

Psychological State and Quality Analysis of Young People Aged 18-25 in Early Long-Distance Relationships

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Abstract. This qualitative study investigates the mechanisms sustaining long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) among young adults aged 18-25, in the context of increasing societal cross-regional mobility. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with eight participants, the research identifies three interdependent core elements underpinning LDRR stability: authentic expression encompassing genuine emotional sharing and proactive conflict resolution; strategic communication management involving regular, meaningful interactions; and proactive trust-building through behavioral transparency. These components form a dynamic, mutually reinforcing system that mitigates the challenges of physical distance. Conversely, the absence or deterioration of any element frequently precipitates relationship breakdown. The findings of the present study underscore the critical importance of systematic relationship maintenance strategies for the emotional well-being of young adults engaged in LDRRs. While acknowledging limitations stemming from the sample's age range and cultural homogeneity, this study provides a foundation for future research integrating quantitative methods and longitudinal tracking to examine the generalizability of these mechanisms across diverse populations.

1 Introduction

Contemporary society, characterized by heightened geographical mobility and cross-regional employment patterns, has witnessed a significant surge in long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) among young adults aged 18-25. Educational pursuits, career demands, and various personal factors frequently necessitate geographical separation for young couples [1]. This developmental period is crucial for emotional maturation and identity formation, and when intertwined with the complexities of LDRRs, it presents unique psychological challenges that profoundly impact relationship quality and overall psychological well-being [2]. Young individuals navigating romantic relationships concurrently with key life development stages often encounter amplified uncertainty and relational difficulties, a situation particularly pronounced within the LDRRs context [2].

Existing scholarship extensively explores psychological adaptation mechanisms within LDRRs. Empirical evidence indicates that the strains of physical separation can be partially

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alleviated through strategic digital communication practices. These include scheduled video calls, voice messages, and text-based exchanges, which can foster emotional connection and intimacy despite the distance [3, 4]. However, research conducted within specific cultural contexts, such as China, reveals potential drawbacks associated with digital mediation. Notably, the phenomenon termed "emotional virtualization" or "affective virtualization" has been identified, wherein heavy reliance on digital platforms may inadvertently compromise the perceived authenticity of the relationship and impede the organic development of deep trust [5]. To counterbalance these challenges and maintain stability and satisfaction, young couples in LDRRs frequently adopt future-oriented relational strategies. These include engaging in joint life planning, reinforcing mutual commitment through shared goals, and, at times, idealizing partner attributes as a coping mechanism [6].

Despite these adaptive efforts, the inherent challenges of LDRRs remain substantial and multifaceted. Empirical evidence consistently documents recurrent experiences of loneliness, pervasive anxiety, and persistent uncertainty among young adults in such relationships. These negative emotional states are particularly acute when individuals face inadequate social support networks or encounter significant communication breakdowns [7]. Investigations focusing on collegiate romantic relationships further identify individual attachment orientation as a critical moderating factor. Findings indicate that individuals exhibiting high levels of attachment anxiety experience significantly greater emotional volatility and heightened security concerns during prolonged separations. This vulnerability is especially pronounced when they perceive their partner's responsiveness as insufficient or inconsistent [8, 9]. Personality traits and emotional regulation capabilities also emerge as significant variables influencing relationship stability and individual adjustment during extended periods of uncertainty [8].

Collectively, this body of research positions LDRRs as a dual phenomenon: a pragmatic adaptation to the exigencies of modern, mobile lifestyles and a substantial developmental challenge demanding significant psychological resources from young adults. The current study aims to systematically examine the psychological adjustment patterns, communication strategies, and maintenance behaviors employed by 18-25-year-olds engaged in LDRRs. These investigations seek to advance the theoretical understanding of relationship dynamics within this specific demographic context while simultaneously generating empirically grounded insights with practical implications for supporting the emotional health and relational longevity of geographically separated couples.

2 Method

This study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews to delve into the complex psychological dynamics of long-distance relationships among eight participants (5 female, 3 male, all aged 18-25). This methodological choice was driven by its distinct advantages in capturing the depth and nuance of emotional experiences. While quantitative surveys offer breadth, they risk overlooking the subtle textures of subjective feelings. The semi-structured interview format, with its predetermined core questions ensuring thematic focus, coupled with the flexibility for researchers to probe deeply based on participant responses, proved exceptionally effective. It allowed participants to openly share intricate psychological details and root causes underlying their LDRRs experiences—such as profound anxiety, persistent insecurity, and fear of abandonment—emotions often difficult to fully encapsulate and assess through standardized questionnaires, which are also constrained by time and response limitations. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the conversations provided space for participants to introduce unanticipated themes, potentially revealing novel influencing factors or coping strategies not initially considered by the researchers. All interview data underwent systematic analysis using the qualitative data

analysis software NVivo. This involved rigorous qualitative coding procedures to identify recurring patterns, core themes, and significant relationships within the rich textual data (Refer to Table 1 for participant overview). The participant pool comprised eight individuals with direct experience in LDRRs. Based on their relationship status at the time of the study, they were categorized into a "Continuing Group" (participants B1, B2, C1, C2, D1; experiencing long-distance separation ranging from 1 to 4 years) and a "Terminated Group" (participants A1, A2, D2). It is noteworthy that some participants (A1, C1, C2) were not initially in long-distance relationships; their relationships transitioned to long-distance status later. Others (A1, B1, D1, D2) had experienced breakups or periods of disconnection before choosing to reconcile and resume their relationships. Key participant characteristics, including age, duration of long-distance phase, current status, time difference (if applicable), city pairings, and interviewer gender, are summarized in Table 1.

3 Results

Table 1. Summary of interview results

Research subject code	Age	Remote duration (months)	Current status	Time difference situation (hours)	Country or city (domestic) pairing	Interviewee's gender
A1	20	5	End	0	Shanghai-Beijing	Female
A2	22	2	End	1	China-Japan	Female
B1	22	48	Ongoing	8 or 9 (daylight saving)	Japan-UK	Female
B2	20	2	Ongoing	1 or 2 (daylight saving)	Japan-Australia	Male
C1	24	12	Ongoing	0	Hangzhou-Hunan	Male
C2	20	15	Ongoing	0	Shanghai-Anhui	Female
D1	22	9	Ongoing	0	Tokyo-Kyoto	Female
D2	19	12	End	0	Suzhou-Dalian	Female

Synthesizing these findings specifically within the 18-25 age demographic reveals nuanced applications of the core mechanisms. Authentic expression, particularly the willingness to share vulnerabilities and daily stressors, forms the bedrock for maintaining emotional connection, demonstrably reducing the sense of alienation fostered by distance [10]. Trust building relies heavily on demonstrable behavioral consistency (like reliably keeping promises) and proactive social transparency, effectively mitigating separation anxiety and reinforcing relational security [11]. Effective communication management requires constant calibration to balance partners' emotional needs across different mediums. The research strongly suggests that structured video calls and engaging in meaningful, focused conversations are significantly more effective in promoting intimacy and understanding than communication dominated by brief, frequent text messages, which are prone to

misinterpretation [12]. Managing jealousy emerged as a particularly critical challenge within this age group, often amplified by social media interactions that can trigger insecurity and suspicion. Couples with high relationship quality demonstrated an ability to transform potentially destructive jealousy into constructive dialogue. This involved collaboratively establishing clear social boundaries (e.g., agreements about interactions with others), reframing jealous feelings into expressed needs (e.g., stating "I would feel more secure if we connected briefly before bed" instead of accusatory language), and actively developing independent social support systems to reduce excessive emotional dependency on the partner, thereby minimizing conflict [13]. In essence, successfully sustaining a long-distance relationship hinges on the integrated application of these three pillars: leveraging authentic expression to deepen mutual understanding, implementing systematic communication strategies to solidify trust, and skillfully reframing jealousy as an opportunity for relational negotiation and optimization rather than a threat. This research demonstrates that LDRRs maintenance is inherently a systemic process, critically dependent on the synergistic interaction of authentic expression, strategic communication management, and dynamic, proactive trust construction. Habits of deep communication and mutual understanding act as the primary buffer against the strains of geographical separation. Simultaneously, the conscious, active construction of trust provides an essential safety net against the pervasive "relational invisibility" and inherent uncertainties of distance. Understanding these core mechanisms and, crucially, their dynamic interrelationships offers invaluable practical guidance for individuals navigating LDRRs. Moreover, it establishes a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for subsequent, more extensive research exploring potential cultural variations and developmental trajectories in how these maintenance mechanisms operate across diverse contexts and over time.

4 Discussion

The findings robustly reveal three fundamental pillars essential for sustaining long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs): authentic expression, strategic communication management, and proactive trust building. Crucially, these elements do not operate in isolation; rather, they constitute a mutually reinforcing framework (visualized in Figure 1), working synergistically to support the stability and healthy evolution of long-distance intimacy.

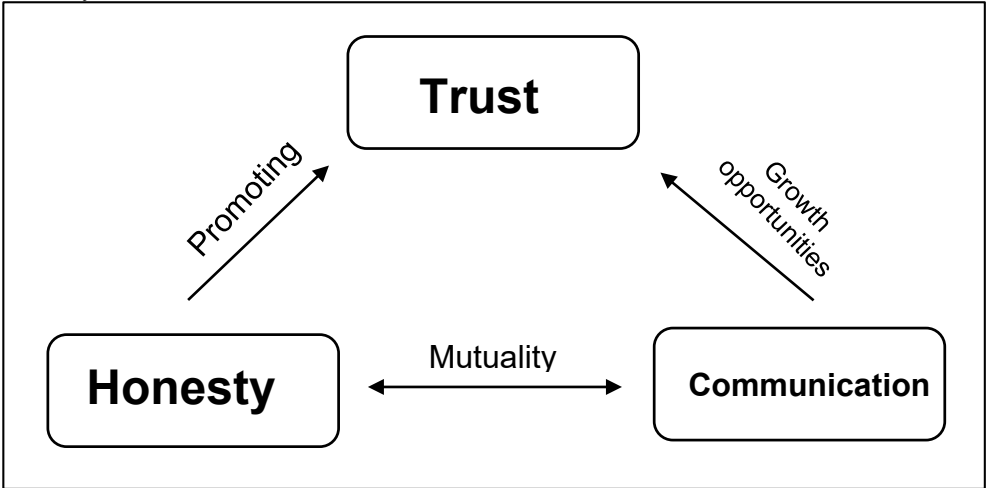


Fig. 1. Relationship between trust, honesty and communication (Photo/Picture credit: Original).

Authentic expression serves as the indispensable bedrock of the relationship. It manifests through genuine emotional sharing (both positive and negative), proactive investment in the relationship's well-being, and honest, constructive approaches to problem-solving. This core finding resonates strongly with psychological self-disclosure theory, underscoring that in the absence of physical co-presence and interaction, the voluntary sharing of authentic inner thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities becomes a paramount substitute for establishing and maintaining a meaningful, intimate connection. Participant narratives vividly illustrate this principle of achieving "emotional visibility" (i.e., being emotionally present despite physical absence) through verbal transparency—where open communication compensates for the limitations imposed by spatial separation (e.g., accounts from A2, B1, B2) [14].

Strategic communication management emerged as the pivotal operational mechanism for sustaining LDRRs. Effective management necessitates a careful balance concerning both the frequency and the methodology of interactions. On one hand, maintaining a predictable rhythm of contact (exemplified by C2's practice of "fixed daily video calls") is demonstrably crucial. Such regularity effectively diminishes the uncertainty inherent in distance and fulfills fundamental emotional needs for connection and reassurance [15]. However, the research clearly indicates that frequency alone is insufficient; the quality and method of communication are equally critical (as highlighted by C1's emphasis on "time adjustment"). Excessive communication or interactions that encroach upon personal space and autonomy can paradoxically induce fatigue and resentment, becoming counterproductive. On the other hand, the conscious selection of communication channels holds significant weight. The study provides compelling evidence that over-reliance on purely text-based communication (messaging, SMS) is prone to misinterpretation due to the lack of non-verbal cues. The absence of vocal tone, facial expressions, and immediate contextual cues often leads partners to "perceive unintended tones or meanings" or infer unintended meanings (a frustration explicitly voiced by C1 regarding their partner). In contrast, video calls or voice conversations, by enabling the transmission of richer emotional expression and non-verbal cues, proved far superior for minimizing misunderstandings, fostering empathy, and deepening mutual understanding. Furthermore, participants who actively maintained substantive dialogue, particularly conversations centered on future planning and shared goals (such as B1's habit of "discussing the future once a week"), consistently reported stronger relationship commitment. This practice aligns directly with the "openness" and "assurances" dimensions central to relationship maintenance theory, positioning it as an effective strategy for navigating the unique challenges of LDRRs [16].

Trust building within LDRRs encounters distinct and amplified challenges. The inherent reduction in shared daily experiences and limited observable partner behaviors create fertile ground for trust erosion, often leading to heightened anxiety, pervasive insecurity, and fear (emotions frequently reported across participants). Consequently, cultivating and maintaining trust in LDRRs demands more conscious, proactive, and mutually agreed-upon efforts compared to geographically close relationships. This study pinpointed several key behavioral pillars for successful trust-building: Firstly, transparency practices are vital. This involves the voluntary sharing of daily routines, schedules, and social information (e.g., D1's partner habitually "reporting daily itineraries" and sharing social media updates). In the absence of direct observation, such self-initiated transparency acts as a crucial substitute, significantly enhancing the partner's sense of security and feeling of being included and needed, thereby serving as a core mechanism for alleviating anxiety. Secondly, consistency in fulfilling commitments* is paramount (exemplified by B1's principle of "always delivering on promises"). Predictability forms the cornerstone of trust [17]. In LDRRs, consistently following through on promises directly strengthens the relationship's perceived predictability and the partners' sense of relational control, providing essential reinforcement for

accumulating trust capital. Finally, proactive management of jealousy emerged as a critical skill. This involves consciously setting and mutually adhering to agreed-upon boundaries regarding social interactions, especially with potential romantic rivals (e.g., C2's established rule requiring "advance notice" for socializing with the opposite sex, while permitting normal interactions). Negotiating these boundaries collaboratively helps reduce suspicion and provides a crucial foundation for trust to flourish.

The intricate synergy and dynamic interplay between these three core mechanisms constitute a defining feature of the model. Authentic expression lays the groundwork for open and effective communication. This high-quality communication, particularly deep and meaningful exchanges, then becomes the primary channel for conveying authenticity, clarifying doubts, and jointly establishing relational rules and trust boundaries (e.g., how the Continuing Group utilized deep communication and active trust behaviors to mitigate anxiety). This process directly facilitates the establishment and reinforcement of trust. In turn, a solid foundation of trust fosters a safer environment for even deeper levels of self-disclosure (authentic expression) and enables smoother, more resilient communication. The case of participant B1, sustaining a relationship successfully for over four years despite significant distance, exemplifies this virtuous cycle: habitual deep communication and the resulting mutual understanding functioned as a key buffer against the negative impacts of separation. Conversely, the research also reveals a vicious cycle triggered by breakdown in relational processes. When communication breaks down—whether due to insufficient contact frequency, inappropriate methods leading to accumulated misunderstandings, or outright avoidance—or when transparency is lacking (e.g., withholding information), perceptions of inauthenticity arise. This rapidly erodes the trust foundation, allowing negative emotions like anxiety and suspicion to escalate, ultimately potentially causing relationship dissolution. The case of participant A1 provides a clear illustration of this destructive cascade. This dynamic interaction strongly supports systems theory, emphasizing that romantic relationships function as holistic entities where instability can stem from the malfunction of any interconnected component [1].

The study also yielded significant insights into the mechanisms driving relationship rekindling following breakups or disconnections. Analysis of participants who experienced separation but later reconciled (A1, D1, D2) revealed that the key catalyst for successful reconciliation was not merely residual affection or nostalgia. Instead, it critically depended on one or both partners engaging in concrete, observable "active commitment behaviors." These behaviors typically manifested in one of three forms: substantively resolving the core issues that originally led to the breakup; demonstrating measurable, sustained improvements in communication quality and transparency; or undertaking clear, unambiguous actions that signaled a genuine and steadfast recommitment to the relationship. Crucially, these tangible efforts proved significantly more effective than verbal assurances or promises in the arduous task of rebuilding damaged trust. They functioned as essential "guarantees" for relationship repair and future stability, moving beyond sentiment to actionable proof of change.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study, through in-depth interviews with eight young adults (aged 18-25) engaged in long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs), elucidates that sustaining distant intimacy fundamentally constitutes a dynamic system built upon three interdependent pillars: authentic expression, strategic communication management, and proactive trust construction. The findings demonstrate that sincere emotional disclosure, particularly the voluntary sharing of vulnerabilities, establishes an essential foundation for relational trust. Strategic communication management, achieved through balanced interaction frequency, optimized channel selection (exemplified by the efficacy of regular video calls), and substantive

dialogue focused on future planning, serves as the crucial operational mechanism mitigating the challenges imposed by geographical separation. Concurrently, proactive trust-building behaviors—encompassing transparency in daily routines, unwavering consistency in fulfilling commitments, and collaboratively negotiated relational boundaries—effectively alleviate the anxiety arising from the inherent "relational invisibility" characteristic of LDRRs, thereby creating a vital stabilizing safeguard. These three elements engage in a powerful, mutually reinforcing cyclical relationship: authentic expression facilitates deeper and more open communication; this enhanced communication enables the clarification of expectations and joint rule-setting, thereby strengthening trust; and established trust subsequently fosters an environment conducive to even more profound authentic expression. This systemic interaction was vividly operational in successful long-term cases, such as participant B1's relationship sustained over four years, where consistent deep communication and trust-building behaviors successfully counteracted geographical separation. Conversely, deterioration in either communication quality or the trust foundation invariably triggered systemic instability, often culminating in relationship dissolution, as observed in participant A1's experience. A particularly significant contribution concerns relationship reconciliation scenario. The study revealed that restoring trust and repairing the relationship following a breakup fundamentally depended on concrete behavioral changes—measurable improvements in communication patterns and the substantive resolution of previous conflicts—rather than relying solely on residual emotional attachment. While the study's generalizability may be constrained by the participants' specific age range and relative cultural homogeneity, the proposed synergistic model of expression, communication, and trust offers valuable practical implications for young adults navigating LDRRs. It emphasizes prioritizing communication quality and depth over mere contact frequency, advocates replacing controlling behaviors with transparency and mutual agreement, and highlights the necessity of tangible actions for trust repair. Furthermore, these findings establish a comprehensive theoretical framework essential for guiding subsequent research examining potential cultural variations and longitudinal developmental trajectories in the maintenance mechanisms of LDRRs.

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