

Can Technology Replace Human Affection?

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ABSTRACT

Physical contact, self-disclosure, and positive communication are important aspects in maintaining romantic relationships for young couples. However, sometimes the necessity of education forces young couples to go through long-distance relationships. This study aims to determine how communication technology affects young couples' long-distance romantic relationships. It uses the theory of social penetration and adopts the online self-disclosure approach. This study also uses a postpositivist paradigm with a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews. Two pairs of participants were selected purposively. The results show that while online video call communication positively affects the long-term continuity of romantic relationships, face-to-face communication could not be completely replaced by technological advancements. Because of time constraints, even the frequent use of communication technology, such as chatting, is not yet enough for people to discuss a variety of issues. Likewise, the quality of relationships is limited to daily topics and does not consider the participants' more personal romantic problems. In addition to these weaknesses, this research finds several factors that easily cause misunderstandings, which are trivial problems that do not occur in face-to-face communication, such as (1) photos with other friends of the opposite gender, (2) typos, and (3) unclear language or phrasing.

Keywords: *Long-Distance Romantic Relationship, Online Self-Disclosure, Young Couple*

1. INTRODUCTION

Love is a universal phenomenon. Everyone must have fallen in love in their lifetime; it is just that each person has different attitudes toward and experiences of it. After falling in love, the next step is to build a relationship. In romance, reaching a maximum and sustained level of compatibility depends on the following factors: similarity between couples (age and education), the desire to maintain relationships, and a sense of mutual support for each another. Another important factor is the frequency of intensive face-to-face interactions (Bird & Melville 1994). The use of the five senses in face-to-face communication can minimize misunderstandings as opposed to the lack of communication when using (mediated) technology. Through face-to-face communication, one can use visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory modes to perceive cues and nonverbal messages (Ruben & Stewart 2006).

All relationships occurring in face-to-face communication are not the same as those that develop through the media. Thus, couples with close relationships are certain to have a higher face-to-face interaction frequency than long-distance partners. In addition, there

are many reasons why partners engage in long-distance relationships, one of the most common being the continuation of education (Guldner 2018).

Statistics in the United States in 2005 show that around 14 to 15 million people consider themselves in long-distance relationships. This number is approximately the same in 2018, at 14 million, of which nearly 4.5 million couples are in nonmarital/dating relationships (Guldner 2018). Several previous studies on student dating behavior focused on defining what is meant by "distance," examining the prevalence of long-distance relationships (Knox et al. 2002) and finding their stability predictors (Schwebel et al. 1992). Couples in long-distance relationships are said to be physically separated by a distance of at least 50 miles. These pairs have also been connected remotely for at least three months and are quite intense in communicating using telephone, e-mail, or other technology (Mietzner & Lin 2005).

Today, young couples in long-distance romantic relationships face the challenges of time and geographical distance, making it difficult to maintain physical and face-to-face interactions. To maintain

intimacy, young couples use computer-mediated communication. The development of computer and Internet technology has paved the way for new ways of communicating with people that we call today as online social networking sites.

Online social networking sites have recreated face-to-face interactions on the Web by allowing people to communicate publicly or privately. Many people use social media as a way to stay connected while others use it to develop new relationships. Therefore, many relational processes occur online, including self-disclosure—the sharing of information about oneself with others. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram or chat applications such as WhatsApp and Line have provided motives and encouragement to the spread of online self-disclosure in young couples. The general growth of self-disclosure is evident from the large amount of information, time spent communicating, and variations in topics, which could be in depth depending on the topic's relevance to one's deepest self, some of which becoming more personal than others (Lee, Gillath, & Miller 2019).

Romantic long-distance couples often use self-disclosure and positive communication to maintain their relationships through communication technology devices and strive to highlight intimacy and positive conversations in their relationships when separated (Wright 2004). Another study found that married couples and premarital relationships display a greater level of openness and assurance in mediated communication (Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada 2012).

Several studies conducted in other countries explained that many couples currently engage in long-distance romantic relationships, which continue to run well and is stable because of social media. An interesting thing to study further is whether the conditions are the same in Indonesian society. More specifically, how can online self-disclosure among young couples affect their long-distance romantic relationships? Do they also tend to convey intimacy in the form of positive speech and greater openness? The study of personal connections related to partner relationships is important considering that more and more couples currently have high mobility and are forced to leave their families or partners for certain periods. The results of this study are expected to strengthen the continuation of the relationship in couples living far apart.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Social Penetration Theory

Social penetration theory emphasizes how individuals develop relationships in their social life, which occur gradually from the introduction of the outermost or superficial layers to the establishment of deeper layers for a more intimate level of closeness. The individual

personality can be illustrated as an onion with layers that are described as levels of trust and emotions. The outermost layer, the most easily recognized, is one's self-image, which consists of their name, skin color, body posture, and appearance. The deeper the layer, the higher the level of privacy; this describes the most intimate part of a person. Furthermore, it was explained that the theory depends on two factors. First, whether social exchange is economic or not. If the perceived mutual benefits outweigh the losses, then the social penetration process can continue. The stages of the relationship can then be dialectical and nonlinear. Second, the dialectical model that affirms the existence of human social relations is characterized by openness or direct contact and the closeness that occurs between individuals. The pressure that exists between openness and closure creates a circle of information exposure and information withdrawal in a relationship (Grffin 2019).

2.2. Online Self-disclosure

One important dimension of social penetration theory is self-disclosure, which is an individual's action to provide other people information about themselves. Through self-disclosure, relationships will develop gradually from the outermost layer to the deepest layer, which represents a higher degree of closeness. It can be said that self-disclosure is the main step toward a closer degree of relationship. Meanwhile, depenetration is the process of self-disclosure withdrawal that can cause a relationship to end. In this discussion, the depth of penetration is equally important in a relationship (Grffin 2019). Communication expert Dindia (2000) (Dindia & Allen 1992) claims that women generally tend to express themselves more than men.

Altman and Taylor (1973) identify three basic dimensions of self-disclosure: (1) openness and the number of topics freely discussed, (2) the depth that shows the intimacy of information disclosed, and (3) frequency of self-disclosure. Dindia (2000) adds a fourth dimension, valence, which refers to the extent to which the message has good or bad implications for the sender, the length of time two people spends expressing themselves in one conversation, and the level of reciprocity that determines whether the communication matches the level of self-disclosure. Similarly, Wang (2019) finds that the dimensions that can be applied to self-disclosure in long-distance romantic relationships through computer-mediated communication are broadness of conversation topics, depth, valence, reciprocity, and relaxed, open, and deep self-disclosure (Wright 2004).

In terms of characteristics, online self-disclosure is different from offline disclosure. This is based on differences in the structural features of the delivery media. Kurniati (2015) explains that self-disclosure includes a large volume of information and does not

emphasize the need for a rapid response from each recipient. On the contrary, Lee, Gillath, and Miller (2019) claims that offline disclosure often occurs in the dyadic (one-to-one) context, and the recipient's responses, whether verbal or nonverbal, are usually expected by the message sender.

Griffin (2019) also explains that one of the important elements in online communication is the extension of time. Online communicators need more time to form a relationship. Text messages sent online take four times longer than immediately spoken messages. Experts claim that in such a relationship, there is a hyper-personal element, that is, a relationship established online will be stronger than one that is built face-to-face. Here, senders have a selective self-presentation in which they will form positive impressions when building relationships online. The receiver will give the sender attribution to the messages sent, which can be delivered anytime. Furthermore, the resulting feedback is a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is someone's expectation of others according to what they believe.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses the qualitative approach with a postpositivist paradigm. Subjects in this study were selected purposefully according to the criteria initially determined by the researcher, namely, university students, aged 18–25, in a long-distance relationship for more than three months, separated by a distance of 50 miles from their partners and could not directly and routinely see eye-to-eye, and using communication technology. The participants chosen as research samples were students, as they are approaching adulthood and are in relatively stable romantic relationships. As an entry point in data collection, the researcher observed friends who have been in long-distance relationships for one year. The selection of participants, which were limited to campus friends, took into account their limited time and availability to explain their romantic relationships to the researcher. The initial research sample had three couples, but the third couple gave insufficient data, and among the two other couples, data was considered saturated.

Data collection was done according to the idea proposed by Boyce and Neale (2006), in which intensive individual interviews were held with the participants to explore their management of long-distance romantic relationships—mainly how they perform self-disclosure. This type of interview is useful when the researcher wants detailed information about an individual's ideas and behavior or intends to thoroughly explore a novel issue. After all the data were collected, the next step was to perform coding and examine the data using thematic analysis (Alhojailan 2012).

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Participant Background

This study used pseudonyms to hide the identities of the subjects. The first couple was Heri, who lived in Jakarta at the time of this research, and Kania, who lived in Bali. They have been in a relationship for four years. Heri was 23 years old, and Kania was 25. Heri was a university student and also worked as an online media reporter. Meanwhile, Kania worked as an English teacher. They knew each other from being enrolled in the same campus in Surabaya.

The second couple was Angga and Dara, who lived in Surabaya and Jakarta, respectively. Angga worked as a mechanical operator in a paper factory in Surabaya, and Dara was a university student. The couple has been in a relationship for three years, entering a long-distance arrangement in their third year since Dara had to continue her postgraduate education. They were both 24 years old and knew each other through the online application LINE.

Heri met Kania for the first time when he joined the English literature student organization and was attracted to her because she was an interesting person to talk to. Meanwhile, Angga was attracted to his partner because of how her hair looked. For Heri, the way to get to know a potential partner better is to browse their social media accounts. Meanwhile, for Dara, this is done by gathering information from their friends, as she only knew Angga through a sense of suspicion.

4.2. Connecting Through Social Media and Chat Applications

At the initial stage of their relationship, Heri shared that he gave Kania codes of endearment whenever they chatted through the application WhatsApp. Heri started his sentences by using the codes “dear,” “honey,” or “love” as his favorite words to call Kania. Conversely, for Angga, their commitment to be in a relationship was done offline. He said,

I have planned to express love to her. I invited her to meet at the restaurant. But before eating, I already bought flowers and then I gave it to her, and then I said I love her, it is just so simple hahaha.

The relationship dynamics between partners occurred online. Dara said, “It was hard for me to control my emotions,” which explains that online media conversations have not been fully effective because they were susceptible to misinterpretations, leading to conflict. Dara also felt uncomfortable with the way Angga responded in their chat conversations. The contents of his messages usually contained many typographical errors,

for example, changing *pijet* to *pihet* or *bawa* to *bawah* (see Fig. 1).

Regarding online conversations, Dara stressed,

Then there was the problem of Enhanced Spelling (EYD) when I chat with him. I am a language student; I feel most disturbed if there is no writing in accordance with EYD. He ruled the language very poorly. He made a typo, I got annoyed. And I have told him, but he is not changing.



Angga: I'm feeling seek and tired, I'll take a day off tomorrow, going back to Surabaya.

Dara: How did you go home? Did you hit the town late last Saturday? It was windy you'll get sick again

Angga: I slowly road my motorbike. Its time for my weekly message (massage). It's been so long since my message (massage), massage

Dara: Why did you take the motorbike?!?! Until what time are you working?

Figure 1 Online Conversation by Angga and Dara through LINE.

It appears that the problem of language mastery makes it difficult for Angga and Dara to communicate through chat. Angga's recurring errors finally made Dara decide to communicate via telephone or video call rather than chat. Difficulties in communicating through chat were also found in Heri and Kania, who often misunderstood the meaning of each other's messages, affecting the couple's harmony.

If I'm chatting, I'm afraid she's angry again. Sometimes she has a short chat, it turns out it's not because she is resentful of me but because she's busy. So, sometimes there are misperceptions. (Heri)

Long-distance relationships for young couples, especially those that involve studying in different cities, certainly affect their psychology and harmony with the emergence of jealousy, suspicion, and lack of trust. However, interestingly, all participants were very supportive of their partners in continuing their studies. For example, Angga would serve as Dara's personal "alarm clock," waking her up by telephone so that she could do coursework. Meanwhile, Kania would send messages of encouragement to Heri every morning before his classes.

For couples in long-distance relationships, communication through social media greatly helps them maintain their connections, and each partner also prefers certain social media. Their passion arose because they were approached through social media, whose available

features were interesting and fun, such as funny stickers, photo GIFs, and emoticons, and they felt that the messages were delivered faster. In general, the participants conveyed,

WhatsApp is simpler, and there is always a better voice call than LINE. For Instagram, suppose there are those quotes that I send to him. Then, reply to the IG Story. Meeting face-to-face is very important. Long time no see it actually makes me want to tell a lot to him. (Kania)

Since the beginning of courtship, we have already used the LINE application. The stickers are also funny rather than in WA. Actually it is better to meet directly. I look directly into his eyes. The response is also direct. If in the media there is a delay there, right? (Angga)

Although all couples agreed that advances in communication technology were significantly helpful in managing their relationships, not all of them were satisfied and comfortable when using social media or chat applications. The most common problem is misunderstanding the message that was sent (see Fig. 2). This was experienced by Heri, whose relationship with Kania almost ended because of confusion regarding the contents of the message. Kania explained that Heri would continuously bombard her with messages, seemingly forcing her to reply. Heri would send her a large volume of messages because he wanted to resolve their relationship problems as quickly as possible. He would also be worried that Kania was getting angry and would no longer reply. Meanwhile, Kania would prefer for the situation to calm down for a moment, thus her silence.



Kania: How do you count it?
Heri: So shut up first. Listen to me. I am discussing prices with Mbak W***
Kania: That's it, do it yourself. I don't care.
Heri: That's why, if its about balance sheet, let me help. Don't just go telling Mbak W*** to not listen to me

Figure 2 Online Conversation by Heri and Kania through WhatsApp.

Even though in the end Heri and Kania did not break up, they could introspect from their quarrel that social media and chat applications could not be an effective venue to solve their love problems. Thus, in case of significant love issues, they would avoid contacting each other for several days to calm down or meet in person to avoid misunderstandings.

4.3. Online Self-disclosure Among Couples

Based on the interview results, which have been analyzed in depth, the stage of self-disclosure in all participants occurred naturally and spontaneously. In addition, it was found that there was reciprocity in all couples, or in this case, there was no one who dominated. For example, Heri and Kania were not overprotective of each other, and both of them exchanged news about themselves as needed. The same thing was found in Angga and Dara. If Angga uploaded a photo with Dara on his Instagram account, then Dara would also do the same. The topics that the subjects often expressed when communicating with each other online were about daily activities such as college assignments, workmates, movies playing in theaters, restrictions by annoying parents such as not going home late at night, and trends in mainstream media such as artist gossip or social issues.

Heri shared that Kania could not keep secrets from him. Kania's openness was reassuring to Heri despite their distance, which helped them maintain trust. For example, when Kania was approached by another man, the first thing she did was share it with Heri through video call.

Meanwhile, Dara said that when they started dating, Angga had told her a lot about his family's background and characteristics. After their relationship entered a harmonious stage, they already understood each other's traits such as being romantic, irritable, and caring. When they finally entered a long-distance relationship, they knew that the worst thing they could experience was the high risk of conflict when communicating through social media, so they took efforts to greatly minimize such a risk.

When Angga and Dara started their long-distance relationship, Angga claimed to not feel a longing for a partner. However, after a few months, he felt uncomfortable and wanted to immediately meet with Dara. He did not reveal the reason to her because he was worried about disturbing her, as she was busy with college assignments.

The presence of increasingly sophisticated video call technology has helped both partners manage their romantic relationships. For them, video calls can at least replace face-to-face communication directly. Through video call, they can see the faces of their partners and understand each other's nonverbal communication. Heri and Kania even made a special schedule for video calls on Saturdays and Sundays. They also had a unique ritual, which was watching a movie in a cinema as if doing so in the same place and time. They usually chose concurrent movie show times and then exchange photos. According to them, this activity helps them maintain the intimacy in their relationship. They usually engage in three-hour video calls every Saturday and Sunday.

Meanwhile, Angga and Dara did not have a special arrangement for video calls. They would usually send messages via the chat application every day and engage in video calls if they were not busy. Although both partners liked video calls, they used different chat applications. Heri and Kania preferred WhatsApp because there are no buffers and the video call would be smooth. Angga and Dara preferred LINE because of its interesting features such as funny stickers and face effects. Angga and Dara usually participate in video calls for one hour a day.

Based on field observations, Heri and Kania do not often show their intimacy in their social media accounts. The reason is that they do not want their followers to see it. They believe in the growing myth that couples who often take photos together on social media are fake and are actually having problems in their relationships. Therefore, they agreed not to share photos of them together. However, in certain occasions such as holidays, Eid al-Fitr, or anniversaries, they would upload photos together and write each other romantic captions. Meanwhile, Angga and Dara would share photos of them together on social media, as this is how they show their followers that they are happy with each other. According to them, a photo together with a partner becomes important, and thus, the relationship becomes more intimate.

While in a long-distance relationship, Kania would be irritable and jealous when looking at photos of Heri with other women in social media posts. Kania's jealousy would lead to a feeling of suspicion that Heri is having an affair. To avoid confusion, Heri would immediately explain to Kania that the photo with his female friend was taken to establish a professional relationship because his female friend was the company's client. In addition, uploading photos with company clients is indeed a way for an individual to conduct personal branding on social media.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the results, we know that women tend to be more open in expressing their love than men. Therefore, gender is one of the factors that influence the participants' openness to certain things. However, on the man's side, it was found that they actually felt a much greater longing for their partners but were reluctant to express it to them. Meanwhile, women are more jealous and suspicious of their partners when engaging in long-distance relationships. It turns out that women are also more expressive in showing affection to their partners. They often send photos and ask how their partners are. As stated earlier regarding self-disclosure, the more open an individual is to their partner, the more intimate the relationship will be (Altman & Taylor 1973).

Several instances of conflict were found among the participants of the study, and the couples already knew

what steps to take to cool down the situation. This sense of openness ultimately informed them of the steps that must be anticipated or carried out if a fight occurs. However, online self-disclosure does not always have a positive impact on the intimacy of a relationship. The limitations of individuals in interpreting messages and their difficulties in deciphering nonverbal cues actually backfire in a relationship. All participants agreed that no matter how sophisticated social media technology is, it still could not replace face-to-face communication. In face-to-face communication, they can maximize all five senses to understand nonverbal messages such as through touching, embracing, and others. In addition, face-to-face communication can also reduce misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the most popular social media platform among young couples on long-distance relationships is Instagram. Here, photos can be edited at will and are much more interesting. A survey conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NPSCC) [29] found three reasons why young people like Instagram: the ability to share stories, communicate with peers, and follow friends. In addition, getting likes from followers is also a pleasurable experience. Meanwhile, WhatsApp and LINE became the most popular chat applications for young couples in Indonesia. This is because these apps have good user interface and user experience, cute stickers, and emoticons and are widely used by fellow young people.

Young couples who often upload photos of them together on their social media accounts have a quite high relationship satisfaction. The reason they upload photos of themselves with their partners is to prove to their followers that they already have a partner and are happy about it. In addition, they also want to express the statement that despite the long distance, their romantic relationships are fine. However, another interesting finding is that some young couples do not really like sharing photos of themselves with their partners on social media. This is because they still believe in the myth that couples who often post photos of themselves together on social media are fake and are in fact experiencing problems in their relationships. Another reason is their intention to avoid bullying, including being ridiculed for showing off intimacy or being teased by followers as “slaves of love,” among others.

Some studies that examine online self-disclosure showed that self-disclosure by couples does have a positive impact on their romantic relationships. Saslow (2013) showed that individuals who included their partners in their social media profile images displayed higher relationship satisfaction compared to those who did not include their partners in their profile pictures. Likewise, Papp, Danielewicz, and Cayemberg (2012) found that those who revealed their romantic relationship status on their social media profiles showed higher relationship satisfaction than those who did not. Toma

and Choi (2015) also found that couples involved in more self-disclosure on social media involving relationships, such as revealing romantic relationship status and posting photos together, are able to increase their commitment to their relationships over time.

6. CONCLUSION

The continuity of the development stages of romantic relationships is influenced by the extent to which couples can be open to each other. Young couples who engage in long-distance relationships for reasons of education tend to find it more difficult to control their emotions. Being easily suspicious and lack of trust are the most important factors in the decline of a relationship. Interestingly, all couples support each other in their aspirations to continue their studies. Women are more dominant in showing expressions of longing, but it turns out men feel the deepest longing but are reluctant in revealing it to their partners. In addition, young couples maintain the warmth of their relationship when in long distances by prioritizing communication frequency. For example, every day, as much as possible, they take the time to ask news about their partners. According to young couples, by continuing to be connected every day, they remain happy despite being in long-distance relationships. In addition, young couples who like to share romantic stories with their partners on social media tend to be more satisfied with their relationships. On the other hand, those who are reluctant to share their love stories on social media tend to believe in the myth that couples who often post photos of themselves together on social media are fake and are actually having problems. They also want to avoid being bullied by their followers, including being teased for showing public affection or being ridiculed as “slaves of love.”

The advancement of communication technology can help routine communication in long-distance relationships. However, it can also trigger conflict between partners. Media is still quite limited in conveying nonverbal communication and is vulnerable to misinterpretation. While some couples consider that communication through technology positively affect the continuity of long-distance romantic relationships, young couples believe that face-to-face communication still cannot be fully replaced by technological advancement. The absence of the ability to use all five senses in mediated communication can ultimately reduce the quality of romance.

7. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

In Indonesian culture, couples are less open about their love stories. Therefore, the researcher has not succeeded in exploring long-distance romantic relationships among Indonesian couples. Nevertheless, this study actually shows long-distance equality among couples in Indonesian society, which is a novel concept.

For stronger findings, future research would benefit from a deeper examination of online self-disclosure among young couples in Indonesia as well as a higher number of research informants. Future studies may also explore certain themes such as sexting in online conversations among young couples, the risk of fraud or scams in online correspondences, and gender relations between couples.

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