to COVID-19 that could damage relationship satisfaction and cause conflict (Johnson et al., 2021). Also, aspects of conflict between romantic partners decreased throughout the pandemic such as disagreements and verbal fights (Johnson et al., 2021). As relationships experienced numerous

changes and shifts to adapt to the evolving times, coping mechanisms were developed within these relationships to face future stressors and further changes.

**Coping with Pandemic-related Relationship Issues/Stress**

Although the quality of relationships during unprecedented or unforeseen circumstances can be affected dramatically and negatively, relational quality may increase (Rubinsky et al., 2021). Intimacy is shown to increase among those couples who quarantined together or who were confined at home for longer periods of time, which could in turn expand feelings of connection and closeness among romantic partners (Rubinsky et al., 2021). Other factors that can improve or maintain relationships during stressful times, like COVID-19, include more physical exercise, androgynous sex roles or shifting roles within the household, increased trust, and respect, the avoiding of over-indulgence, and couples' therapy (Maiti et al., 2020). Those in relationships claiming their partners were coping with the pandemic well reported low relational conflict, which then showed increased relational satisfaction and decreased partner blaming (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Essentially, those couples engaging in dyad maintenance within their relationships during times of increased stress benefit immensely, especially from mutual support (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Also, social support from family members was shown to be an especially "protective" factor against the harmful emotional and psychological effects the pandemic might have (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021).

**Summary**

The research regarding relational turbulence in times of crisis exists, however that research has yet to include adequate evidence of just how RTT applies to couples and long-term relationships during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. In the literature, not having had a global pandemic prior to COVID-19 to base research on, the outcomes of relationships following

the changes COVID-19 has brought is yet to be known; however future research might use what exists currently regarding LDRs, relationship maintenance strategies, and both internal and external stressors. From the existing literature, I concluded first that relationships must become intimate, both physically and emotionally to further develop. From there, the literature explained that even when progression using emotional and physical intimacy is taking place, relational change is inevitable, which then leads to the relationship becoming either long-term or short-term. Relationships also are characterized as being communal or not, essentially meaning dyadic change takes place for both relationship partners to experience satisfaction. Following the discussion of communal relationships, the literature then expressed definitions and traits of high-quality relationships and what sets those apart from others. In exploring what creates a relationship of high-quality, I then found within the literature what defines a stressful relationship and what external factors induce chaos or stressful situations within relationships, high-functioning or otherwise. In analyzing relationship stress, one must also understand support gaps and how they might influence a relationship's reported level of stress as well as distance. Distance is a key component throughout the literature. LDRs as well as long-term relationships then are defined to better show the role of distance in relational stress. Then, attachment theory as well as relational maintenance are explained in connection with LDRs, as the processes and strategies for both attachment theory as well as relational maintenance differ for those in geographically distant relationships. In preparation to later discuss the impact of COVID-19 on distanced relationships, the Relational Turbulence Model (RTT) then was discussed in connection with routines in relationships, interdependence, and relational uncertainty. The RTT is essential for understanding and explaining the impact the pandemic would have on relationships, although the long-term effects have yet to be decided. COVID-19 brought on

unanticipated changes to all aspects of life including romantic relationships. The forced separation of couples was unexpected as was the loss that the couples experienced together, but also individually. Coping with the consequences of forced separation as well as loss created stressors that were as unexpected as the pandemic itself. The college-aged population maintaining or attempting to maintain romantic relationships was impacted as well. Lastly, as I have said previously, the literature regarding the long-term effects of COVID-19 on all aspects of life is yet to be decided as the pandemic continues to impact daily life, so the long-term impacts of the pandemic on romantic relationships that have endured or survived its wrath and new studies emerge daily.

The purpose of this proposed study is to analyze long-distance relationships that existed prior to the onset of the pandemic to discover changes, if any, that occurred as the pandemic progressed. This proposed study might also offer findings that will aid in discovering whether relationships experienced greater stress and turbulence, how they were maintained communicatively to continue attachment, and progressed in specific ways resulting from social-distancing as well as other aspects of pandemic-culture, including these "new normals" created due to their being forced to adapt within unprecedented, unexpected situations. The following research questions are raised in the study:

RQ1: How has the pandemic created new daily hassles and stressors and impacted the overall relationship quality for persons in LD relationships?

RQ2: How are intimacy and partner attachment established and maintained by persons in LD relationships during COVID-19?

RQ3: How do persons describe the presence or absence of protective buffering and relational turbulence in their LD relationships during the pandemic?

In the following section, the methodology of the proposed study including participants as well as procedures for the study are discussed.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Method

**Participants**

To answer my research questions, nine individuals were interviewed. Recruitment criteria for participating in this study, one must be at least 18 years of age and involved in a romantic, long-distanced, long-term relationship established prior to the beginning of the pandemic and currently ongoing. Only one person in the relationship was interviewed. One individual from these LD relationships was interviewed rather than both as participants were recruited from the University of Arkansas. In the case of LD relationships, the participants' partners attended college elsewhere. Participants were recruited from University of Arkansas undergraduate Communication classes and offered extra credit for their participation. College-aged individuals were appropriate for the study because young adults, aged 18-30, report the highest levels of psychological distress throughout the pandemic, including a rise in depression and anxiety, as well as overall stress (Worley & Mucci-Ferris, 2021). This physiological stress affected romantic relationships.

**Procedure**

Upon receipt of approval by the University Institutional Review Board, prospective participants were notified by professors and instructors about the opportunity for their participation in the study. Persons meeting the criteria for participation were notified by the researcher to schedule a time for the interview. Participants first provided written consent prior to the data collection process. Upon gaining their consent, one-on-one interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interview questions were developed for the use in this study to identify relational maintenance strategies, ways partners manage their attachments, and from an adaptation of the

instrument used to examine dimensions of relational turbulence (Brisini & Soloman, 2017). The modification of this instrument was used to examine self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, relationship uncertainty, interference from partners, facilitation from partners. Specific questions also were created regarding coping, stress, and distance within relationships during the pandemic (see Appendix C).

After completing nine one-on-one interviews via Zoom with willing participants recruited through the University of Arkansas, then the data transcribed in Zoom.  The raw data then were separated according to the parts addressing each of the research questions, copied and pasted into separate documents. This process was repeated for each of the research questions. At the top of each document was the corresponding research. The data then were coded identifying similarities and to create connections, as well as to discover differences. (see Appendix C). After creating a cohesive document including each participant's responses to each interview question, similarities and differences were discovered and noted utilizing a color-coded system. The similarities and differences included, but not limited to, new hassles and stressors as caused by COVID-19, turbulence, progression, digression, digital intimacy, healthy or unhealthy attachment, protective buffering instances, disruptions to typical relationship functioning, and so forth.

This process was conducted by first reading through the transcriptions for each research question. The data then were re-read with notes taken for recognizing commonalities in responses and to aid in recalling particularly strong examples of the general themes. If more than two responses contained similar themes, such as mental health effects, digital communication, etc., those were noted to the side. During the third read-through, similarities between responses were sought. During this read-through, these common themes were color-coded. In color-coding the similarities within the data, they became much easier to place into certain themes that arose.

During the final read-through, thematic phrasing also was created to sort the color-coded data to draw conclusions. For example, the theme of adaptability arose from phrasing participants used when explaining how digital communication occurred where face-to-face communication might have been preferred.

Phrases such as "we put time aside to call each other every night," became a marker of adaptability. The label 'adaptability' came to mind as more and more responses began to show that LD couples and these participants were forced to create new ways of communicating to adapt to the pandemic as well as new ways of creating intimacy, among other things. The second theme became resilience. Resilience was marked in participants' responses by "we didn't know anything else," or "it made us stronger." The label 'resilience' was developed to imply strength in facing the unknown, or in the case of LD couples, a rather known experience that was separation. The third theme utilized was trust. Trust was found within the responses when participants explained that they had school or work-related responsibilities during the day, and their partners had the same, causing them not to be able to communicate for extended periods of time. Trust here was shown when participants would claim these instances were "normal." The label 'trust' entails security and confidence in the relationship, even while apart. The final theme noted here is that of turbulence. Turbulence could have been marked by many things within the data, but here it was marked by phrases such as "financial burden" and "busy," implying perhaps one partner is feeling more of the negative weight of the LD relationship, the pandemic, or both.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Results

Research Question one asked how the pandemic has created new daily hassles or stressors and impacted the overall relationship quality for persons in LD relationships. For adequate responses, the participants were asked a series of questions regarding what stressors and daily hassles they faced while in LD relationships prior to the onset of COVID-19. Here, participants expressed conflicting schedules, career requirements, college classes, even being in time zones, affected their ability to regularly communicate oftentimes (see Table 1). Travelling to see LD partners was identified as a common stressor within LD relationships prior to COVID-19. Understanding these stressors and hassles existing prior to the onset of the global pandemic was important for allowing participants to express the new stressors and hassles COVID-19 created within their LD relationships. COVID-19 caused widespread travel restrictions and even travel bans internationally. When asked if these new stressors were problematic when attempting to make plans to see one's partner, five participants claimed this was a negative aspect of the pandemic, while others expressed their positive feelings toward the travel restrictions as it caused their partners to be closer to them geographically than their hometowns. Thus, it was easier for them to visit their partners than to go home. One participant also explained that travel costs were far lower than prior to the pandemic, making the LD travel much easier to accommodate.

Participants also claimed to have increased levels of anxiety resulting from the pandemic. When asked what stressors outside of their romantic relationships were affected by COVID-19, job stress was the most common response while the adaptation to virtual jobs and virtual schooling were also found in four interviews to be a stressor. Three participants expressed their

stress and unhappiness toward other stressors including cancelled plans within their social lives as well such as proms, sporting events, and other milestones. To cope with stressors participants might normally have been able to tackle with their partners, they were unable to do so due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked how they adapted and coped with stressors under these circumstances, seven of them claimed to be extremely comfortable utilizing FaceTime and remaining in communication while texting.

Turbulence was explained to participants as "chaos, stress, or any sort of disruption" within their romantic relationship. After defining turbulence, participants were asked if COVID-19 caused any turbulence within their LD relationships and if so, how. Three claimed that having to have conversations that would have been best to have face-to-face occurred via FaceTime instead, or through phone calls, or text. One participant said that when conflicts or arguments ensued, confronting, and discussing issues with their LD partners over the phone caused arguments to last longer due to the lack of body language or physical touch available to mend the situation. Participants were asked if they felt their relationships had *more* turbulence resulting from the pandemic than they did prior—six participants claimed COVID-19 did not cause increased levels of turbulence within their relationships. Lastly when aiming to address the impact of COVID-19 on daily hassles and stressors of LD relationships and the pandemic's overall impact on relationship quality, participants were asked if they felt their relationships either progressed or digressed resulting from the pandemic. Seven of the nine interviewed expressed their relationships either progressed or did not change due to the pandemic. Three participants stated that the prolonged separation contributed to the progression of their own self-growth experienced throughout the pandemic. Three participants also claimed they would not be in their relationships at all had it not been for COVID-19 (see Table 2).

Research Question two asked participants how both their intimacy and partner attachment are established and maintained by persons in LD relationships. To effectively answer this question, participants were asked two further questions. The first of these implored how participants engage in intimacy during times of separation, when they are together, and whether they feel they and their partners have a healthy attachment style. While apart, most participants claimed to engage in the exchanging of images via text message or Snapchat. Participants implied these images were sexual in nature, but one also exchanged images that were not. Remaining in constant contact with their partners also was widely reported for maintaining emotional intimacy and connection while apart using text messages. While together, participants expressed that they engage in physical intimacy to accommodate for the extended periods apart when physical intimacy is not possible. Six of the nine participants claimed to have a healthy attachment style, meaning they do not have feelings of jealousy or feel that they must be speaking to their partners consistently, even when separated. They attributed the healthy attachment also to having activities, hobbies, and commitments to keep them busy while apart. One participant explained that while the partner has a healthy attachment style, the participant did not due to increased stress over the course of the pandemic and the feelings of insecurity it has created.

The next question participants regarded maintenance strategies used while separated. More specifically, participants were asked in what ways they maintain their relationships with their partners while apart. Digital communication, specifically FaceTime, was the most common response here. Four participants expressed that they created a sort of "date night" utilizing FaceTime to feel togetherness like they might otherwise have been able to if they were geographically closer. Four participants also said that watching the same movies or listening to

the same music playlists while separated aided in maintaining their relationships. Two participants discussed how planning for future meetings or reunions helped to pass time and to maintain feelings of positivity while in their LD relationships. "Counting down the days" appeared to be a common theme as well.

Research Question three asked how participants describe the presence or absence of protective buffering and relational turbulence in their LD relationships. Participants were asked two questions to offer greater insights in response to the research question. The first of these asked if participants feel they have ever withheld information from their partners as a means of preventing conflict or stress for them, and if so, to describe the instance. One participant explained that financial differences and stressors in their personal life became something they did not express to their partner, while another said work-related stresses and approaching deadlines for graduate school were withheld from their partner to not cause the same burden for them. Seven participants recalled instances in which they experienced advances from someone other than their partners—a flirtation, texting others, and even in one instance, a physical advance, that they withheld from their partners. One participant who experienced a situation like this said they withheld the instance or the details of the instance from their partner due to the partner's feelings of jealousy and possessiveness in the past when similar instances occurred. Participants explained that due to the distance between themselves and their partners, the disclosure of situations like these would only cause their partners stress, anger, or sadness (see Table 4).

The last supplemental question focused on research question three was in the form of a six-point scale from a Brosini and Soloman (2017) study to assess relational turbulence. The first of the four sub-scales asked for participants to rate their relationships from one to six, one being

"stable," and six being "chaotic." The second of the sub-scales asked participants to rate their relationships, one being "calm," six being "turbulent," based on the definition of turbulence given previously in the interview. The third sub-scale asked participants to rate their relationships, one being "running smoothly," six being "tumultuous." The fourth and final sub-scale asked participants to rate their relationships, one being "peaceful," six being "stressful." Overall, all participants rated their relationships on average a two when asked to rate them according to the second sub-scale, one being "calm," six being "turbulent." The highest ratings occurred when asked on the fourth scale, one being "peaceful," six being "stressful." Five of the participants gave their relationships a three or above for this scale, implying a stable relationship does not always entail a relationship without stress.

The findings display similarities, but also differences. Couples who remained in steady, consistent communication were not void of engaging in protective buffering behaviors, which might differ from the assumption that simply because communication remained constant, that partners share all in LD relationships. The presence of digital communication, specifically FaceTime, Snapchat, and texting, was common among most participants' responses as well. It appears from the data digital communication was necessary to maintain relationships when separated within LD relationships with both sexual content and content that was not sexual in nature. Living in a global pandemic created general turbulence, however most participants did not feel that COVID-19 created more turbulence within their relationships, but rather, they saw benefits from the impact of the pandemic or did not notice a change at all.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**Discussion**

The intention of this study was to determine whether relational turbulence occurred within LDRs following a global pandemic and how relationship maintenance occurred while facing unprecedented changes. Romantic relationships, especially those that are LD, commonly lack examination in previous studies in conjunction with COVID-19, especially when attempting to discover how LD couples coped with unprecedented circumstances in the form of a global pandemic. Past studies also fail to address how RTT explains relationship maintenance for couples living during the pandemic, specifically in adults ages 18-30. No published research reflects the incorporation of elements of COVID-19, LDRs, RTT, coping, as well as the age group of 18-30 all within one study. That is what this study aimed to accomplish.

**Summary of Findings and Implications**

New daily hassles and stressors were expected within LD relationships resulting from the pandemic. Persons' mental health quality was affected, according to participants' responses, but not always negatively. The lack of a social support group could have contributed to participants' mental health declines during COVID-19 and periods of separation from their partners according to Sechser and colleagues (2021). One participant claimed that the physical distance from their social group caused a "fizzle out" effect, which then led to a lack of social support when separated from their partner. However, in terms of mental health progressing, one participant claimed their mental health improved resulting from having more time to focus on self-growth and engaging in activities that they enjoyed. This information implies that the pandemic was not viewed as a completely negative situation for all circumstances. Although the looming threat of an extremely transmissible illness was anxiety-inducing, it seems having time away from school

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and work-related responsibilities might have offered benefits for improved mental health. It also implies, though, that the presence or lack of a social support group while quarantined alone or with a partner can be essential to those who view that as significant. Those who suffered from the absence of social events and those forced to miss important social milestones might have suffered more from the lack of a support system while living through the pandemic.

In addressing relational turbulence within LD relationships, existing literature stated that with the disruption of routines caused by the pandemic, couples were likely to face increased turbulence resulting from decreased stability as well as decreased relationship quality (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Within the results of this study, most participants interviewed expressed that, in fact, relational turbulence did not increase with the onset of the pandemic at all. Some participants even claimed the pandemic allowed more time to establish emotional connection with their partners as well as increased availability to communicate. Pietromonaco & Overall (2021) state that couples indicating there were benefits felt within their relationships due to COVID-19 was primarily because those couples reporting positive feelings were also those who had ample access to technology to consistently communicate. Although one might assume that relational turbulence was extremely likely to occur because of COVID-19, one may conclude that LD couples were more resilient to these changes and felt as though the pandemic was a time of connectivity as opposed to separation, as they are accustomed to experiencing.

Attachment style additionally was addressed both within existing literature as well as the present study. Participants were asked whether they felt they and their partners believe they had a healthy attachment style. While most participants claimed to experience healthy attachment within their LD relationships, two participants did not. One expressed their attachment insecurity with their partner due to having a detached relationship with their father, allowing for their past

experiences to potentially hinder their romantic progression. Pietromonaco and Overall (2021) explain that this attachment insecurity during the pandemic was common and can directly result from insecurity or a lack of attachment within one's family. Another participant felt that their attachment to their partner could at times seem unhealthy because of past failed romantic relationships, considered to be a pre-existing vulnerability (Overall et al., 2021). This might imply that attachment insecurity and unhealthy attachment styles are not to blame solely on the pandemic or one's romantic partner, but instead can exist in connection with both past and individual experiences as well as unprecedented circumstances, such as a global pandemic.

LD couples are familiar with extended periods of separation or using digital communication to maintain relationships while apart. Phone calls, text messaging and "sexting," or the exchange of sexual images between partners managed periods of distance among LD couples (Rubinsky et al., 2021). This was true for the participants of this study whereas most claimed to regularly exchange sexual images as a means of maintaining physical intimacy while they were unable to be physically close. The exchanging of sexual images via text message or Snapchat, although physical in nature, might also imply an emotional connection. Those partners who feel affection through physical touch might find the exchange of sexual images as a means of doing so while distanced, at least in makeshift way. One participant explained that these exchanges take place to feel close to their partner, especially when that partner typically feels that physical touch is their preferred means of feeling affection. After couples were reunited following an extended period of distance or separation, they were able to account for the lack of physical intimacy while apart and most expressed that physical intimacy occurred while reunited. Aylor (2003) presents seven strategies for relational maintenance, one of which being using face-

to-face time wisely by which physical affection resumes as well as other needs not met while separated.

When in durations of time separated, LD couples also had to create ways in which to maintain their relationships. While phone calls, FaceTime, and the exchange of images were effective, couples also turned to Netflix to watch movies together replicating a sort of 'date night,' while others listened to playlists together and connected through music. Aylor (2003) argues couples must create alternative ways of communicating while separated to maintain their relationships, which these couples were able to do. This might mean that for sustaining stability and a sense of romantic connection while distanced, couples do not necessarily have to feel physical affection to maintain their relationships, but alternative means of connecting, such as date nights from afar, are effective as a means of maintaining closeness and intimacy (see Table 3).

In addressing relational turbulence within LD relationships, existing literature states that with the disruption of routines caused by the pandemic, couples were likely to face increased turbulence resulting from decreased stability as well as decreased relationship quality (Jones & Theiss, 2021). Within the results of the present study, most participants interviewed expressed that, in fact, relational turbulence did not increase with the onset of the pandemic at all. A portion of the participants even claimed the pandemic allowed more time to establish emotional connection with their partners as well as increased availability to communicate.

Within the literature, LD couples often are studied within military relationships. One participant in this study is married and their spouse serves in the United States Army. In addressing protective buffering, military spouses typically indicate they do not to feel able to disclose information to their partners regarding negative feelings felt toward deployment or the

separation it causes (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Protective buffering, which most participants in this study claimed to have experienced within their LD relationships, originally was viewed to primarily exist within military relationships (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Among the participants who claimed to have engaged in protective buffering in their LD relationships, which in this study was most, participants revealed not wishing to disclose information regarding interactions or flirtations their partners might have perceived as negative, as Joseph and Afifi (2010) suggested, although only one participant was in a military relationship. This might mean that couples, LD, or military, might be more likely to engage in protective buffering so as not to add a burden to their partner's existing stressors while apart.

Existing theories regarding relational turbulence and relational maintenance strategies seem to fall short when it comes to adequately explaining the adaptability among LD couples and their coping strategies during the pandemic. Relational turbulence is defined as "a transition in an interpersonal relationship or a period of discontinuity between times of relative stability, during which individuals adapt to changing roles, identities and circumstances" (Goodboy et al., 2021, p. 1801). RTT thus far does not address distanced couples whatsoever. Instead of roles changing among participants interviewed for this study, it seems that roles remained the same due to the pandemic, however adaptation was taking place. Turbulence is explained as being something relatively negative, when really within the findings of this study, the turbulence researchers felt COVID-19 would bring in fact progression of romantic LD relationships. In terms of relational maintenance, Aylor (2003) argues that forming new ways to communicate is a maintenance strategy specific to LD couples, which remains true within these findings. FaceTime and other forms of digital communication were prevalent, perhaps meaning a new theory could be developed in which digital communication as a means of relational maintenance

is the primary focus. This theory might first define digital communication and attempt to explain the benefits of digital communication within LD relationships. LD couples have strategies they engage in to maintain their relationships while distanced that they developed prior to the onset of the pandemic, which seemed to remain effective during the pandemic. This shows resilience among these couples in that they were able to develop and utilize relational maintenance strategies that showed themselves to be effective under unprecedented circumstances as well as usual periods of distance couples experienced prior to COVID-19. One of these relational maintenance strategies is, in fact, protective buffering. Nearly all participants claimed to have engaged in protective buffering within their LD relationships as a means of preventing stress or conflict, thus making it a strategy in itself.

Overall, LDRs appear to be more resilient than prior literature might have led researchers to believe when faced with a global pandemic in terms of maintaining their relationships experiencing relational turbulence. It seems that LDRs, especially those relationships existing prior to the onset of COVID-19, had faced extended periods of distance regularly, so the distance is not what contributed to the turbulence, if any turbulence was reported. Most participants of the nine interviewed claimed that their relationships were not impacted by added turbulence because of the pandemic, but rather, they progressed resulting from efforts to maintain their relationships as COVID-19 raged on. Participants also claimed to feel stress within their relationships overall, as portrayed through the Brosini and Soloman (2017) scale used during interviews, however while they felt that stress, they all claimed their relationships were relatively calm and stable. This implies that the added stressors COVID-19 may have caused them not to impact their romantic LDRs to the extent past research might have predicted in terms of turbulence.

**Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

This study has its limitations as all studies do. The limitations or weaknesses of this study relate to the size and demographics of the sample, time constraints, and lack existing literature upon which to draw concerning unprecedented health crises. The first of these limitations regards the sample size of the participants interviewed. Due to time constraints, the researcher conducted only nine interviews. However, saturation was reached in themes identified in the responses midway through the interviews that did occur. Had more time been available, further interviews could have occurred allowing for more responses as well as a more diverse participant pool. Only two of the nine participants were male, while the other seven were female, creating a bit of an imbalance. While all participants fell within the 18-30 age range, one participant of the nine was married, while the others were in long-term dating relationships. The responses from the married participant greatly varied from those of the other participants engaged in long-term dating relationships.

The second limitation noted for this study is about the time constraints and delays experienced. Following the development of research questions with subsequent interview questions, the interview questions were sent to the Internal Review Board (IRB) for approval. The approval of the interview was delayed by IRB, which in turn caused a delay in beginning the recruitment process for participants and the eventual interview process. Upon receiving approval to begin interviews, time was of the essence. Interviews occurred over the span of two weeks, which left little available time to recruit more participants and conduct further interviews. Had approval occurred in a timelier manner, interviews would have happened earlier allowing for a larger and more diverse sample.

A third limitation for this study was the decision to only interview one individual within the LD couples of which participants were members. Having only one perspective of the relationship within the interviews significantly limits the findings and does not give a full overview of the LD relationship as a whole. Initially, only one member of the relationship was to be interviewed due to the distance between them and their partner, however since the interviews were conducted via Zoom, both members of the relationship could have easily been interviewed.

The final limitation regards existing research utilized within the literature review. COVID-19, first reported in the United States just over two years ago, make it difficult to uncover peer-reviewed, scholarly research on the topic. Research on the topic began in June of 2021 for the present study, meaning just one year and three months following the initial onset of the pandemic in March of 2020. This timeline created problems finding relevant research regarding COVID-19 in relation to the topics discussed within this study. It was especially challenging uncovering research regarding the pandemic and its long-term effects on relationships considering the pandemic is ongoing.

A major strength of this study was identifying protective buffering as a maintenance strategy within LD relationships. In withholding information from one's partner to avoid conflict, protective buffering is a way in which couples maintain their relationships. Considering most participants claimed their relationships did not see the effects of increased turbulence during the pandemic, perhaps that implies protective buffering contributed to that finding in either a minor or major way. This study examined how LD couples engaged in maintenance behaviors, intimacy, and the presence or lack of protective buffering within their relationships as well as how stressors that existed within their relationships prior to COVID-19 changed, if at all, resulting from the pandemic. The findings of this study primarily included information that did

not support past research regarding a combination of these issues, however published research incorporating all topics discussed in this study in connection with one another did not exist prior to the completion of this study. The most important strength of the present study is that it adds to the existing literature examining these aspects of relational maintenance in the context of LDRs as well as the conversation of just to what extent the pandemic has impacted those relationships.

RTT assumes that flux and shifts create negative outcomes within relationships, but persons in LD relationships interviewed for this study showed that this might not always be the case. In fact, it seems there is a strong connection between LD relationships and a positive outlook toward relational turbulence, which differs from existing research. Living during a global health crisis, one would imagine that external turbulence would create internal turbulence within these relationships. It seems the resilience of LD couples, even in unprecedented circumstances, is evident. Their resilience is defined by their adaptability and willingness to engage in relational maintenance strategies, some that may differ from those utilized in GC relationships perhaps.

**Future Directions**

This study aimed to create connections between COVID-19, Relational Turbulence Theory, and long-distance, long-term relationships. The goal was to discover how couples engaging in LDRs coped with added stressors and turbulence while living in a global pandemic.

Future research should explore the existence of turbulence within GC relationships in contrast to those that are LD. This might be helpful to future research in that it would offer an insight into how couples who quarantined together during the pandemic were able to cope with turbulence caused by the pandemic, if any, to distinguish strategies used to do so. This could potentially aid GC couples in the future in maintaining their relationships through another pandemic if one were

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to ever occur. While this study addressed these coping mechanisms and strategies LD couples might continue to use, those for GC couples remain unknown. Seeing the resilience of LDRs within COVID-19 culture has sparked an interest to further the research and discover how the pandemic has impacted not only GC relationships, but also relationships that have failed resulting from COVID-19, whether they were GC or LD.

In attempting to explain how the pandemic has created new daily hassles and stressors within LD relationships as well as impacted their overall relationship quality, the findings show that conflicting schedules and finding mutual time to communicate throughout the day was a common problem prior to the pandemic, while during COVID-19, LD couples found that it allowed for more time to communicate and to connect emotionally with their partners. Findings also showed that participants view their relationships progressed resulting from the pandemic as opposed to digressing or failing entirely. Intentional communication is essential—the idea of setting aside time for one's partner, especially while distanced. Within GC relationships, although not found here, more time spent developing and maintaining emotional connection between partners might prove to be beneficial as it was for LD couples. Perhaps GC couples assume time spent 'connecting' is unnecessary due to their close geographical proximity, when really, emotional connection and closeness must be intentional and desired by both partners to develop. Emotional connection can be established and maintained even at a distance, as shown by this study.

When discussing the impact of distance on LD couples' intimacy, findings show that intimacy via digital means was widely used to maintain a sense of physical connection when actual physical closeness was not possible. Physical intimacy became a priority following the LD partners' reunions after a period of distance. Thus, LD couples were able to adapt under the

circumstances to meet their physical needs and those of their partners. In terms of emotional closeness, new traditions and habits were formed for maintaining feelings of affection and closeness while separated. Constant communication by way of text messaging, FaceTiming, and phone calls aided in maintaining relationships while distanced as well as allowing couples to cope with stressors they might normally have been able to face together. In addition to communication, couples created make-shift date nights utilizing technology. They watched movies together using Netflix while separated as well as listened to playlists created prior to separation. This also contributed to feelings of closeness LD couples desired while in periods of distance. The theme of adaptability among LD couples and participants was evident, not necessarily by choice. In utilizing pre-pandemic routines, such as 'date nights,' and FaceTime calls, couples seemed to be creating a basis for increased feelings of connection while apart. Time spent together, reflecting on the earlier idea of intentionality, aids in establishing emotional closeness and connection, therefore when apart, couples were able to maintain the connection created prior to separation. Regardless of the reason behind periods of distance whether it be pandemic-related or otherwise, couples in LD relationships adapted to changes with the help of technology. Without technology, the findings from this study show that these relationships might not have been so successful or progressed as participants claimed they did. Previous studies discussed within existing literature seem to imply that without the use of technology with LDRs, feelings of assurance as well as intimacy cannot be maintained. The results regarding media usage in this study support prior studies in that media and cell phone usage as a means of maintaining communication and relationships while distanced are paramount to say the least.

When describing protective buffering to participants, it seemed most recalled specific instances that quickly came to mind, all of which regarded flirtations, advances, or

communication with others while separated from their partners. This is both surprising and significant to understanding feelings of jealousy among LD couples. Although most participants interviewed for this study felt as though they were secure and stable in their romantic relationships according to their responses, just how secure *did* they feel if they also believed they could not disclose information regarding a romantic flirtation with another? Perhaps it is not a question of relationship security or attachment, instead it is the idea of 'choosing one's battles'-- one participant explained that due to the geographical distance between them and their partner, explaining the specifics of the instance would only result in a fight that would be difficult to resolve via phone conversation. It is interesting that protective buffering among this age group is primarily regarding instances in which emotional deception might be occurring, even if the advances discussed were one-sided. Perhaps this finding can be further explained when considering the risk versus the reward. In other words, the risk these individuals might have faced to confront and disclose to their partners the details of the concealed instance might be greater than the reward of commendation for their honesty. The onset of jealous feelings, anger, or even termination of the relationship might be feared and perceived as not worth disclosing. It is also fascinating to question whether the individuals would conceal these instances, or they would happen at all if the couples were geographically close rather than distant.

**Conclusion**

In exploring the effects of an instance like the COVID-19 pandemic using RTT within GC relationships, Jones and Theiss (2021) found that relational uncertainty can occur resulting from turbulence within romantic relationships. One concealed instance from a partner could have created an entire build-up of resentful feelings or feelings of attachment insecurity, according to RTT. Throughout the course of the pandemic, couples suffered dramatic changes within and

outside of their relationships in terms of losses, either job-related, financial, or perhaps in terms of health or a loved one. Couples also suffered turbulence during COVID-19 when it comes to relational uncertainty—self, partner, and for the relationship. The uncertainty associated with an unprecedented, major event created the potential within relationships for this uncertainty, these losses, and other sources of turbulence also created shifts within LD relationships regarding where their relationships will lead, if anywhere. Couples have been forced to face the fear of a society divided on how to approach and to keep one another safe during COVID-19 as well, which no doubt caused internal stressors within these relationships as past research has shown. All these factors may contribute to the trust levels between romantic LD partners, which might help to explain the existence of protective buffering within these relationships.

This study created an excellent starting point for future researchers wishing to explore the effects of COVID-19 and turbulence on relationships, whether they are GC or LD. In doing so, future studies should have a larger sample size to generate more varied or a greater number of consistent responses leading to answering the research questions. Future research should also aim to address post-COVID life, as the present study occurred closer to the height of the pandemic, than one focused on management of LD relationships in the future. Overall, the study of LD relationships in connection with the pandemic as well as relational turbulence is important because although COVID-19 was unprecedented, another pandemic might not be. This study created a stepping-stone for pandemic-related research and how a pandemic affects romantic relationships when analyzing turbulence within those relationships, as well as outside of them. Therefore, using qualitative research methods, this study effectively created a means for explaining turbulence within LD relationships resulting from a global pandemic.

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# Appendix A

## IRB Letter of Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS

| | |
|---|---|
| To: | Trish Amason |
| From: | Douglas J Adams Justin R Chimka, Chair<br>IRB Expedited Review |
| Date: | 04/11/2022 |
| Action: | **Expedited Approval** |
| Action Date: | 04/11/2022 |
| Protocol #: | 2203391391 |
| Study Title: | Six Feet Apart: Relational Turbulence Theory and Coping with Covid-19 within Long-Distance Romantic Relationships |
| Expiration Date: | 03/21/2023 |
| Last Approval Date: | |

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc:  Mia Waymack, Investigator

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Mia Waymack
Faculty Supervisor: Patricia Amason

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a research study about how you communicate in your long-term long-distance romantic relationship during the Covid-19 pandemic

**WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

Who is the Principal Researcher?
Mia Waymack
Graduate Student
Department of Communication University of Arkansas
mgwaymac@uark.edu

*What is the purpose of this research study?*
To analyze long-term long-distance relationships that existed prior to the onset of the pandemic to discover how persons manage the communication and stress in their relationships.
*Who will participate in this study?*
College students in long-term long-distance romantic relationships
*What am I being asked to do?*
Your participation will require the following:
Complete a one-on-one interview session discussing how you use communication to manage your long-distance relationship
*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*
The possible risks or discomforts would be potential fatigue associated with providing interview responses or answering the questions, and the potential to become emotional or agitated when discussing your communication with your romantic partner.
*What are the possible benefits of this study?*
Your comments will contribute to what is known about how persons use communication to manage their long-distance romantic relationships during the pandemic.
*How long will the study last?*
Interviews should take about 45 minutes and should not exceed 1 hour.
*Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?*
There will be no monetary compensation for participating. **If you are a student of Dr. Amason's**, you will receive extra credit in a course in which you are enrolled with her. If you do not wish to participate, you will be given an alternative opportunity to earn the same extra credit. Participation is this study is not your only option to earn extra credit. She will communicate those options to you.

*Will I have to pay for anything?*
No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.
*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*
There will not be any penalties if you decide to not participate in the study. You will not be penalized for not participating by your professor.
*How will my confidentiality be protected?*
All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law and University Policy. The researcher is legally required to report specific incidents which include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and risk of suicide. Pseudonyms will be used if any quotations appear in any resulting publications or reports. Responses are aggregated with those of all persons who complete the interview to identify common themes across all responses. Demographic data will be used to describe the total population of participants rather than to identify characteristics of a particular participant. Audio recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and stored in Kimpel Hall 517, and there will be no video recordings of the interviews.
*Will I know the results of the study?*
You may ask for a summary of the results of the study once completed.
*What do I do if I have questions about the research study?*
You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Supervisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Mia Waymack, Graduate Student, Department of Communication, mgwaymac@uark.edu
Patricia Amason, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Communication. Pamason@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP

Institutional Review Board Coordinator Research Integrity & Compliance University of

Arkansas

105 MLKG Building

Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201

479-575-2208 irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research may be shared with the participant. By signing this consent form and completing the interview, you are agreeing your responses to be used in this research.

Before beginning, these demographic questions will be asked:

- Date of Birth?

- Gender Identity?

- Relationship Status?

- Length of Relationship?

- Length of Time in a Long-Distance Relationship?

Next, I will ready you the research question, then ask you a series of questions to better respond to the overarching research question.

### Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions

**RQ1: How has the pandemic created new daily hassles and stressors and impacted the overall relationship quality for persons in LD relationships?**

1. Describe the stressors and daily hassles you experience in your LD relationship.

2. How have the stressors within your relationship changed because of the pandemic?

3. How have the stressors outside of your relationship changed over the course of the pandemic?

4. Describe a time or situation in which you feel COVID-19 directly disrupted your typical, everyday relationship functioning. How so?

5. When distanced resulting from COVID-19, how were you able to cope with stressors you might normally have been able to tackle together?

6. How you feel COVID-19 has caused specific turbulence within your relationship?

7. As a result of COVID-19, how do you feel there is more turbulence within your romantic relationship?
8. How do you feel your relationship would be where it is today in terms of progression or digression if it had not been for COVID-19?

**RQ2: How are intimacy and partner attachment established and maintained by persons in LD relationships during COVID-19?**

9. How do you and your partner engage in intimacy both while you're separated and when you are together? Do you feel you and your partner have a healthy attachment style?

10. In what ways do you and your partner maintain your relationship while separated?

**RQ3: How do persons describe the presence or absence of protective buffering and relational turbulence in their LD relationships during the pandemic?**

11. Do you feel that you have ever withheld information from your partner as a means of preventing conflict or stress for them? If so, when?

12. Use the scale for assessing relational turbulence from Brosini and Soloman (2017)

On a scale of 1-6, please rate your relationship—Stable being 1,     Chaotic being 6.
On a scale of 1-6, please rate your relationship—Calm being 1, Turbulent being 6.

On a scale of 1-6, please rate your relationship—Running smoothly being 1, Tumultuous being 6.

On a scale of 1-6, please rate your relationship—Peaceful being 1, Stressful being 6.

# The Codebook

The following themes were coded from the interview data, in addition to any new ones that arose during data analysis.

- Conflicting schedules: refers to partners not having similar schedules or responsibilities to communicate more often throughout the day
- Traveling: a common theme within LDRs for couples to see one another face-to-face
- Travel costs: refers to the financial aspects of traveling for couples engaged in LDRs
- Anxiety or mental health decline: noted by mentions of "depression" or feelings of isolation, as well as anxiety toward the separation from their partners as well as anxiety toward the pandemic
- Travel restrictions: refers to restrictions as caused by COVID-19 including exposure to or the contraction of COVID-19 by one or both partners as well as travel bans that occurred in 2020
- Job-related stressors: noted here by mention of "work" or "school" within interviews
- Virtual school/ job: jobs and schools resorted to remote work where participants explained they worked from home
- Loss of social support: the loss of face-to-face interactions with loved ones as well as increased geographical distance from friends and family
- Social event cancellation refers to events participants intended to participate in prior to their cancellation resulting from the pandemic
- Cancelled travel plans: plans that were cancelled due to COVID-19 participants made to reunite with their partners
- Phone conversations: refers to conversations had via FaceTime, text messages, or traditional phone calls
- Relational progression: refers to positive feelings felt toward relationships such as growth, development, etc.
- Relational digression: refers to negative feelings toward relationships such as conflict
- Sexual images: photos exchanged digitally depicting explicit images as to increase physical intimacy while distanced
- Constant communication: the consistent exchanging of text messages, phone calls, or other forms of communication while distanced
- Social media: refers to Snapchat, Netflix, and Spotify and used to establish connection and maintain relationships while apart

**Table 1**

| How the pandemic has created new daily hassles and stressors and affected relationship quality resulting from COVID-19 | Examples |
|---|---|
| Conflicting schedules | Participant expressed that conflicting schedules while distanced made it difficult to remain in constant communication with their partner.<br><br>"Figuring out when we could communicate regularly while he was at work, and I was not working was hard. I had much more free time during the day than he did, so just being able to communicate all day whenever I wanted was a little bit tough because that wasn't really possible." |
| Job-related stress | Participant expressed their stressors related to their job becoming virtual as opposed to face-to-face.<br><br>"I was teaching and that was so incredibly difficult, because I was doing that at first from the living room of my parents' house, which is depressing in itself. Yeah, and I was having to teach, you know, kindergarten through zoom and then when we were allowed to come back to the classroom, it was a hybrid of teaching kids in person and teaching kids at home at the same time." |
| Cancelled plans | Participant explained that several plans to reunite with their partner were cancelled resulting from the pandemic.<br><br>"Okay, so because of the pandemic, all the flights that I had and all of the times that we were going to get to be together over a 365-day period were completely taken away." |
| Loss of social support | Participant felt as though the lack of social interaction throughout the pandemic was causing stress within their romantic relationship. |

| | “I feel like there was a lot of isolation. I'm a person that has to be around people a lot and I love to spend time with people, so I think just like the lack of social interaction might have in turn affected my relationship.” |
|---|---|

**Table 2**

| Reasons LDRs progressed resulting from and during the pandemic | Examples |
|---|---|
| Self-growth | Participant felt as though they experienced internal growth following meeting with a therapist during the pandemic to better communicate with their partner. "I did see a therapist and that really helped me figure out more of who I was as a person and how I needed to handle situations moving forward, and so, in a way, I felt I grew." |
| Increased emotional connection | Participant felt as though the pandemic allowed for increased emotional connection resulting from increased communication while apart. "I honestly look at like the long distance when COVID started, I feel like it made our relationship stronger because then we were just able to talk to each other. We just had that emotional connection." |
| Decreased travel costs | Participant explained that they took advantage of lower travel costs during the pandemic and were able to see their partner more often to decrease periods of separation. "Flights were so cheap, and I could go stay with him for so long, so I wasn't traveling as much to go see each him. So, like I would say, like the pandemics sort of coming to a close added more stress because prices increased." |

**Table 3**

| Ways in which intimacy is maintained within LDRs, both physically and emotionally | Examples |
| --- | --- |
| The exchange of sexual images via phone | Participant explains that the exchange of sexual images while separated aids in maintaining not only physical intimacy, but also emotional intimacy.<br><br>"When we are apart, my boyfriend, I would exchange images to one another also just keeping constant communication in terms of emotional intimacy as well as physical intimacy." |
| Mock date nights | Participant expresses how they and their partner enjoy watching the same movie or television show while distanced to feel as though they are physically together to maintain their relationship as well their emotional intimacy.<br><br>"We definitely have to put aside time for each other. We'll be like, "OK, well let's FaceTime on Saturday at this time and watch a TV show or watch a movie together." |
| Future plans | Participant discusses how they and their partner make future plans for when they reunite to help time pass more quickly and to boost morale while separated.<br><br>"We talk about things we have to look forward to. He likes to like count down days and plan things out in advance. Like on this day, we're going to go here and then we're going to eat at this place." |

**Table 4**

| Reasons LD couples have engaged in protective buffering while separated | Examples |
|---|---|
| Work or school-related stressors | Participant explains that their reason for withholding information from their partner while distanced so as not to cause them stress was related to school-stressors that their partner would not relate to or possibly not understand.<br><br>"My reason for being stressed was maybe a big paper deadline or a concept I was learning that he didn't understand. I wouldn't tell him about those things that were school-related that stressed me out just because I felt like he wouldn't exactly get it." |
| Financial woes | Participant expresses their reason for withholding their financial struggles with their partner following a past event in which their partner responded to this in a way that made the participant uncomfortable.<br><br>"Sometimes I struggle with money for groceries and stuff, and I was having a conversation with him about how like I just can't get groceries that week. He sent me $100 and it like, really bugged me 'cause I knew he was trying to be nice, but it was just too much. I sent it back, blocked him on Venmo for like a week so he couldn't send me more money. From then on, I just haven't told him if I've been struggling financially and it's not a huge problem, but it's still something that like I try to withhold. I feel like if we were together, it would be a lot more obvious, but since we're apart, there are some things that he just doesn't need to know, right?" |
| To conceal details of a flirtation that occurred while distanced | Participant reflects on an instance that they did not disclose to their partner due to the partner's jealous nature and the stress it may cause the relationship. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | "My friends had a friend that I'd never met before. I did not say I had a boyfriend because I didn't think it mattered. He called me pretty once and I was like, "Thank you so much, like I really appreciate it" and I did not reciprocate it back. He starts texting me, it becomes very flirtatious I am trying to disengage, like without being rude. I'm not gonna flirt back, I'm not gonna touch you, I'm not gonna kiss you, I'm not gonna go home with you, I'm not gonna do any of that, but he has remained quite persistent. I've neglected to tell my boyfriend that because I reflect on how he was when we were talking. He was very possessive and jealous and kind of scary. I don't like the word 'scary,' but like it makes me wanna cry. It makes me very anxious to think about what he would do if this he knew this person was like it's Snapchatting me or texting me. I just don't feel like would really help our situation." |

**Table 5**

| Participant | Age | Race | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | 24 | White | Female |
| B | 23 | White | Male |
| C | 25 | White | Female |
| D | 19 | White | Female |
| E | 19 | White | Female |
| F | 19 | White | Female |
| G | 19 | White | Male |
| H | 20 | Black | Female |
| I | 24 | White | Female |