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Long-Distance Relationships Among Adults over 30

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1 Introduction

“I gaze at my partner, perceiving his face, his voice... and that seems to be all. I see him only through the screen of my mobile phone. But is this really all that I perceive? No, it is not. I sense that he has taken the time just so we can call and even see each other. Although the image sometimes freezes a bit and I hear every third word, it is still pleasant to hear his voice. I realize that I am wearing a bracelet he gave me, and I glance at the photo on the nightstand, which reminds me of our trip to the mountains. No, I perceive much more than it might seem at first glance...”

Over 90% of people in Europe have at some point been in some form of long-distance relationship, meaning that they meet each other once or twice a month, on average, according to the long-distance relationship facts. The average duration of such relationships is 14 months, with a 58% chance of success (Dobric, 2021). The duration and quality of these relationships naturally depend on the alternative ways these people communicate with each other.

Long-distance relationships have undergone significant transformation due to technological advancements. Historically, communication in such relationships relied on traditional methods like letter writing, which required patience and time. Today, these methods have been largely replaced by digital forms of communication, such as video calls, instant messaging, and social media platforms. These technological advances allow couples to overcome physical barriers and maintain emotional connections despite great distances. However, while these developments bring new possibilities for connection, they also introduce challenges related to maintaining intimacy and closeness in the absence of physical presence. The shift to digital communication requires partners to adapt to new forms of interaction and address issues such as the lack of tactile or sensory engagement.

Technology plays a pivotal role in bridging physical distances in long-distance relationships. Rather than relying solely on advanced tools like virtual reality or haptic feedback devices, many couples depend on more accessible and widely available technologies, such as mobile phones, laptops, and tablets. Applications like WhatsApp, FaceTime, Zoom, or even social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook allow couples to stay connected through text messages, voice calls, video chats, and photo sharing. These tools make it possible for partners to maintain daily communication routines that mimic the immediacy of in-person interactions. For instance, sending quick updates throughout the day via messaging apps or scheduling regular video calls can help couples feel emotionally connected despite the physical distance. While these tools are effective for fostering communication, they also require effort from both partners to establish routines and manage expectations around availability and responsiveness.

My personal experience with long-distance relationships has played a significant role in shaping my interest in this topic. While I personally prefer relationships that are not conducted over long distances, my experience has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of such partnerships. It has also raised questions about how individuals navigate the challenges posed by physical separation and what strategies they employ to maintain emotional intimacy. I am particularly intrigued by the ways couples use technology creatively to overcome these barriers and how their practices evolve over time. Research in this area has the potential to uncover both common patterns and innovative approaches that could benefit others in similar situations.

One aspect that surprised me during my preliminary research was the lack of studies focusing on older generations in long-distance relationships. Much of the existing literature centers on younger individuals, often university students or young professionals, who may have less experience with long-term partnerships. In contrast, individuals over 30 often bring a wealth of relational experience, having navigated longer relationships or even marriages. Their insights offer a unique perspective on how relationship dynamics evolve with age and time. This gap in research inspired me to focus on individuals over 30 in my study, aiming to explore how they manage their relationships across distances while incorporating technology into their daily lives. By examining their practices and experiences, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in long-distance relationships and provide practical insights that could inform both couples and developers of relationship-supporting technologies.

During my academic journey, I had the opportunity to participate in a seminar that introduced me to multisensory research methodologies. Multisensory research investigates how various senses—such as sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste—interact to shape human experiences and perceptions. Initially, I did not see the relevance of this approach for studying long-distance relationships. However, after discussions with colleagues and my thesis supervisor, I began to consider how sensory elements play a role even in digitally mediated interactions. For instance, technologies like scented devices or tactile feedback tools can evoke sensory experiences that help bridge emotional gaps between physically separated partners. This realization led me to explore not only visual and auditory aspects of communication but also other sensory dimensions that are often overlooked in studies of digital interaction.

My exploration of sensory practices also intersected with feminist theories, which provided a critical framework for examining power dynamics within technology-mediated relationships. Feminist approaches emphasize the importance of understanding how societal norms around gender and power influence individuals' experiences with technology. For example, traditional gender roles may shape

expectations around emotional labour or communication styles within long-distance partnerships. By incorporating feminist perspectives into my research framework, I aim to critically analyse these dynamics while acknowledging the diverse ways participants navigate their connections in relationships in digital spaces.

Feminist methodologies also prioritize reflexivity—a practice that encourages researchers to reflect on their own biases and positionality within the research process. Given my personal experience with long-distance relationships, reflexivity became an essential part of my approach. It allowed me to critically examine how my own assumptions might influence the research process while striving for an empathetic and ethically grounded perspective. By fostering an inclusive research environment that values participants' voices and perspectives, I aim to produce findings that are both meaningful and respectful.

To summarize the aims of my thesis: My goal is to investigate how individuals over 30 navigate long-distance relationships by focusing on the role of technology and sensory practices in maintaining emotional intimacy. Through interviews with participants who use various technologies for communication—such as mobile devices or messaging applications—I seek to uncover both common practices and innovative strategies employed by couples facing physical separation. These findings will be contextualized using Sarah Pink's (2011) multisensory approach alongside feminist theories and Actor Network Theory (ANT). By combining these theoretical perspectives, I hope to provide a comprehensive understanding of how technology can support emotional connection in long-distance relationships while addressing broader societal implications related to gender, power dynamics, and digital interaction.

2 State of the art

In the state-of-the-art chapter, I present the literature that either deals with completed research on the topic of long-distance relationships or is closely related to it. It consists of the relevant studies about general practices in long-distance relationships, followed by the impact of technologies and presenting the use of concrete tools. Subsequently, I analyse the distinct and defining characteristic traits of the age sample interrogated. This is followed by the impact of the context of the relationship and gender of my actors, which may also be an important determinant of their traits, particularly for the purposes of this work, since the main theories used are feminist ones and multisensoriality. Lastly, based on this literature, I define how my research could contribute to this topic and identify the most significant gap in the information already obtained on this subject.

2.1 Current research and relevant studies

There is a substantial body of research conducted on long-distance relationships (LDRs), with studies varying in both methodology and research intent. Many of these studies have explored the differences between long-distance and geographically close relationships, often employing quantitative methods or document analysis to examine aspects such as intimacy, commitment, and communication strategies. Such quantitative research has provided valuable insights into how LDRs compare to geographically close relationships (GCRs) in terms of satisfaction, communication quality, and relational stability. However, this focus on quantitative approaches has left a significant gap in the literature regarding qualitative explorations of LDRs.

Qualitative research, which offers a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience (qualia) of individuals in LDRs, remains underrepresented. The few existing qualitative studies highlight the complexities and emotional depth of maintaining relationships over distance. For instance, qualitative research involving international students has uncovered themes such as trustworthiness, family support, and the role of communication in sustaining relationships despite geographical separation (Amelia, 2020). These studies emphasize the importance of exploring LDRs from a multisensory perspective, as advocated by scholars like Sarah Pink (2011), who argue for a deeper understanding of human interactions through sensory dimensions.

Moreover, LDRs are a concept primarily associated with young people; however, it is important to recognize that individuals in more advanced stages of life who are no longer in college may also have partners living far away due to professional commitments—an area less frequently addressed in

research, especially due to limited availability. A broader exploration of LDRs beyond the traditional focus on young adults may present a gap in current state-of-the-art research.

In the realm of Science and Technology Studies (STS), there is also a lack of qualitative research addressing LDRs. The existing studies often focus on the role of technology in facilitating communication but rarely delve into how these technologies impact the sensory and emotional experiences of partners separated by distance. This gap highlights the need for more qualitative approaches that consider how digital tools influence relationship dynamics and emotional intimacy.

Broadly speaking, while quantitative research has significantly contributed to our understanding of LDRs, there is a pressing need for qualitative studies that delve into the sensory and experiential aspects of these relationships. By expanding the scope of research to include older demographics and multisensory experience, future studies can offer more comprehensive insights into the maintenance and dynamics of long-distance relationships. In this chapter, I will attempt to outline what has already been discovered about practices in long-distance relationships.

2.1.1 Building Emotional Bonds and Trust

When examining various communication strategies, it is necessary to understand the context of the relationship, such as its duration or the frequency of seeing each other. In the early stages of a relationship, especially younger couples often engage in frequent communication as a fundamental way to establish a connection and build rapport. This period is characterized by a heightened desire to get to know each other, which naturally leads to more regular interaction (Stafford, 2010). Such communication is not only about exchanging words but also about creating a shared emotional space where both partners can feel connected despite any physical distance that may separate them.

Frequent interaction serves several important purposes. Firstly, it helps in fostering emotional bonds by allowing partners to express their feelings, share their thoughts, and discuss their aspirations. This process of emotional sharing is crucial as it lays the groundwork for trust and intimacy, which are essential components of a healthy relationship (Stafford, 2010). Moreover, these interactions create a sense of presence, making each partner feel that the other is actively involved in their life even when they are not physically present. The frequency and mode of communication play a crucial role in fostering closeness between partners in long-distance relationships. Regular and frequent communication can contribute to a sense of connection, while a lack of communication may lead to feelings of separation and isolation: *“Yet it is engaging in the everyday and mundane that creates and develops intimate relationships”* (Rooney, 2014, p. 888).

The content of the exchanges during such interactions varies widely but typically includes emotional expressions such as declarations of affection or appreciation, discussions about the relationship itself, and sharing personal experience that helps partners understand each other better. Additionally, couples often talk about their future plans and aspirations, including planning future visits or activities they wish to do together. This kind of forward-looking conversation not only strengthens the bond between them but also provides a sense of shared purpose and direction (Rooney, 2014).

Such exchanges are crucial for sustaining emotional closeness over time. They ensure that both partners feel involved in each other's lives, which is vital for maintaining the momentum of the relationship. By continuously engaging in meaningful communication, couples can navigate challenges such as feelings of loneliness, jealousy, and uncertainty about the future more effectively. This ongoing dialogue reinforces their commitment to one another and enhances their overall relationship satisfaction (Stafford, 2010).

Moreover, effective communication is characterized by open and honest discussions about needs and expectations, which contribute to feelings of security and closeness within the relationship. Partners who feel securely attached to each other are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction and intimacy in their relationship (Pistole, 2010). Secure attachment fosters resilience against the challenges posed by distance, allowing couples to maintain strong emotional bonds.

Additionally, maintaining rituals or routines can significantly strengthen the bonds in long-distance relationships, as noted by Carole Pistole (2010). These practices, such as setting aside time for regular conversations or celebrating milestones together from afar, help create a rhythm that supports the relationship's stability. Rituals provide continuity and predictability, which are comforting when navigating the uncertainties inherent in being physically apart. They serve as anchors that keep partners connected despite the distance.

Overall, the ability to maintain an emotional connection through consistent and meaningful communication is vital for couples navigating the complexities of long-distance relationships. It not only helps sustain their bond but also prepares them for future challenges by building a strong foundation based on trust and mutual understanding (Stafford, 2010).

2.1.1.1 Communication tools

The dynamics of intimate relationships are profoundly influenced by digital communication tools, which mediate both the frequency and quality of interactions. In the context of long-distance

relationships (LDRs), the choice of communication mode plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional depth and closeness experienced by partners. The engagement in communicated interactions, like phone calls, and symbolic gestures, such as sharing pictures, fosters a sense of proximity and caregiving. As Pistole (2010) highlights, *"In the LDR, the partners adjust their individual set goals and adapt to changes as they develop and engage in distally communicated (e.g., phone calls) and symbolic (e.g., pictures) proximity and caregiving"* (p. 118). This ability to adapt and maintain closeness through intentional actions is crucial for sustaining long-distance relationships.

Moreover, as noted by Latimer and Gomez (2019), the way partners engage through digital means can significantly affect their sense of connection. These interactions, facilitated by technology, can evoke a spectrum of emotional responses ranging from feelings of closeness and affection to moments of frustration and misunderstanding. *"How intimacy emerges as an effect of how relations are materially done and get done, and how these affective relations are actually ordinary and even essential to different kinds of world-making"* (Latimer & Gomez, 2019, p. 253). This suggests that the digital interactions in long-distance relationships are integral to constructing a shared reality and emotional landscape, underscoring the importance of how partners navigate these virtual spaces to foster intimacy and connection.

The technological infrastructures that support these interactions, such as social media platforms and messaging applications, define the boundaries within which intimate communication occurs. These platforms provide both opportunities and limitations, influencing how individuals express themselves and connect with their partners. *"Digital mediations do not give rise to fully new exchanges, relations, activities and situations. Mediations produce forms of attachment: among bodies, among people, and between people and technologies"* (Lasén & Casado, 2012, p. 551). The design and functionality of these technologies can either enhance or hinder the emotional intimacy between partners, depending on how they are used.

For instance, video calls can bring a sense of closeness by allowing partners to see each other's expressions in real-time, while messaging apps provide constant connectivity that can maintain a sense of presence throughout the day (Sutcliffe et al., 2022; Rooney, 2014). However, these same tools can also lead to superficial exchanges if not used thoughtfully, potentially eroding deeper connections. Thus, understanding the impact of these digital mediations is essential for navigating modern relationships effectively.

Finally, the broader socio-cultural context, including policies and regulations surrounding technology use, plays a significant role in shaping intimate relationships. For example, WhatsApp—the by far most used communication platform in the region—does not offer the option of video calls in Saudi

Arabia or most Gulf countries due to ostensibly security and identification reasons (Argaam, 2019). These external factors can impact how individuals experience their relationships, highlighting the importance of considering not just personal interactions but also the larger societal framework in which these relationships exist (Latimer & Gomez, 2019). For instance, privacy policies and data security measures can affect how comfortable individuals feel sharing personal information through digital channels.

2.1.2 Technologies

The evolution of LDRs has been significantly shaped by technological advancements, which have altered communication patterns and impacted how relationships are maintained over time. The advent of real-time communication tools has transformed how partners interact, enabling more frequent and diverse forms of contact that help mitigate the challenges posed by distance. These tools allow partners to engage in spontaneous conversations, share immediate reactions, and provide support in real-time, which can enhance the feeling of closeness. Understanding the role of technology in LDRs is essential for exploring the broader socio-cultural dimensions of technology use in romantic relationships. These digital interactions not only support emotional closeness but also provide a sense of shared presence and involvement in each other's lives (Hoffman, 2018).

Individuals often gravitate towards specific technologies for sharing private and intimate matters, establishing preferred channels for emotional support and connection. Studies focused also on young adults among students have shown that the most common practices used by people in LDR are phone calls, text messages, and video calls (Belus et al., 2019). This tendency has profound implications for LDRs, where partners heavily rely on technology to maintain their relationship across distances. As Sutcliffe et al. (2022) suggest, the choice of communication tools is critical in bridging the geographical gap, enabling partners to sustain their emotional bond despite physical separation. The reliance on technology in LDRs underscores the need for thoughtful consideration of how these tools are used to foster meaningful connections.

To be concrete, frequently utilized to foster connections and maintain intimacy despite physical separation are social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (before Twitter) (Murikkattu et al., 2024). These platforms provide a virtual space where partners can share their daily experiences, express emotions, and engage in meaningful interactions, all of which are crucial for sustaining emotional bonds. By posting photos, updates, and messages, partners create a sense of shared life and involvement, even when miles apart. This sense of connection is vital for maintaining the emotional ties that underpin their relationship.

Moreover, social media platforms offer unique opportunities for couples to participate in each other's social circles virtually. By commenting on each other's posts or sharing content that resonates with them both, partners can maintain a shared social identity. This interaction helps reinforce the bond between them and provides a platform for mutual engagement beyond direct communication (Hoffman, 2018).

Couples who engage in frequent and meaningful text conversations often experience higher levels of relationship satisfaction than those who communicate rarely. Through affectionate messages, sharing daily experiences, and expressing emotional support via text, partners can further strengthen their bond (Rooney, 2014). Text messaging offers a convenient and accessible means of staying connected throughout the day, allowing partners to share small moments and thoughts that help maintain a sense of presence in each other's lives.

However, texting also comes with limitations and challenges similar to those encountered with other digital communication methods like video calls. While texting provides convenience, it lacks the richness of face-to-face interaction and may not always effectively convey emotions or nuanced meanings. This can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or feelings of disconnection if not managed carefully (Holtzman et al., 2021). It is important for couples to be aware of these potential pitfalls and strive to communicate clearly and empathetically to ensure that their digital interactions enhance rather than detract from their relationship satisfaction.

In addition to these challenges, the reliance on digital communication requires couples to develop new skills for managing their interactions effectively. This includes being mindful of tone and context in messages and being proactive in addressing any misunderstandings that may arise. As technology continues to evolve, it presents both opportunities and challenges for maintaining intimacy in LDRs. By understanding these dynamics, couples can better navigate the complexities of digital communication to sustain their emotional connection over time (Walther & Parks, 2002).

Moreover, voice calls play a crucial role in maintaining intimacy and connection in long-distance relationships (LDRs). Unlike text messages, which can sometimes lack emotional depth, voice calls offer a more personal and immediate way to communicate. Hearing a partner's voice can convey nuances of emotion that written words often miss, allowing for a deeper understanding and connection between partners. This auditory element helps bridge the emotional gap created by physical distance, making partners feel closer and more involved in each other's lives (Hoffman, 2018). They can serve as an important tool for relationship maintenance by offering a sense of presence and involvement. They allow partners to share daily experiences and discuss important matters in a way that feels more

intimate than texting. This can be particularly beneficial for LDRs, where maintaining a sense of shared life is essential for sustaining emotional bonds (Holtzman et al., 2021).

The ability to engage in real-time conversations through voice calls provides couples with a platform for transparent communication, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings that can arise from text-based interactions. This immediacy allows partners to address issues promptly and express emotions more authentically. As such, voice calls are often associated with positive relationship outcomes, such as increased feelings of love, connection, and relationship certainty (Walther & Parks, 2002).

In addition to fostering emotional closeness, voice calls demonstrate effort and care. Taking the time to call rather than send a quick text shows commitment and investment in the relationship, reinforcing the partner's importance. This act of reaching out through voice calls can enhance relationship satisfaction by making each partner feel valued and prioritized (Holtzman et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, while text messages and voice calls are widely used, video calls have become an essential tool for couples striving to bridge the physical distance that separates them. These methods allow partners to share not only words but also nonverbal cues and emotional expressions, which are crucial for deepening intimate connections. The ability to see each other's facial expressions and body language during video calls adds a layer of richness to communication that text or voice alone cannot provide (Goncalves, 2016). This visual interaction helps convey emotions more accurately, fostering a sense of closeness and understanding that is vital for sustaining emotional bonds (Rooney, 2014).

The quality and depth of interactions facilitated by these technologies are critical for strengthening relationships. It's not merely the use of technology that enhances intimacy, but how couples engage with it. Meaningful conversations and emotional exchanges are at the heart of building and maintaining strong connections (Rooney, 2014). Video calls enable partners to share their daily lives in more vivid detail. This sharing of everyday experiences helps partners feel more involved in each other's lives, reinforcing their relationship despite the physical distance.

Additionally, technologies like video calling enable couples to engage in shared activities that contribute to building shared memories and maintaining a sense of mutual connection. Partners can watch movies together, cook in a virtual kitchen, or play games online, creating shared experiences that enhance their bond. These activities help build a shared narrative and foster a sense of togetherness, even when physically apart (Goncalves, 2016).

Furthermore, video calls are positively associated with relationship satisfaction. The transformative role of technology in bridging physical distances lies in its ability to foster intimacy through enhanced

communication modalities. By allowing partners to see and hear each other in real-time, video calls provide immediate support, empathy, and encouragement during times of stress or difficulty. This capability is crucial for maintaining psychological well-being and stability in long-term partnerships (Dutton & Blank, 2013).

Moreover, the immediacy of video calls allows partners to address issues as they arise, reducing misunderstandings that can occur with text-based communication. This real-time interaction supports transparent communication, enabling couples to resolve conflicts more effectively and express their emotions authentically. As such, video calls not only enhance the emotional connection between partners but also contribute to overall relationship satisfaction by reinforcing commitment and understanding.

2.1.2.1 Alternative technologies

While traditional digital communication methods like text, voice, and video calls are commonly used in long-distance relationships (LDRs), emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) offer innovative ways to enhance connection and intimacy. Although not yet mainstream in LDRs, VR presents exciting possibilities for couples to create shared experiences that transcend physical boundaries. By simulating real-life interactions, VR provides users with a sense of presence and engagement that traditional digital communication often lacks. This immersive quality aligns with theories of embodied interaction, emphasizing the importance of physical presence in communication (Maloney et al., 2020).

VR technology enables couples to engage in activities together, such as virtual travel or shared adventures, which can significantly enhance their relationship by fostering a sense of togetherness and creating shared memories. For example, couples can explore exotic destinations or participate in virtual date nights, which can inject excitement and novelty into their interactions. This capability is crucial for maintaining emotional connections and combating the monotony that often challenges LDRs (Balzarini et al., 2024).

Moreover, VR facilitates non-verbal communication through avatars, allowing partners to express gestures and facial expressions that enrich their interactions. Non-verbal cues like naturalistic nodding enhance perceptions of engagement and trust, functioning as social glue that strengthens interpersonal bonds even in digital environments (Aburumman et al., 2022). These elements are vital for creating a more natural and immersive communication experience.

The potential of VR to simulate real-life interactions offers a transformative role in bridging physical distances and fostering intimacy through enhanced communication modalities. As VR technology continues to evolve, it promises to redefine the possibilities for LDRs by providing a richer sense of presence and closeness than traditional methods. This advancement could make the distance between partners feel less pronounced, offering new ways to maintain psychological well-being and stability in long-term partnerships (Dutton and Blank, 2013).

In long-distance relationships (LDRs), where physical presence is limited, objects of affection such as printed pictures, jewellery, letters, and postcards play a significant role in maintaining emotional connections. These tangible items serve as physical reminders of a partner's presence and affection, providing comfort and a sense of closeness despite the miles that separate them.

While digital communication remains essential for maintaining contact in LDRs, objects of affection provide an irreplaceable physical connection that enhances emotional intimacy. Exchanging gifts and tangible items serves as an important symbolic gesture in LDRs. These acts are classified within nonverbal communication frameworks as "object language," which involves using physical items to convey affection and commitment (Kees & Kees, 1969). During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies observed that couples relied more heavily on such gestures to maintain their bonds when physical visits were restricted (Manap & Michelle, 2023). *"The gift itself might be linked to previous interactions, to their shared history. It is in such interactions that the gift is embedded, and thus acquires meaning"* (Rooney, 2014, p. 885).

Moreover, postcards have historically been used to mediate distance with romantic intentions. As Sui Wang discusses in her exploration of postcards' dual nature as both personal correspondence and semi-public artifacts, they provide glimpses into relationships through personalized messages that maintain intimacy despite geographical separation (Wang, 2021). These insights underscore the enduring relevance of tangible communication methods amidst digital advancements.

2.1.3 The research sample specificities

Given that this paper focuses on older generations, I would like to provide additional insights that are more specific for this particular but still relatively wide sample. The integration of digital communication technologies in long-distance relationships (LDRs) presents unique challenges for individuals often referred to as "digital immigrants." These are people who were born before the widespread adoption of modern digital technologies and thus face specific hurdles in adapting to these new forms of communication (Prensky, 2001). Unlike digital natives, who have grown up with digital

technology, digital immigrants may struggle with the nuances and rapid evolution of these tools, which can impact their ability to maintain LDRs effectively.

Digital immigrants might prefer face-to-face interactions or traditional communication methods over digital ones, which can lead to a slower adaptation process (Prensky, 2001). The cognitive load required to learn and adapt to new technologies can be significant for older generations. The process of learning a new "language" of digital communication can be daunting and may contribute to feelings of isolation or frustration when trying to connect with loved ones over long distances (Karavidas et al., 2005).

However, the emotional benefits of overcoming these technological barriers are substantial. Studies have shown that older adults who engage with digital communication tools experience reduced feelings of loneliness and improved emotional connections (Wilson, 2018). This is particularly important in LDRs, where maintaining emotional intimacy is crucial.

2.1.4 Technologies and feminist perspectives

Turning to the positionality and identity of the actors, we cannot oversee the aspects of gender. Analysing interactions from an STS feminist perspective reveals how technologies shape communication and emotional sharing between couples (Pink, 2011). For instance, studies indicate that women in long-distance relationships may feel pressured to express emotions verbally, while men might rely more on nonverbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions (Gitelman, 2006). This can lead to misunderstandings if partners are unaware of these gender-specific styles. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for exploring how couples engage multiple senses to enhance connection, as outlined in my research questions.

Material conditions also play a significant role in shaping long-distance relationships. Gender disparities in income, digital literacy, and access to infrastructure can affect access to and affordability of technologies (Mol, 2002). This can result in women having fewer opportunities to stay connected with their partners, exacerbating gender inequalities. This insight is relevant to my investigation into the technologies used by couples and their roles in maintaining connection.

It should also be noted that cultural norms further influence technology use in long-distance relationships. In collectivistic cultures, frequent video calls might be prioritized to maintain togetherness (Bond, 1991), whereas individualistic cultures might favor text-based communication for respecting personal space (Hofstede, 1980). Gender roles intersect with these cultural expectations; for example, men might traditionally be the primary communicators using technology to initiate

contact (Giddens, 1990). Understanding these cultural nuances is essential for developing inclusive technologies that cater to diverse needs.

Ethical considerations regarding privacy and surveillance also arise. Unequal power dynamics can be exacerbated when one partner monitors the other's online activity (Gitelman, 2006), raising important questions about privacy in digital communication. These issues are pertinent to understanding how interactions reveal insights into multisensory strategies used by couples.

2.1.5 Multisensoriality in literature

In exploring the concept of multisensory experience in long-distance relationships, it becomes evident that there is a significant gap in the literature focusing on this topic. While there are studies on multisensory experiences, they often focus on different contexts, such as educational settings or dementia care, rather than romantic relationships over long distances. However, these approaches emphasize the importance of viewing senses as interdependent and not privileging one over another, thereby enhancing the richness of human interactions through multisensory engagement (Mullins et al., 2023).

In contrast, newest studies on long-distance relationships have primarily focused on technological solutions like social VR platforms and AI-driven communication tools. For example, research on social VR highlights its potential to create immersive virtual environments that simulate physical presence, allowing couples to engage in activities together despite being miles apart (Zamanifard & Freeman, 2019). These platforms offer a sense of co-presence and enable couples to experience embodied interactions through avatars, although they often neglect other crucial qualities such as body language and shared memories (Zamanifard & Freeman, 2019).

While technologies like video calls and AI-powered communication platforms have improved connectivity by enhancing audio-visual interactions, they still fall short of replicating the full multisensory experience of physical presence. The absence of tactile sensations remains a significant limitation, despite advancements in haptic feedback technology that attempt to simulate touch.

Given the context, this research could make a valuable contribution by focusing specifically on how multisensory technologies can be applied to enhance intimacy and connection in long-distance romantic relationships. By expanding the scope beyond sight and sound to include other senses such as touch or smell, the study could provide new insights into strengthening emotional bonds across

distances. This would fill a critical gap in the literature and potentially lead to innovative applications that enrich the experience of long-distance relationships.

2.2 Research gap

In the previous section, several studies were outlined that considered the phenomenon under study from various angles. However, the nature of the cited studies was predominantly quantitative, and they did not completely focus on the aspects that are the subject of this paper. While existing studies offer valuable insights into the dynamics of LDRs, they often rely on theoretical frameworks rather than empirical investigations. Moreover, many of the studies that do touch upon my area of focus were also slightly outdated in terms of the technologies they examined, often referencing communication tools such as emails or SMS messaging, which have since been supplanted by more advanced platforms, or, on the contrary, were examining VR, which is perhaps too advanced—particularly for the sample selected for the purpose of this paper.

Furthermore, the existing literature tends to focus on specific demographics, such as young parents in long-distance relationships or teenagers navigating romantic intimacy, leaving a notable gap in understanding the experiences of individuals in LDRs who do not fit into these categories. The scarcity of qualitative studies exploring the nuanced intricacies of emotional intimacy and relational satisfaction among diverse populations underscores the potential for further research in this area. Additionally, while quantitative studies abound, their outcomes may not fully capture the lived experiences and subjective realities of individuals navigating long-distance partnerships in an increasingly digitized world. Therefore, there exists a compelling opportunity to fill this gap in the literature by conducting qualitative research that delves deeply into the experience of individuals born before the digital age who are engaged in long-distance romantic relationships.

Moreover, the existing body of literature predominantly focuses on the cognitive and verbal aspects of communication, overlooking the importance of multisensory experiences in shaping relational dynamics. Within the realm of LDRs, sensory modalities such as touch, scent, and visual cues play a pivotal role in fostering emotional connection and intimacy. However, empirical investigations into the utilization and impact of these sensory channels in maintaining closeness across distance are scant, leaving a significant void in our understanding of the holistic experience of long-distance partnerships. By bridging this gap, future research can provide valuable insights into the complexities of maintaining intimacy in long-distance relationships, especially for those navigating such dynamics without the digital fluency ingrained in younger generations.

This study aims to contribute to the empirical field by shedding light on the experience of individuals who did not grow up with digital technologies, particularly in the context of long-distance relationships (LDRs). By focusing on this demographic, the research will address a critical gap in the literature, offering a nuanced understanding of how these individuals adapt to and utilize contemporary communication tools to maintain emotional intimacy.

Additionally, my research will explore the role of sensory experience in LDRs, which has been largely overlooked in existing studies. By investigating how sensory modalities such as touch, scent, and visual cues are integrated into communication strategies, this study will enhance our understanding of how these elements contribute to relational satisfaction and emotional connection. This focus on multisensory experiences could reveal innovative ways in which individuals bridge physical distances, potentially informing the development of new technologies or practices that better support emotional intimacy in LDRs.

Ultimately, this research has the potential to broaden theoretical frameworks by incorporating both technological adaptation and sensory experiences, offering a more holistic view of long-distance relationship dynamics. It could also inform practitioners and technology developers about the unique needs and preferences of older adults in LDRs, leading to more inclusive and effective communication solutions.

3 Concepts and theories

In this section, I will provide a rough outline of what I mean by the individual concepts, such as long-distance relationships, practices, connection, and intimacies; explain what is meant by each term; and, last but not least, attempt to outline how I will utilize the aforementioned theories that I have chosen for my research, including the multisensorial approach, feminist theories, and ANT.

3.1 Long-distance relationship:

The term "long-distance relationship" (LDR) refers to a romantic partnership between two individuals who are geographically separated and unable to regularly interact physically (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Maguire & Kinney, 2010). This type of relationship can arise for various reasons, such as work, education, military service, or other personal commitments that require distance from one's partner (Pistole, 2010). In my research, I define a long-distance relationship as a relationship between two heterosexual partners, whether married or simply in a romantic relationship, who are separated by physical and thus geographical distance. The specific length or nature of the relationship or the geographical distance between the partners is not the focus; rather, it is the fact that the partners have been geographically separated for an extended period and do not spend all their time in the same location.

I chose to focus on monogamous heterosexual couples in my research for several reasons. Firstly, finding suitable candidates in long-distance relationships can be challenging, and as a heterosexual individual, I felt more comfortable and equipped to engage with this group. This choice minimizes the risk of inadvertently causing discomfort due to my limited understanding of other relationship types. Additionally, as said previously, there is a notable research gap concerning long-distance relationships among heterosexual couples within the age range I selected. Addressing this gap allows me to contribute valuable insights and expand our understanding of these dynamics. By concentrating on heterosexual monogamous couples, I can provide a more focused examination, which is essential for specificity in research. Although long-distance relationships exist in various forms, such as polyamorous or same-sex relationships, narrowing the scope enables a detailed exploration of this particular group's dynamics. Furthermore, much of the existing research on long-distance relationships has centred on heterosexual monogamous couples, offering a robust foundation for comparison and further study.

3.1.1 Practices

By communication practices of couples in long-distance relationships, I mean any activity that allows partners to communicate or connect with each other, whether it's a mutual exchange or initiated by just one partner. These practices are essential for maintaining closeness and ensuring the relationship remains strong despite physical separation. They include a wide range of interactions, from regular video calls, text messages, and emails to more creative methods like sending care packages or handwritten letters. Couples might also engage in shared activities such as virtual date nights, where they eat dinner together via video call or watch a movie together online.

Furthermore, these practices extend beyond digital communication to include physical tokens of affection, such as gifts or mementos, which serve as tangible reminders of the relationship. The purpose of these practices is to foster emotional intimacy and maintain a sense of togetherness, even when partners are miles apart. This can be achieved through consistent communication routines, sharing daily experiences, and planning future visits or activities together. Engaging in shared activities beyond virtual dates can strengthen the bond between partners. For instance, reading the same book simultaneously or playing online games together creates new shared experiences despite the distance. Planning for future visits or activities provides hope and something tangible to look forward to, reinforcing the idea that separation is temporary.

An important aspect of these practices is establishing clear communication expectations. By agreeing on how often to communicate and which modes to use, couples can prevent misunderstandings and ensure both partners feel connected. Being present during interactions is also crucial; giving undivided attention during conversations helps each partner feel valued and appreciated.

Open and honest communication forms another key part of these practices. Transparency about feelings and concerns fosters trust and understanding, which are vital when nonverbal cues are less accessible. Regularly expressing appreciation can deepen emotional bonds and promote positivity within the relationship.

Overall, these communication practices are designed to bridge the gap created by physical distance, ensuring that emotional connections remain strong and vibrant. By incorporating a variety of methods and maintaining consistency in their efforts, couples can successfully navigate the challenges of long-distance relationships.

3.1.2 Technologies

By communication technologies, I mean all the tools and systems that facilitate the exchange of information between individuals or groups. This definition extends beyond the conventional scope of information and communications technology (ICT), which primarily focuses on digital communication through computers, networks, and software. Instead, it encompasses a broader range of artefacts and methods that aid in human connection. For instance, traditional devices such as landline telephones and radios are included, as well as more personal and tangible items like letters, diaries, or shared calendars that couples might use to maintain their connection. These technologies are not limited to digital platforms; they also cover any tool or medium that enhances interpersonal communication.

The significance of communication technologies lies in their ability to improve how we interact across various contexts, including personal relationships. They enable real-time connectivity and information sharing, thus playing a crucial role in bridging distances and fostering understanding. As these technologies evolve, they continue to transform the way we connect with each other, offering new possibilities for collaboration and interaction. Understanding communication technologies in this broader sense allows us to appreciate their impact on both our personal lives, highlighting their importance in fostering social bonds and facilitating effective communication. Their potential facilitates connection and emotional intimacy even when physical proximity is limited. This directly relates to my research question about what specific communication strategies heterosexual monogamous couples use and what technologies play a role in maintaining their relationships.

3.1.3 Connection and intimacy:

In the context of long-distance relationships, intimacy and connection are crucial elements that underpin the emotional and relational dynamics between partners. Understanding these concepts is essential for exploring how couples maintain their relationships despite physical separation. Within this place, I would like to emphasize that these two concepts are closely related for me, and in some cases, it is difficult to distinguish between them. Nevertheless, I will attempt to outline the difference I perceive between them and how I will address them in the context of my research.

3.1.3.1 Connection

According to Mashek and Aron (2004), connections are defined as the emotional, social, and psychological bonds that link individuals together. These connections encompass feelings of

closeness, trust, and understanding between partners. They may also involve shared experiences, mutual interests, and supportive interactions that contribute to the strength and depth of the relationship. Moreover, connection is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond mere physical presence. It involves a profound sense of being understood and supported by a partner, which is essential for the health and longevity of any relationship. Emotional bonds are at the core of this connection, providing a sense of security and belonging. Trust forms the foundation upon which these bonds are built, as it allows partners to feel confident in each other's intentions and actions.

In my work, I consider connection to refer to any form of contact created between partners. This includes not only emotional bonds but also the use of communication strategies and technologies that facilitate these connections despite geographical separation. In today's digital age, technology plays a pivotal role in maintaining connections across distances. Video calls, instant messaging, and social media platforms enable couples to share their lives in real-time, bridging the gap created by physical separation.

Furthermore, shared experiences and mutual interests can significantly enhance the sense of connection between partners. Engaging in activities together, even virtually, can foster a sense of unity and shared purpose. For instance, watching movies simultaneously or participating in online games can create shared memories that strengthen the bond.

Supportive interactions are another crucial element of connection. Being present for each other during challenging times, celebrating successes together, and offering encouragement can reinforce the emotional ties between partners. This support helps maintain a positive outlook on the relationship and ensures both individuals feel valued and understood.

Ultimately, maintaining connection in relationships requires intentional effort and adaptability. By leveraging technology and prioritizing open communication, couples can sustain their emotional bonds despite physical distances. This approach not only preserves the connection but also enriches it by allowing partners to explore new ways of interacting and supporting each other.

Finally, to distinguish between connection and intimacy, I must focus on their interrelation. For me, connection is essentially a broader term than intimacy. Within connections, it is possible to have intimacy, which in my view is characterized by a deeper bond usually shared by only two people (in this case, my couples) and is related to shared content that is not publicly accessible.

3.1.3.2 Intimacy

Intimacy is defined as the deep emotional, physical, and psychological closeness between individuals in a relationship (Mashek & Aron, 2004). This closeness is characterized by vulnerability, openness, and a sense of mutual understanding and acceptance. It involves sharing personal thoughts, feelings, and desires with a partner, as well as engaging in physical affection and closeness. Elements such as trust, respect, and commitment are integral to fostering intimacy within a relationship. In my research, intimacy is thus an imaginary bond based on all the aspects mentioned above.

3.2 Multisensoriality:

As a crucial term that I tie both to the method and the theory in my work, there is "multisensoriality." Multisensoriality, as discussed by Sarah Pink (2011) in her work, refers to an approach that recognizes and engages with the diverse sensory experiences involved in human perception and interaction with the world. It goes beyond traditional modes of research and understanding that prioritize visual and verbal information to encompass the full range of sensory modalities, including touch, smell, taste, and sound. This concept is integral to my research as it allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of individuals in long-distance relationships, considering not only what is seen and said but also what is felt, smelled, tasted, and heard.

"Not only can our brains perceive an audiovisual medium in a multisensory way, but they must do so because there is no other way for our perception to occur. Our natural, not exceptional or synesthetic, way of perceiving is multisensory" (Antunes, 2019, p. 95).

This insight underscores that perception is inherently multisensory, meaning that our brains naturally integrate various sensory inputs to form a cohesive understanding of our environment. This insight is crucial for studying LDRs, as it suggests that all senses contribute to the perception of intimacy and connection, even when partners are physically apart and the necessity of considering all sensory modalities to fully understand how individuals experience intimacy across distances.

Furthermore, Pink (2011) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging how different senses shape our experiences, perceptions, and meanings attached to places, objects, and interactions. By considering multisensoriality, I gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals in LDRs not only by listening to their experiences but also evaluating the lived experience of connection and interaction by myself within the long-distance setting.

"Studies from phenomenologists, neuroscientists or philosophers all agree that our senses do not work in isolation, but they continuously work in close and synergetic ways, or through synaesthesia."

Synaesthesia is not an intellectual phenomenon but a perceptual experience, where all the senses are triggered. It recombines with lived experience and memory, memory being our capacity to access sensory experiences" (Royer, 2019, p. 12-13).

This quote highlights the interconnectedness of the senses and their role in forming memories and emotional connections. In LDRs, understanding how sensory integration influences memory and emotional bonding can help explain how partners maintain a sense of closeness despite physical separation.

In essence, multisensoriality explores the richness of human experience beyond the limitations of sight and sound, recognizing the holistic nature of perception and the ways in which sensory engagement shapes our understanding of phenomena. For Howes (2003), the sensorium is *"the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all the values and practices of society are enacted"* (p. 1). Howes underscores the cultural significance of sensory experiences. In the context of LDRs, this perspective suggests that cultural expressions through sensory modalities can influence how partners perceive and maintain their relationships across distances. This perspective aligns with my research's aim to understand how cultural expressions through sensory experiences influence intimate relationships.

By embracing multisensoriality, I aim to capture the richness and complexity of connections and intimacies in LDRs, shedding light on aspects that may be overlooked in traditional research approaches. In particular, in Western contexts, touch appears to integrate other senses and has been either diminished due to its strong physical nature or elevated when linked with emotions and spirituality (Porcello et al., 2010). This suggests that tactile experiences can have profound implications for emotional intimacy.

The senses provide an alternate entry point into the history of memory, serving as a site for recovering forgotten or erased experiences that reintegrate the sensorial with the material—countering modernity's fragmentation of senses proposed by divisions of sense and labour (Porcello et al., 2010). These insights are crucial for understanding how sensory experiences can maintain connections over distances. Space is produced and transformed through social interactions and "endowed with value," acquiring the meaning of place (Khan 2015). This concept is particularly relevant when considering how individuals create meaningful connections across physical distances using technology.

3.3 STS Feminist Perspectives:

Incorporating feminist theoretical perspectives provides to my research a critical lens through which to examine the gendered dynamics of technology use in long-distance relationships. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, Annemarie Mol, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Lisa Gitelman and Sarah Pink have significantly contributed to understanding how technologies are not neutral but are embedded with gendered power dynamics.

The Cyborg theory by Donna Haraway is particularly relevant as it challenges traditional boundaries between humans and machines, suggesting that technology can be a tool for redefining gender roles. This perspective is useful for exploring how digital communication technologies in long-distance relationships can empower individuals to transcend conventional gender norms and create hybrid identities that promote more egalitarian partnerships.

To be concrete, I aim to use her Cyborg Theory, which deals with, among other things, the suppression of dichotomous boundaries between men and women and how technology influences gender roles and identities. By examining heterosexual relationships, this approach can be very useful as it will help me discern whether there is a pattern of this phenomenon in the use of technology in long-distance relationships: for instance, whether in the couples I study, this traditional division can sometimes be considered suppressed or whether my couples' practices tend to align more with a dichotomous and binary opposition of these roles.

Furthermore, within my research, Haraway takes on a very important role, especially regarding my third research sub-question concerning my positionality (see the chapter on research questions). She discusses the concept of the "modest witness," an impartial observer whose statements are considered factual and unbiased, thereby gaining epistemological authority (Haraway, 1997). She critiques this idea while introducing a new constructivist vision, which directly corresponds with my position as a researcher. Haraway calls for a re-evaluation of what constitutes objectivity in scientific practice. By highlighting the gender and cultural biases inherent in the traditional model, researchers are encouraged to consider how these biases may affect scientific observations and conclusions. I follow this approach in my research as well and strive to reflect much more in my analysis on how my own positionality, gender, experiences, and the general context I am in (relationship with participants, my age, etc.) influence my work.

Moreover, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's (2006) work on digital cultures examines how habits and infrastructures shape social interactions and power dynamics. Her insights into the non-neutrality of digital networks are crucial for understanding how these platforms can perpetuate or disrupt existing gender inequalities. This perspective encourages a critical examination of how digital tools might

reinforce traditional expectations or offer opportunities for subverting them through new forms of engagement.

To be concrete, by incorporating her discussion on habits, where she argues that new technological habits are formed in times of crisis: "habit + crisis = update," I will better understand how certain habits and practices have developed among some couples. Chun (2006) examines how users of digital media are shaped as "neoliberal subjects" who are encouraged to change their habits with the promise of happiness, efficiency, or productivity. This pressure for constant updating and change leads to new products quickly becoming commonplace. With this awareness, I will also focus on whether this phenomenon appears in the research and allows me a deeper understanding of how and why certain technologies are used and whether participants align with Chun's arguments.

By integrating these feminist theories into my research, I can critically assess how digital technologies influence the negotiation of roles and responsibilities in long-distance relationships. These perspectives help uncover how digital tools can be leveraged to challenge entrenched gender norms and foster more equitable partnerships, ultimately aiming to promote equality and empowerment through technology in personal relationships.

3.3.1 Technofeminism

Judy Wajcman's technofeminism provides a critical framework for understanding the mutual shaping of gender and technology. This theory emphasizes that technology is both a source and consequence of gender relations, highlighting how digital tools can either reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles. This approach is essential for analysing how technology facilitates shared emotional labour and caregiving responsibilities in long-distance relationships, promoting more balanced dynamics.

Judy Wajcman's work is particularly relevant in this context. In her seminal book "Technofeminism" Wajcman (2004) argues that technology is not simply a neutral tool but is shaped by and reinforces gendered power relations. She emphasizes how technological development has historically been dominated by men, which has led to the design and use of technologies that reflect masculine values and priorities. This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of long-distance relationships, where digital tools like video calls, messaging apps, and social media platforms are central to maintaining intimacy. Wajcman's (2004) insights suggest that these technologies may reinforce traditional gender roles, with men often being positioned as more technically adept or as initiators of communication, while women may be expected to engage more emotionally or passively in these interactions.

Wajcman (2004) also highlights the concept of technoculture, where masculinity is closely tied to technical expertise, further marginalizing women in technological spaces. This is particularly relevant in long-distance relationships, where access to and proficiency with technology can influence the balance of power between partners. For example, if one partner (often the male) is more comfortable using digital tools, they may control the frequency and mode of communication, reinforcing traditional gender dynamics.

Furthermore, STS feminist theories emphasize that technologies often reflect and reinforce existing gender inequalities (Mol, 2002; Haraway, 1991). Technologies are frequently designed and utilized in ways that privilege masculine perspectives and experiences (Chun, 2006), potentially disadvantaging women and other marginalized groups. In the context of long-distance relationships, this can manifest in reinforcing traditional gender roles, where men might be seen as the initiators of communication and women as passive recipients (Gitelman, 2006). This perspective aligns with my research question about the specific communication strategies used by heterosexual monogamous couples and highlights the need to consider how gender influences these interactions.

I will incorporate this approach into my analysis to examine whether participants exhibit these traits when using technology within their gender roles. Similar to Haraway's Cyborg Theory, the arguments by Wajcman, Chun, and Gitelman will assist in understanding potential differences in technological proficiency between men and women. For instance, if participants mention certain technical issues, I will consider these discussions.

To summarize, STS feminist theories offer a valuable framework for analysing the gendered aspects of technologies in long-distance relationships. By employing this perspective, my research aims to uncover how technologies shape communication, emotional sharing, and connection maintenance among heterosexual monogamous couples. This approach not only enhances our understanding of these dynamics but also informs the development of technologies and practices that promote gender-equitable and inclusive long-distance relationships. Recognizing my own role as a researcher within this context further enriches the analysis by incorporating an awareness of how personal experiences intersect with academic inquiry.

3.4 Actor Network Theory

The last and complementary theory that I incorporate into my research because I think it offers a valuable theoretical framework is the Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT, articulated by scholars

like Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, provides a critical lens through which to examine the interplay between human and non-human actors in long-distance relationships. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for analysing how technologies, such as smartphones and videoconferencing tools, are not neutral but actively shape the dynamics of communication and emotional connection between partners. According to Latour (2005), technologies are "society made durable," meaning they embody social relations and influence how these relations are maintained over time. In the context of long-distance relationships, technologies become integral actors that can redefine traditional roles and expectations, potentially altering how partners interact and maintain intimacy despite physical separation.

ANT emphasizes that both human and non-human entities possess agency within networks, contributing to their formation and evolution. This perspective highlights how technologies are not merely passive tools but active participants that shape communication dynamics (Latour, 2005). For instance, video calls can create a sense of presence that helps sustain intimacy across distances, yet they also introduce challenges such as managing time zone differences or ensuring privacy during conversations. As Callon & Law (1997) describe in their concept of "translation," actors within a network negotiate and redefine roles, which in long-distance relationships can manifest as partners adapting their communication styles to fit technological constraints or capabilities. This process can lead to shifts in power dynamics, where one partner may become more reliant on certain technologies due to accessibility or familiarity, thus altering the balance of interaction.

Material conditions also play a significant role in shaping long-distance relationships from an ANT perspective. Disparities in access to technology due to economic or geographical factors can impact relationship dynamics significantly. If one partner has limited access to reliable internet, it may affect their ability to maintain regular communication, thereby influencing the stability of the relationship network. Latour (2005, p. 7) argues that *"the social is not a special domain but a principle of connections,"* underscoring how material conditions like access to technology are integral to sustaining social ties. These disparities highlight the importance of considering how economic inequalities can affect partners' ability to engage with each other effectively.

As a researcher employing ANT, I will specifically use those thoughts to recognize one's positionality within the network being studied. Similarly to the feminist acknowledgment of positionality mentioned above, I will be paying attention to my personal experiences and biases, which might influence interpretations, ensuring a more nuanced analysis of how technologies mediate long-distance relationships. Reflexivity in research helps maintain transparency and enriches the understanding of complex network interactions. By acknowledging one's role as an actor within the

research network, I can better appreciate how my perspectives might shape findings, ensuring insights that are both accurate and relevant to individuals navigating long-distance relationships.

In conclusion, Actor-Network Theory offers a valuable framework for analysing the role of technology in long-distance relationships. By highlighting the agency of both human and non-human actors, ANT provides insights into how technologies shape communication patterns, power dynamics, and cultural practices within these relationships. This approach not only enhances our understanding but also informs the development of more inclusive and equitable technological solutions for couples separated by distance.

4 Research questions

In this next subsection, I will attempt to briefly outline the research questions that I will specifically address in my work. I have one main question and three supplementary sub-questions that should contribute to answering it.

4.1 Main Research Question

The main research question of this study—*What practices do heterosexual monogamous couples employ to manage connection and intimacy when physically separated by distance?*—is designed to explore the complexities of maintaining emotional and relational closeness in long-distance relationships (LDRs). This question is central to understanding how couples navigate the challenges of physical separation, with a particular focus on the strategies they adopt to sustain intimacy. The subquestions build upon this foundation by delving deeper into specific aspects such as communication strategies, the role of technology, multisensory engagement, and how these practices manifest in real-life interactions.

Moreover, it seeks to investigate the overarching practices that heterosexual monogamous couples use to maintain their connection and intimacy when they are geographically separated. Physical distance can create significant emotional and psychological challenges for couples, including feelings of loneliness and insecurity, and a potential decrease in emotional closeness. Therefore, understanding how couples manage these challenges is crucial for gaining insights into what makes long-distance relationships successful or difficult.

This research question is broad enough to encompass a wide range of practices—both emotional and practical—that couples might use to maintain their relationship. These could include daily communication routines, shared activities (such as watching movies together online), or even rituals like sending gifts or letters. By asking this question, I aim to uncover not only what specific practices are employed but also why certain strategies are more effective than others in maintaining emotional closeness during periods of physical separation.

4.2 Subquestion 1

The first subquestion—*What specific technologies do heterosexual monogamous couples use?*—narrows the focus to communication, which is widely recognized as one of the most critical elements

in maintaining any relationship, especially long-distance ones. Research has shown that effective communication can significantly enhance relationship satisfaction in LDRs (Holtzman et al., 2021). However, not all forms of communication are equally effective; some technologies may foster greater intimacy than others.

This subquestion aims to explore both *how* couples communicate and *what tools* they use to facilitate that communication. For example, video calls may allow for richer interaction compared to text messaging because they enable visual cues like facial expressions and body language (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). On the other hand, asynchronous communication methods like texting or email might offer more flexibility but could lack the immediacy needed for real-time emotional support.

By examining the role of technology in these relationships, this subquestion seeks to understand how different platforms influence emotional connection. Technologies such as video calls, messaging apps, or even virtual reality (VR) can provide varying levels of sensory engagement and immediacy. Understanding what technologies are preferred—and why—can offer valuable insights into how modern tools help bridge the emotional gap caused by physical distance.

4.3 Subquestion 2

The second subquestion—*How do heterosexual monogamous couples engage multiple senses to enhance their connection and intimacy despite being geographically separated?*—addresses another critical aspect of relational intimacy: *sensory engagement*. In face-to-face relationships, partners can engage all five senses—touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste—which play an essential role in fostering closeness and intimacy (Howes, 2003). However, in long-distance relationships, many of these sensory experiences are limited or entirely absent, so by this question I would like to find out how these senses are related to the maintaining of the connection of the couples, which senses are used for this purpose and how.

By focusing on multisensory strategies, this subquestion aims to uncover innovative ways that couples maintain a sense of closeness beyond verbal communication. It also opens up possibilities for exploring how emerging technologies might further enhance these sensory connections in ways that were previously unavailable.

4.4 Subquestion 3

The third subquestion—*Which insights into the multisensory strategies used to maintain connection and communication are revealed during interactions with individuals in long-distance relationships?*—takes a reflexive approach by incorporating my own experiences as both a researcher and someone who shares a form of long-distance relationship with the participants. This subquestion is designed not only to gather insights from the interviewees but also to reflect on my own observations during online interviews conducted via video conferencing platforms.

Given that all interviews were conducted online due to geographical constraints or convenience—and that some participants were already known to me through previous interactions—this subquestion allows me to draw from my own experiences interacting with the participants. These interactions provide an additional layer of understanding about how digital platforms mediate not only their relationships but also my relationship with them as a researcher. Through this lens, I aim to complement the findings by reflecting on how our shared experiences in online spaces contribute to my understanding of their multisensory strategies.

This reflexive approach acknowledges that my role as both an observer and participant in these online interactions offers unique insights into how digital environments shape relational dynamics. By engaging with participants through similar mediated channels as they use with their partners (e.g., video calls), I can better understand how these technologies facilitate or hinder connection from both an external and internal perspective. This methodological angle enriches the overall findings by providing a more nuanced view of how technology mediates not just romantic relationships but also researcher-participant dynamics.

5 Research field and methods

This chapter presents the research methodology employed to explore the practices and technologies employed by heterosexual monogamous couples in establishing and preserving connections when physically separated by distance. It consists of the research design, which contains the method of qualitative interviewing that I used, the recruitment method complemented by the commented actual process, and the methods that I used to analyse the data that I gathered.

5.1 Research Design

My research design employs qualitative methodology (Jensen & Lauri, 2016). Through qualitative research, I aim to explore the intricate nuances and subjective experiences within practices and technologies in LDRs, shedding light on the ways in which individuals navigate and make meaning of their relationships across geographical distances (Jensen & Lauri, 2016). Utilizing methods such as interviews and a little observation, I seek to capture the multifaceted nature of technology-mediated communication in long-distance relationships. By prioritizing understanding the "how" and "why" behind the use of technology in maintaining intimacy and connection over long distances (Charmaz, 2014; Jensen & Lauri, 2016), this approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the underlying dynamics and intricacies of the topic. Through qualitative inquiry, I endeavour to generate in-depth insights that contribute to a nuanced understanding of the role of technology in shaping and sustaining long-distance relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Jensen & Lauri, 2016).

The reason why I chose this approach over, for example, ethnography or quantitative research is quite simple. At first, if I refer back to the part where I discuss the research that has already been conducted on this topic, I see a very significant research gap in terms of qualitative research. I was able to find mainly quantitative approaches, which, however, never directly addressed the insights I would like to clarify in my research, such as various sensory perceptions related to how individuals experience and interpret physical separation and the role of shared technologies in these experiences. These insights are crucial for understanding the nuanced ways technology mediates intimacy and connection. Also, due to the difficulty of selecting participants and the scope of the field itself, I did not choose ethnography, as it would likely be extremely challenging to enter the lives of my subjects and observe their behaviour.

However, my multisensorial approach compensates for this by allowing me to explore sensory dimensions through interviews and participant interactions. There remains a possible question as to

why I did not focus on netnography, which would suit both my research intent and the field I study. I excluded this approach because it would be very difficult to navigate such a delicate environment and also because, from my experiences with previous research of this type, such as challenges in maintaining participant engagement and accurately interpreting online interactions without in-person context, I do not have very good experience.

In my research methodology, as previously outlined, I have chosen to incorporate a multisensorial approach, as informed by Sarah Pink's (2011) work, to explore the sensory experiences that define human interactions with technology in long-distance relationships. This method, often seen in educational contexts as a "learning" approach, allows for a comprehensive examination of both cognitive and verbal elements, as well as the embodied, affective, and sensory dimensions of these interactions. By employing techniques such as participant observation (Pink, 2011) while being myself a part of a certain long-distance relationship with my actors, I aim to capture the myriad ways individuals interact with technology in their relationships, focusing on aspects like touch, sound, visual aesthetics, and spatiality. This approach seeks to unravel the complex relationship between technology and sensory perception, highlighting how various senses contribute to building intimacy and connection across distances.

As Sarah Pink (2011) suggests, recordings can capture social actions, discourses, material configurations, textures, and other elements that she refers to as "modes." When these modes are translated into different media, certain semiotic elements may be lost or transformed. For instance, while cameras might miss some semiotic modes present in speech or writing, they also offer unique affordances that these other forms do not. This underscores the importance of understanding how different media can influence the meaning-making process (Pink, 2011).

I understand the interview less as a data collection exercise and more as a shared conversation through which new ways of knowing are produced. However, for the method I discuss here, *"talking is combined with walking and image making with research participants"* (Pink, 2011, p. 271), which for my purpose is quite impossible. That is why I took it from a different angle. To be concrete, I tried to approach this method from two directions. Given my research questions, it concerns the sensory perceptions of the research subjects themselves and thus their perception of geographically distant relationships using all senses and shared artifacts and technologies with them. This approach allows me to gather insights into how sensory experiences like touch, sound, and visual aesthetics contribute to maintaining intimacy. Additionally, it considers my situatedness in this issue; during the overall research process, several aspects emerged that included sensory and emotional perceptions associated both with the relationship itself and with interaction with me. I am aware that this method is mainly used in connection with ethnography; however, as I have already mentioned, unfortunately

ethnography in the true sense cannot be directly implemented in my research. Therefore, I will use this approach for qualitative interviews and voice and video analysis, which are ultimately part of ethnographic research.

Furthermore, recognizing the inherently subjective nature of all research, I draw on Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of *situated knowledge*. This perspective acknowledges that all knowledge is shaped by the specific contexts and positions from which it is produced. By embracing this framework, I aim to reflect critically on how my own positionality influences the research process and outcomes. This involves employing reflective practices to address potential biases introduced by my presence and triangulating data sources to ensure a balanced interpretation. These additions aim to clarify my methodology's unique contributions and address potential limitations while maintaining the integrity of the original text.

5.1.1 Recruitment and Sample Selection

The recruitment of participants was done with the help of verbally describing my intention within the circle of my acquaintances, who then occasionally confided in me that they knew a suitable candidate who would fit my research purpose. Thanks to these gatekeepers, I gained access to participants who met the criteria I had set for my study. I made this selection in order to ensure a careful balance between familiarity and objectivity. As outlined, the difficulty lies in establishing trust with participants, especially considering the sensitive nature of the questions. Leveraging my circles of acquaintances is a pragmatic strategy, as it introduces a degree of trust into the recruitment process, making it more likely for participants to share candid insights. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, emphasizing the importance of rapport and trust between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

In these cases, I then asked these acquaintances of mine, using the technology I was used to communicating with them, for any contact information for these candidates. I mostly communicated via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, but in some cases, this recruitment was also done via email. In some cases, another actor was recommended to me, whom I knew and who further knew someone who would fit my research. This created an interesting chain that sometimes generated several levels of communication. Referring to the previous paragraph, this method of obtaining respondents could have contributed to the fact that the actors I eventually managed to interview were reassured both by their closer friends and by the openness and information provided. Communication through technology and thus indirectly could also have increased my chances that they would not feel pressured since, in the worst case, they could simply ignore the message and would not have to be

directly confronted with an unpleasant situation where I or their closer friends might pressure them into doing something they were not interested in.

I must admit that this first step was the most challenging from my perspective. I had to remind myself several times when communication was stagnant, as platforms like email do not directly indicate whether an email has been delivered and read. Therefore, I had to consider how long to wait before reminding the recipient. Even with WhatsApp or Messenger, the information about a delivered message often did not provide any clarity, as I was unsure whether to remind the person or if the displayed message meant they were not interested. In many cases, I did not know the actors at all, so I was uncertain about how to communicate with them and how to address them, and even after the conversation took on a more "friendly" tone, I was still hesitant about whether to maintain a professional, distanced researcher attitude or to act more familiarly in the spirit of trust and openness with the actor. In the end, I decided based on the feeling I got from the actor's messages. If I sensed that a wave of warmth would not intimidate them, I became less formal after a certain time; otherwise, I remained at a purely polite level. I also realize that this decision was influenced by my previous (non-)acquaintance with the actor and their age.

For example, for someone I knew by sight and knew to be between 30 and 40 years old, I initially wrote formal emails with a greeting and a formal farewell, but towards the end of our arrangement, I only sent replies to any questions, and emoticons from punctuation occasionally appeared in the messages. While with a far older participant that I have never seen in real life, I stayed very formal throughout our correspondence. I also adopted a warmer approach when we moved from email to WhatsApp, where I dared to send emojis as well. If the conversation was from the beginning on WhatsApp or Messenger, I usually knew the actor partially in advance; therefore, the conversation was rather informal from the start. However, my feelings were still confused—perhaps precisely because of this—and I felt nervous because I was not used to discussing such delicate matters of a rather professional nature with these acquaintances. Therefore, in some cases, I carefully considered the wording and form of communication several times.

These feelings reminded me that this is exactly how people in long-distance relationships may sometimes feel when communicating through these channels, which often distort many things. Of course, in my case, it was a completely different intention, but even this first experience reminded me of how difficult it can sometimes be to understand only written messages if one does not have sufficient context. This realization underscores the importance of exploring the role of different sensory modalities beyond just visual and auditory cues, highlighting how written communication can lack nuance without additional sensory input or context. These additions aim to enhance clarity and provide additional context while maintaining your original text's integrity.

5.1.1.1 Participants:

To prevent possible confusion, I have also decided to include a table here with the names and basic information about my participants that I consider relevant for the research, bearing in mind that all names are fictitious and the information has been modified to avoid compromising the research purpose but also not to facilitate the identification of the participants. The table provides an overview of the key participant details, including their age, the duration of their relationship and the duration of the long-distance arrangement, and the frequency of their in-person meetings. This information helps contextualize the insights gained from the interviews and video analyses, allowing the reader to better understand the diverse experiences represented in the study.

Fictive name	age	duration of the relationship	duration of the long distance relationship	frequency of visits
Dana	45-50	20 years married	with changes/brakes10 years	each 1 month
Jack	40-45	20 years married	2 years	each second week
Peter	50-55	25 years married	1,5 year	each 6 months
Nela	55-60	30 years married	4 years	each 3 weeks
Patric	30-35	2 years partners	6 months	each 6 months
Charles	35-40	1 year partners	3 months	each second week
Lily	65-70	45 years married	with changes/brakes 20 years	approximately each 2 months

5.2 Data Collection

The data collection process for this study involved conducting online interviews and gathering information through visual data collection. The following sections will discuss these methods in

detail, highlighting how they contributed to capturing both verbal insights and non-verbal cues from participants.

5.2.1 Online Interviews

Given the sensitive nature of researching long-distance relationships, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to explore the intricacies involved. The chosen method involved semi-structured interviews, as described by Jensen and Laurie (2016, p.173-174), using a conversational technique (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method was selected for several reasons. Unlike classic narrative interviews, this approach mitigated the risk of participants not opening up due to the topic's sensitivity and allowed for the exploration of specific areas of interest. It also provided the opportunity to uncover unexpected insights about participants' practices that might not have been considered when formulating the questions.

The semi-structured format offered a balance: participants could avoid discussing topics they were uncomfortable with, yet still addressed key areas of interest through a basic set of questions. This sometimes led to a free flow of thoughts, revealing emotional and sensory perceptions—an important aim of the research. This method enabled a comprehensive exploration of participants' viewpoints and experiences in maintaining long-distance relationships. By focusing on one individual per relationship, it ensured participant anonymity and mitigated risks related to confidentiality breaches.

Interviews were conducted online, aligning with the theme of long-distance relationships and offering practical advantages like flexibility and accessibility (Jones, 1991). I engaged with each participant in a "long-distance relationship" call, creating a shared virtual space reflective of their experiences. To manage time constraints, I conducted six online interviews and received one written response via email. The sample included three women and four men, aged 30 to 70 years old. Interviews were conducted using platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, or Google Meet, lasting between 25 and 50 minutes, with one written response spanning four pages.

Each interview was unique in its origin and progression. Some interviews were planned days in advance, while in one case with Charles, I received a message half an hour before the scheduled time that it unfortunately could not take place because he had an urgent work meeting planned for that time. Fortunately, we had good and quick communication via WhatsApp, so I received the message immediately and was able to react. On the other hand, in another case with Nela, where I waited about ten minutes in the video room with nothing happening, I experienced great anxiety about what was going on. It was also surprising that when arranging alternative interview times, it sometimes

happened that a participant decided they were willing to connect within twenty minutes of sending a message. It was peculiar to hardly know the participant at all, making it all the more pleasant that the communication was so "easy."

Considering the rather chaotic process of arranging some interviews, I am ultimately glad that I was able to conduct six interviews and communicate with one participant solely through email. I was pleasantly surprised by the diversity of my participants. I did not inquire about specific details regarding them or their relationships in advance to avoid intruding on their privacy. However, after conducting my sixth interview and obtaining written responses to the seventh (see chapter written answer), I concluded that I had gathered a wide range of information from a diverse set of participants and decided that additional interviews were not necessary.

To continue with the process, the interviews were recorded for accurate data preservation. For safety reasons, in case the recording directly on the platform where the conversation took place failed, I also recorded the conversation on my phone, which was always placed next to the computer to effectively capture at least the sound. I informed participants about the recording and ensured their comfort with it. The recordings were saved with generic names such as "Interview 1," "Interview 2," etc., to anonymize them.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and for those conducted in Czech, they were translated into English using DeepL. The original version was kept because for translations of citations used in this work, I attached the original wording below. Verbatim transcription was chosen because not only words but also intonation and filler words can convey emotions or impressions about questions or answers. Where it was important not to omit this aspect, I expressed how the person sounded—whether they were laughing or serious—next to the transcription using italics. Fictional identifiers replaced participants' real names for their safety.

5.2.2 Written Answer

Unexpectedly, within my research, I found myself utilizing modified methods in one particular instance. Instead of conducting interviews as initially planned, I opted for written responses to questions that would typically be posed verbally. My participant suggested this alternative because of their very busy schedule and also because of the difficulty of attending online. It was her decision and request towards me, which I naturally respected and was grateful for even this form of information since their written responses were very beneficial for my research. The disadvantage was that this interview did not include any observations from my multisensory analysis perspective but only

information provided on paper. Furthermore, a significant drawback was that I could not directly ask follow-up questions on issues that might arise during an interview and could only work with the data provided to me. On the other hand, this method was very helpful for transcription as it eased my workload. At least one interview was already transcribed and could thus be easily coded immediately. In summary, I am aware that this method presents certain limitations regarding my research and that I might not have obtained as much relevant information through it; however, even as an alternative method, it helped me acquire data from a very interesting participant that otherwise I would not have had.

5.2.3 Visual Data Collection

In addition to conducting online interviews, visual data collection was an integral part of this research, aimed at capturing the non-verbal communication that accompanies verbal exchanges. This process involved systematically reviewing the recorded interview videos to observe and document participants' behaviors, gestures, voice tones, and facial expressions. By focusing on these visual cues, I sought to gain deeper insights into the emotional and sensory dimensions of participants' experiences in long-distance relationships. During the video review sessions, I meticulously noted any significant gestures or changes in voice tone that might indicate emotional responses or attitudes towards specific topics. For example, a participant's shift in posture or a change in facial expression when discussing certain aspects of their relationship provided valuable context that enriched the verbal data. These observations helped identify patterns and themes that were not immediately apparent from the transcripts alone.

The visual data collection process was facilitated by using a structured note-taking approach, where each video was watched multiple times to ensure no subtle detail was overlooked. I categorized these observations into themes such as "emotional response," "engagement level," and "non-verbal agreement or disagreement," which later informed the hermeneutical analysis. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how participants express themselves beyond words, offering a holistic view of their interactions and experiences.

Moreover, Pink's (2011) work on sensory ethnography suggests that understanding emotions involves more than just observing visual cues like gestures and facial expressions; it requires considering how these visual elements interact with other sensory inputs such as voice tone and even the physical environment in which interactions occur. Her methodology encourages researchers to engage empathetically with participants' experiences by immersing themselves in the sensory world of the

subjects, which also led me to gain deeper insights into how participants emotionally experience their interactions.

By incorporating multisensorial perspectives, I could achieve a holistic view of emotional expression that goes beyond verbal communication. Pink's (2011) approach suggests that emotions are not only expressed through visible actions but also through other sensory channels that might not be immediately apparent. This aligns with the structured note-taking approach described, where repeated viewings and categorization of observations help capture subtle emotional nuances. Overall, Sarah Pink's (2011) multisensorial perspectives allow for a more nuanced interpretation of emotions in visual data collection, enriching the analysis and aligning with contemporary methodologies that emphasize the interconnectedness of sensory experiences in social research.

5.2.4 Ethical Considerations

Maintaining ethical standards is paramount in this research, especially considering the sensitive nature of the questions to the participants. All participants were informed in advance about the research's purpose, funders, and potential implications. At the start of the recruitment process, I sent them a document briefly describing the research, including rough outlines and question categories that I planned to ask during the interview. While this step may have impacted the results as participants could prepare for the questions, I believe it was necessary for them to be willing to participate. This step aligns with ethical guidelines (Bryman, 2016) and demonstrates a commitment to transparency and participant autonomy. Before recording, I asked for their consent and, in some cases, reassured them that only I would have access to the recording and that it would be deleted as soon as its anonymous transcript was produced. Before commencing the interview, I also asked again if they truly consented to the interview.

The emphasis on anonymity and data security extends to the dissemination of findings, where actors and their explored content are presented anonymously in all outputs. Therefore, I changed not only the names of the participants but also information that could potentially lead to their identification. I aimed to do so without influencing the results, which was not so hard to do since the information that had to be changed in most cases was not the core of the research. However, the safety of the participants always takes precedence. This measure is taken to protect participants from potential repercussions, ensuring their rights, well-being, and secrecy are preserved (Bryman, 2016).

5.3 Limitations and faced issues

The section on limitations and faced issues addresses several key challenges encountered during the research process. It includes discussions on the validity of participants' answers, potential selection bias introduced through recruitment methods, and technical limitations experienced during data collection. Each of these aspects is explored to provide a comprehensive understanding of the constraints and considerations impacting the study's findings.

5.3.1 Validity of Answers

It is necessary to consider the limitation that the information provided may not be entirely true. To minimize this limitation as much as possible, questions were carefully constructed to be clear, non-intrusive, and sensitive to the participants' comfort levels. However, during the interviews, participants did not seem overly nervous, and some had no trouble opening up and fully relaxing during the conversation. I also carefully observed, whenever possible, the participant's reactions on camera, such as fidgeting. Therefore, my results are partly influenced by visual cues that complement the information obtained.

This approach aligns with interpretivism, which emphasizes understanding subjective experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to them. Interpretivism acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that researchers must consider the context in which information is provided (Myers, 2008). By observing non-verbal cues and considering participants' comfort levels, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences within their specific social contexts. However, it is also important to remember that even visual data may not represent the complete truth. Interpretivism values multiple perspectives and recognizes that individuals may act differently when observed or when interacting with someone they do not know personally. This critical stance is essential in interpretivist research, where understanding the diversity of human experience requires careful interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. As noted by some sources, participants might behave differently in front of a camera or when their first interaction with the researcher occurs via video, highlighting the complexity of capturing authentic experiences in research.

5.3.2 Selection Bias

Utilizing personal networks for participant recruitment introduces the possibility of selection bias. Even though this term is mostly used in quantitative research, I must mention that even in my qualitative research, the aim was to have as diverse a sample as possible. Since I also know that one is usually not surrounded by people from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, I have to acknowledge that the findings revealed may come from a certain "social bubble." Moreover, by

restricting the sample to only include people older than 30 years, the pool of potential participants and the social circles I finally accessed were even more limited. Nevertheless, to address this limitation, I made efforts to reach out to different social circles and communities in order to find as much diverse information from the participants as possible. Even though I cannot claim complete success in overcoming certain limitations, I still believe that my sample is diverse enough, and the information obtained is highly valuable and interesting for understanding the research topic from the perspective of this specific population.

5.3.3 Technical limitations

Given the nature of my research, which essentially simulates communication in long-distance relationships, I also acknowledge significant technical limitations that emerged during the interviews. Firstly, not all interviews were conducted in my native language, in which I have no trouble expressing myself. Three of the interviews were conducted in English, which sometimes caused complications, and not all questions or answers were precisely articulated. Sometimes, participants struggled to find the right words, which they might have expressed more fluently in their native language. Secondly, connectivity issues arose at times. In one instance, I had to conduct the interview without video because a poor internet connection caused every third word to be inaudible. Thirdly, as I did not have access to a full version of the remote calling software, interviews were sometimes interrupted after 40 minutes, which was frustrating as it required quick communication, interruption of the participants' narratives, and notification of the impending end of the session, followed by a hectic negotiation to continue. Fourthly, I encountered privacy concerns. Although I conducted the interviews mostly in a home environment, there were instances where family members entered the room during the interview, prompting me to quickly turn off the camera and interrupt the conversation momentarily. Similarly, participants sometimes apologized and briefly left the conversation due to, for example, unruly children. Some of these limitations were acknowledged by the participants themselves, and we even discussed them during the interviews. Therefore, I consider it important to mention them.

5.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis section delves into the methodologies employed to interpret the research findings, including hermeneutical analysis, visual analysis, and reflexivity. These approaches are discussed to illustrate how they contributed to a nuanced understanding of the data, capturing both the explicit and implicit aspects of participants' experiences in long-distance relationships.

5.4.1 Hermeneutical Analysis

For my data analysis, I chose to combine two approaches: hermeneutical and thematic analysis. Hermeneutical analysis is characterized by its focus on interpreting the subjective meanings of texts, communications, and human interactions within their sociohistorical contexts (Bhattacharjee, 2024). I adopted this approach primarily because I knew that my conclusions would be heavily influenced by my subjective perception, as well as by what I already knew about my subjects and their past and context: *“the researcher continually iterates between singular interpretation of the text (the part) and a holistic understanding of the context (the whole) to develop a fuller understanding of the phenomenon in its situated context”* (Bhattacharjee, 2024, p. 119).

In addition to hermeneutical analysis, I employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns or themes within the data. Thematic analysis involves systematically examining the data to uncover significant patterns that provide insights into the underlying meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach is flexible and adaptable to various types of qualitative data, allowing me to organize complex information into coherent themes. The process includes familiarizing me with the data, coding it to highlight important features, identifying overarching themes, reviewing and refining these themes, and finally defining and naming them to present a cohesive narrative of the findings.

Initially, I assessed the overall impression of each interview and also used the hermeneutic circle, which indicates that for the whole analysis, I went back and forth, analysing not only the words and written answers but also the expressions and contexts of each participant. Given the nature and topic of the research, all analysis is subject to my personal judgment, making the conclusions inherently subjective.

The process itself began with reviewing notes on impressions or tone of voice, which influenced some conclusions. Next, I focused on the written content, categorizing it into specific codes based on my judgment. This judgment was shaped by the necessity to organize the thoughts systematically into codes that could be then organized into the specific themes corresponding to the research interest. These codes were developed gradually and inductively. For instance, if a mention of contact frequency appeared in the text, I created a "contact frequency" code. This code was present in all interviews and thus established during the initial analysis, continuing to be used in subsequent analyses. Occasionally, a code emerged only after analysing later interviews if a new theme appeared that had not been referenced before. In total, I developed 16 codes; some were used across all interviews, while others were more unique. Based on the organization within these codes, I conducted my final analysis and compiled insights derived from the coding process.

By employing hermeneutical analysis in this manner, I was able to delve deeply into both explicit and implicit aspects of participants' experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the practices and technologies employed by heterosexual monogamous couples in long-distance relationships. This approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of meanings within their specific social contexts.

5.4.2 Visual Analysis

Given the direction my research gradually took, I decided to also use an additional method of visual analysis of the videos recorded during the interviews. Visual analysis involves the systematic examination of visual materials to uncover meanings and patterns that are not always apparent from verbal data (ONG, 2020). This method allows for the analysis of non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, gestures, and other visual cues that can provide valuable insights into participants' emotions and attitudes.

Only in two cases was this material inaccessible: in one case, it was not a verbal interview, and in the other, the connection was very poor, so video was not feasible. Visual analysis was chosen as a complement to traditional data collection methods because it provides an additional layer of understanding by capturing subtle details and non-verbal expressions of participants. These visual cues are crucial for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and emotions, which is particularly important in research focused on sensory perception. By observing the visual aspects of the interviews, I was able to identify nuances in participants' behaviour that might be overlooked in purely textual analysis. This method allowed me to better understand the dynamics of interactions and emotional undertones, contributing to an overall understanding of the practices and technologies used by heterosexual monogamous couples in long-distance relationships.

5.4.3 Reflexivity

As a researcher who is also a woman, my situatedness within this research is significant. I experienced a form of long-distance relationship with my respondents during the study process. This dynamic introduced attributes typical of long-distance interactions into our communication, influencing both my perspective and the research outcomes. Being aware of my positionality allowed me to critically reflect on how my identity and experiences might shape my interpretations and interactions with participants. This reflexivity is crucial for maintaining transparency and acknowledging potential biases within the research process.

Furthermore, reflexivity was also incorporated as an essential component of the analysis process. As the researcher, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, biases, and preconceptions throughout the research process. This introspective approach enabled transparency and acknowledged the potential impact of the researcher on the research process and findings (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity contributes to the overall rigor and credibility of qualitative research.

The reflexive journal played a significant role in my research by serving as a personal log where I could capture immediate reflections before and after conducting interviews. These notes were invaluable during data analysis as they reminded me of nuances that might not have been apparent during the interviews or insights that could easily be forgotten. For instance, they helped me recall personal interactions with participants when I had the chance to meet them in person later. Although I did not code these notes or use them directly in my analysis, they were crucial when examining the content and interpreting audio or visual responses. They provided context for my immediate impressions, which are often difficult to articulate in words.

In addition to capturing insights about the interviews themselves, I also documented my personal feelings, such as whether I was tired or stressed. This helped me understand how my questions or reactions might have been influenced by my state of mind at that time. When reviewing recordings later, these notes served as a reminder of how my emotional and physical state could have impacted my interactions with participants.

Despite recognizing myself as a partial participant in the research due to my sensory perceptions, I did not consider my notes as primary data for serious analysis. Instead, they served as supplementary information to enhance my understanding of the main content. The notes were often hastily scribbled, inconsistent, and focused solely on my personal impressions of situations. Including them as data would have shifted the focus of the research more towards me rather than the participants I interviewed, which was not my intention.

By maintaining this reflexive journal, I could critically engage with my biases and assumptions, ensuring they did not overshadow the participants' voices. This practice reinforced the integrity of my research by allowing me to remain aware of how my perspectives might influence interpretations and by providing a richer context for analysing participant interactions and responses.

6 Maintaining connections and intimacy; analysing the practices

In this chapter, I will attempt to answer my research question through the analysis of conducted interviews and visual analysis of recorded videos, which I will then elaborate on in the discussion. I will first focus on aspects related to the main research question and the first sub-question, as I believe these are most closely connected. Initially, I will highlight insights regarding the practices and technologies used. Then, I will examine how couples discussed using multiple senses to maintain their connection. Gradually, I will outline how each sense was represented among my participants. Finally, I will explain how my personal experience during the research contributed to understanding and thus enhancing the knowledge of practices for maintaining connection and intimacy in long-distance relationships.

6.1 Practices and technologies

In the realm of long-distance relationships, maintaining intimacy and connection poses unique challenges that require innovative communication strategies. The necessity of maintaining a connection emerges as a central theme, with couples expressing a shared understanding that frequent and meaningful communication is vital for preserving their relationships. This aligns with existing research, which underscores the importance of regular interaction in fostering emotional proximity and intimacy in long-distance relationships. The chapter explores how various communication strategies are employed, ranging from daily phone calls and video chats to the use of social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram,

A critical aspect of this investigation is the role of technology in facilitating communication. The study highlights how digital tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Google Meet serve as essential channels for maintaining contact, sharing experiences, and planning future activities. These technologies not only enable couples to stay connected but also help them navigate the logistical challenges of long-distance relationships.

Moreover, the chapter examines how the stage of a relationship influences communication patterns. Couples in newer relationships often engage in more frequent communication as they build trust and familiarity, while those in established partnerships may rely on well-established routines. The involvement of family members adds another layer of complexity, as some participants extend their communication efforts to include children and extended family.

In synthesizing these observations, this chapter aims to construct an overarching argument about the adaptability and resilience of long-distance couples. By focusing on their unique strategies and the role of technology, it seeks to illuminate how these relationships are sustained despite geographical barriers. Ultimately, this study contributes new insights into the dynamics of long-distance relationships, emphasizing the importance of communication in maintaining emotional bonds across distances.

6.1.1 The Necessity of Connection

To understand what techniques couples use, it is first necessary to mention what drives them to maintain long-distance contact. In all cases, there was a consensus that maintaining any connection is key to preserving the relationship and keeping a sense of mutual closeness. Dana emphasized the importance of keeping the relationship alive despite the distance, viewing it as a temporary situation with the hope of living together again: "*Certainly, maintaining the relationship... so we try to work on the relationship and keep it alive even from a distance.*"¹ Similarly, Lily highlighted the effort to maintain an emotional bond: "*Mainly, however, it meant maintaining the emotional relationship between us... it is not changing; it is still strong.*"² Patrick noted the necessity of maintaining some form of connection: "It is a bit obvious... because we need to keep the connection."

These insights reveal that communication serves as both a lifeline and reassurance for couples navigating long-distance relationships. It is not merely about exchanging information but about reinforcing emotional bonds and ensuring that the relationship remains vibrant and resilient despite physical separation. This drive to maintain connection underscores the importance of frequent and meaningful interaction, allowing couples to feel emotionally close and continue building their relationship.

There are many reasons for communication, and because of them, it takes on several roles and is used in various ways. Another aspect worth mentioning is the different natures of relationships studied. Since, as said in the theories chapter, based on the feminists' perspectives, it is very important to acknowledge the context in which the actors are functioning, such as the length of the relationship or the frequency of in-person meetings.

¹ „Určitě udržování vztahu... takže se snažíme na vztahu pracovat a udržet ho živý i na dálku.“

² “Hlavně to však znamenalo udržování emocionálního vztahu mezi námi... nemění se; je stále silný”

It is important to emphasize that some relationships had already lasted several years at the time of research, while others had only been ongoing for a few months. This difference in the stage of relationships can influence the type and frequency of communication. Couples who have been together longer often have established routines and communication habits, which may reduce the need for frequent interaction. In contrast, newer relationships tend to emphasize frequent communication as partners are still building trust and familiarity.

Moreover, understanding the techniques couples use to maintain long-distance contact begins with recognizing the underlying motivations for doing so. A common thread among these couples is the belief that sustaining any form of connection is crucial for preserving the relationship and fostering a sense of mutual closeness. As Dana expressed:

"Certainly, maintaining the relationship. After all these years, we know we've kept the relationship going because there were, for example, two years in between when we were together again... so it really matters to me that the relationship works. We see this situation as temporary, and we believe that we will live together again, so we try to work on the relationship and keep it alive even at a distance."³

This perspective underscores the importance of working on the relationship to keep it alive despite the distance. Lily emphasized:

"Mainly, however, it meant maintaining the emotional relationship between us, the effort to share everything even from a distance. And it was also a certain reassurance that the relationship is fine; it is not changing; it is still strong."⁴

Similarly, Patrick highlighted:

"So I mean, there are a lot of things that you lose about the relationship with the distance, but I think one of the things that we wanted was to still communicate and know what the other person is doing even if we are not there."

³ "Tak určitě udržení vztahu, po těch letech jako víme, že ten vztah jsme udrželi, protože byly mezitím třeba 2 roky, kdy jsme zase byli spolu... takže mám na tom jako záleží, aby ten vztah prostě fungoval, Vnímáme to jako dočasné tu situaci, věříme, že zase budeme žít spolu, takže na tom vztahu se snažíme pracovat a i na dálku se ho snažit udržet živý"

⁴ "Hlavně však to znamenalo udržování citového vztahu mezi námi, snahu vše sdílet i na dálku. A bylo to i jisté ujištění o tom, že vztah je v pořádku, nemění se, je stále pevný."

In summary, communication in long-distance relationships primarily serves to maintain emotional bonds and ensure the relationship remains vibrant despite physical separation. It is not just about exchanging information but about fostering mutual closeness and reassurance that the relationship is strong and enduring. The motivations for maintaining contact often stem from the belief that sustaining any form of connection is crucial, whether through frequent interaction in newer relationships or established routines in longer-term ones. These examples highlight the importance of effort, adaptability, and shared commitment in preserving a sense of togetherness and continuity in long-distance relationships.

6.1.2 Impact of Reunion Frequency on Relationship Closeness

Building on the necessity of maintaining connection through communication, another crucial aspect of long-distance relationships is the frequency with which couples can reunite. This frequency plays a significant role in influencing their sense of closeness and emotional bond. For couples living on different continents, such as Patrick and Peter, reunions are limited to once every six months due to financial and time constraints. In contrast, couples within Europe, Dana, Lily, Nela, Jack and Charles, manage more frequent visits, ranging from every two weeks to three months apart. These variations are often dictated by the partners' schedules rather than just geographical distance.

Research highlights that the frequency of in-person meetings is influenced by external factors like finances, work commitments, and travel logistics. Long-distance couples must navigate these challenges to maintain regular face-to-face interactions. For instance, Lily's demanding job requires frequent travel and extended stays abroad, making her relationship predominantly long-distance. She shared:

*"Being apart is relative, considering that I have been working at universities. The academic year is shorter and has regular holidays; I always returned to Prague for them, sometimes we spent part of them together in Belgium."*⁵

Conversely, Charles, whose relationship is relatively new, strives to minimize the days apart from his partner. He explained:

⁵ "Odloučení je relativní, vzhledem k tomu, že jsem působila na vysokých školách. Akademický rok je kratší a jsou v něm pravidelné prázdniny, vracela jsem se na ne vždy do Prahy, někdy jsme jejich část trávili spolu v Belgii"

"Obviously, as it's a new relationship, we are trying to fix something like... maximum 14 days without seeing each other. And so we are trying this every second weekend, either Vienna or Luxembourg or even somewhere else" (Charles).

The study revealed significant differences in relationship types, contributing to a broad and interesting range of findings. However, a commonality among all couples was the use of a shared language for communication. Participants noted the importance of this factor, especially when compared to previous relationships with language barriers. The ability to communicate in the same language was seen as a significant advantage, fostering emotional intimacy and reducing misunderstandings. This observation aligns with research on intercultural relationships, which underscores the importance of shared language in building strong connections.

6.1.3 Frequency of communication

Now, let's delve into the practices that couples use to maintain communication when they are apart, focusing on the frequency and nature of their interactions. There is considerable variation among participants in how often they communicate. Some couples make it a point to connect daily, ensuring there is not a day without at least one call, message, or other form of communication. Dana shared her experience:

"We are used to solving everything together, so I talk to him several times a day, mainly through WhatsApp, even with video, so we can see each other." ⁶

Dana also noted that her communication dynamics vary with each family member, influenced by their individual personalities. For instance, her husband is very talkative compared to her son, who communicates less frequently. This difference impacts the overall frequency and quality of communication within the family. Dana lamented that both she and other family members are saddened by the fact that her son communicates very little. On the other hand, she appreciated that she has regular contact with others.

Jack also enjoys frequent interactions, facilitated by his wife's routine calls:

⁶ *"Jsme zvyklí všechno spolu řešit, takže jako fakt všechno, že se mnou vlastně několikrát denně přes, převážně přes whatsapp i s videem, jako aby jsme se viděli"*

*"My wife always calls me regularly from the car in the morning when she goes to school... such a daily regular call that suits me. And we chat and discuss what needs to be arranged for the day and what she will be doing, so we know what each other is doing."*⁷ (Jack).

This regularity helps them stay aligned and informed about each other's activities, reinforcing their emotional bond and ensuring that they remain connected despite physical distance.

Frequent communication, as seen in Jack and Dana's relationships, is vital for maintaining intimacy and understanding in long-distance relationships. Regular check-ins, like morning calls, go beyond just sharing information; they offer a chance for meaningful interaction that builds trust and emotional closeness. These consistent routines make partners feel valued and prioritized, which is key to a healthy relationship. Daily interactions also help couples address issues or misunderstandings quickly, preventing them from becoming bigger problems. By discussing their daily plans, Jack and his wife can align their schedules and support each other better. This approach underscores the importance of open communication in reducing misunderstandings and boosting relationship satisfaction. Overall, Jack's experience shows that regular communication is crucial for emotional intimacy and stability, helping couples overcome the challenges of distance and maintain a strong connection.

In contrast, younger participants like Patrick and Charles exhibit a more flexible approach to communication, which is based on mutual agreement rather than a fixed schedule. This flexibility allows them to adapt to each other's changing needs and schedules, fostering a sense of independence and autonomy that can be beneficial in long-distance relationships. Patrick explained:

"No, it's not like we had a plan and a fixed schedule, but it was not a spontaneous thing. We plan this like every week. Like, okay, well, when do you have time for doing this and that?" (Patrick)

This approach highlights the importance of planning and negotiation in maintaining effective communication.

Charles noted how their communication evolved over time:

"Yeah, of course, it was developing from time to time. So obviously, yeah, in the beginning we were even talking during the day when that was possible. But now we rather concentrate on the evenings with a video chat" (Charles).

⁷ *"Žena mi vždycky ráno pravidelně volá z auta, když jede do školy... takový každodenní pravidelný hovor, co mi vyhovuje. A tak si popovídáme a probereme si na ten den, co je potřeba zařídit třeba a co bude dělat, tak až tak nějak víme o sobě, co kdo dělá..."*

This evolution reflects how couples can adjust their communication strategies as their relationship matures and as they become more comfortable with each other's routines. By embracing flexibility, these couples can maintain a strong connection while also allowing for personal growth and independence, which are crucial for sustaining long-distance relationships over the long term.

Development could also appear over time and with the evolution of certain technologies. Lily, who has been in a long-distance relationship intermittently for more than 20 years, mentioned her practices and how they gradually transitioned from one technology to another, each requiring a different connection regime:

"We always communicated regularly; at first, it was through letters and postcards, occasionally phone calls through calling cards (calling was expensive). Later it was SMS, more frequent phone conversations, almost daily emails. We discussed both work matters for each of us, organizational matters of our household, but only the most essential things, or we communicated when we needed the other's advice"⁸ (Lily).

This progression demonstrates how technological advancements have influenced both the frequency and nature of interactions.

On the other hand, Nela and Peter have less regular communication patterns, which reflects a broader trend in how social media influences modern relationships. Peter noted that he generally has a need to talk to someone, which is why he often calls his friends and discusses things that interest him in Czech. He admitted that these calls might even be more frequent than with his wife, as she does not have as much time, but she responds to text messages more often. However, regarding any form of connection, unlike almost all the other participants, he stated that he sees what everyone is doing on social media every day and has information about his loved ones just as they have about him.

However, while this method offers immediacy and connectivity, it may lead to superficial engagement, lacking the depth and intimacy of direct communication. This could potentially create emotional distance from family, reinforcing Peter's desire for deeper connections that are not fully satisfied by his current communication style.

⁸ „Vždy jsme spolu komunikovali pravidelně, na začátku to bylo formou dopisů a pohledů, občas telefonických hovorů přes kartu (telefonování bylo drahé). Později to byly SMS, častější telefonické rozhovory, téměř každodenní e-maily. Jednak jsme spolu probírali pracovní věci každého z nás, organizační věci naší domácnosti, ale jen to nejzásadnější, nebo jsme spolu komunikovali tehdy, kdy jsme potřebovali radu druhého.“

Nela also mentioned that she does not have a regular connection regime, as her husband has his own schedule, and it is relatively difficult to meet daily. However, in a similar spirit to Charles and Patrick, she stated that connection occurs when they agree that they have time for a longer call, including video, which happens about once a week in the evening. This approach highlights the adaptability required in long-distance relationships to balance digital interactions with more meaningful engagements.

Overall, while social media provides significant benefits in maintaining relationships across distances and busy schedules, it also underscores the importance of seeking deeper connections through more personal forms of communication, such as longer planned phone or videocalls that are balancing those certain feelings of distance.

Similar to Peter, Nela mentioned that social media is another source where she can see what her loved ones are doing and interact with them, and she does so quite regularly. She said that at first, for example, her daughter did not want to have her in her “followers” on Instagram, but after she quit the family home, she agreed, and therefore Nela has from time to time the opportunity to see what she is doing through this app. This change signifies an evolution in their relationship, where digital means foster both autonomy and connection. While social media allows Nela to stay updated and interact regularly, it also raises concerns about the depth of these interactions. The absence of non-verbal cues and the potential for misinterpretations can challenge the authenticity of these connections.

These varied approaches underscore how couples adapt their communication strategies based on personal preferences, technological access, and lifestyle demands. Whether through routine interactions or flexible arrangements, maintaining contact remains a vital practice for sustaining relationships across distances.

6.1.4 Diverse Communication Dynamics

Following the frequency of communication, it's essential to explore the diverse roles communication plays in long-distance relationships. Communication varies significantly based on several factors, including the different stages of relationships. A significant factor was that five participants were married and four had children. As already mentioned above, sometimes the interaction of those married couples went beyond the romantic ties and extended the needed bond also to other members of the family. Dana shared:

*"Well, because we share as a family. What they did together that day, so that I know, I was part of it. And sometimes we discuss what's next, or how we two are doing and so on. Not everything needs to be heard by the kids."*⁹

Nela added:

*"We just call in the evening when everyone is home, and sometimes our daughter, who is studying in Copenhagen, joins the call."*¹⁰

She also recounted assisting their child with using a washing machine via a video call:

*"We often deal with everyday things, like the other day my son called me and asked how to use the washing machine. So then... fortunately, he knows how to handle the mobile, so he turned on the camera and showed me the buttons... and so we managed to put the laundry in the washing machine together from a distance, hehe."*¹¹ (Nela).

Moreover, some couples view communication as a primary means of maintaining their relationship by creating a sense of shared experiences and time spent together. Additionally, the promise of support often drives partners to stay connected more frequently. For instance, partners may call each other for advice or assistance with various issues. Jack shared:

*"Yes, sometimes at a certain moment they need tutoring; they have a problem... for example, one of the kids needs help with something, so I try to provide some support, just from a distance. Either with math or I don't know, with some subject that the wife might not know how to handle, so I try."*¹²

These insights reflect research suggesting that involving children and extended family adds complexity to communication patterns in long-distance relationships. Families often establish routines, ensuring both partners and children feel connected despite physical distance. Participants

⁹ "No tak, protože že sdílíme jako rodina. Co třeba ten den dělali společně A tak abych abych věděla, byla u toho. No a někdy se třeba řeší jako co dál, nebo co my dva, jak jsme se měli a tak tak. Nemusí všechno děti slyšet"

¹⁰ "To si prostě zavoláme večer, když už jsou všichni doma a občas se k tomu hovoru připojí i dcera, která už je na studiích v Kodani."

¹¹ "Docela často řešíme i běžné denní věci, třeba tuhle mi volal syn a ptal se, jak se používá pračka. Takže pak... on našťestí s tím mobilem umí dobře, takže si pustil kameru a ukazoval mi ta tlačítka... no a tak jsme společně na dálku zvládli dát prádlo do pračky, hehe"

¹² "To jo třeba v některý moment potřebují doučování, mají problém... třeba jedno z děcek potřebuje s něčím poradit, tak třeba řeším jako nějakou podporu, jen no jako na dálku. Buď to s matikou a nebo já nevím s nějakým prostě předmětem, kterým který si třeba neví rady manželka, tak to zkusím já"

without children focused solely on partner communication. Interestingly, those who were very communicative also discussed interactions with the wider family. Peter noted:

*"My dad doesn't call me either; he's not the type to initiate these phone calls or conversations, so I've not always welcomed it... that he calls me at 6:30 or 7 in the evening. And I quite enjoyed going there, and now we talk more often than we used to."*¹³

Nela mentioned:

*"And I also call my sister quite often because she takes care of our parents, so we discuss what's going on."*¹⁴

These examples illustrate how long-distance relationships extend beyond the couple to involve close family members. This broadening of communication is supported by research showing that wider family and social connections provide emotional support during separation. It's important to recognize that people in long-distance relationships are often cut off not only from their partner but also from friends and family and that the importance of connecting is for them concerning more people than just their partner.

6.1.5 Selective Disclosure and challenges

If I now continue with topics participants mentioned as those they do not discuss with each other—apart from safety concerns—Lily provided an example highlighting this dynamic. She wrote that her husband never burdened her with issues that might worry her without offering her a way to resolve them:

*"For instance, I found out that someone tried to break into our apartment in Prague and broke a window, but fortunately, it was interrupted by a neighbor. My husband came back from our country house, dealt with the police, boarded up the window, etc. He only told me about it after I returned to Prague, and by then everything was fine. There was an effort not to distress the other person, as distance usually contributes to imagining the situation as worse than it actually is"*¹⁵ (Lily).

¹³ "Táta mi taky nezavolá, táta už je na tom jako špatně ten ten ten taky jako neinicioval vlastně nikdy tyhle tyhle jako telefonáty nebo mluvení, tak. Tam jako jsem. Ne úplně jako vždycky přivítal, že mi zavolá v 6 a půl 7 večer. A docela rád jsem tam jako zajel a teďkon spolu teda jako mluvíme častěji, než jsme spolu mluvili"

¹⁴ "No a taky se sestrou si voláme celkem často, protože ona se stará o rodiče a tak, tak se i domlouváme co a jak..."

¹⁵ „Např. jsem se dozvěděla, že se někdo pokusil vniknout do našeho pražského bytu a rozbil okno, byl našťástí vyrušen sousedkou. Manžel přijel z naší chalupy na venkově, vše řešil s policií, dal okno zasklít, apod., mně to

This example illustrates a common strategy in long-distance relationships where partners choose to withhold potentially distressing information to avoid unnecessary worry. This approach aligns with research suggesting that partners often engage in "selective disclosure" to manage the emotional impact of their communications. Selective disclosure involves sharing information in a way that maintains emotional stability and preserves the relationship. Individuals in long-distance relationships may avoid discussing stressful or troubling issues that could exacerbate feelings of distance or helplessness. This behaviour reflects a broader strategy to maintain a positive relational atmosphere and minimize conflict.

Furthermore, Lily's description relates to "emotional buffering," where partners protect each other from stressors to preserve emotional well-being. This strategy can be particularly relevant in long-distance relationships where negative news might be amplified due to a lack of physical presence and immediate support. By choosing not to share certain distressing events, partners aim to prevent unnecessary anxiety and maintain stability in their relationship. This strategy highlights communication's role in managing psychological effects of distance and underscores emotional support's importance in maintaining long-distance relationships.

However, having in mind Chun's (2006) and Haraway's (1988) perspectives on the gender inequalities, it is important to also suggest that Lily's husband was in a powerful position that allowed him to choose what to tell her. Nevertheless, from Lily's perspective, it was a gesture of a favour, more than a showing of power; therefore, I consider these practices also a sense of bonding in long-distance relationships.

Moreover, when discussing challenges in the practices that couples use to maintain any connection, it is impossible to avoid talking about several pitfalls concerning uncomfortable topics to discuss with their partner. Many participants preferred to avoid topics that would lead to disagreements or conflicts. They often felt there was little reason to argue, or they actively avoided conflict because it is unpleasant and detracts from the limited time they have together. The desire to maximize positive interactions when spending time together often lead partners to sidestep contentious issues that might otherwise cause friction.

However, in addition to selective disclosure, managing disagreements and conflicts presents unique challenges in long-distance relationships. Patrick discussed these issues extensively, highlighting how

řekl až poté, co jsem se vrátila do Prahy a už to bylo v pořádku. Byla v tom snaha nezneklidňovat druhého, kdy vzdálenost přispívá obvykle k tomu, že si člověk situaci představuje horší, než je skutečnost.“

technical difficulties can exacerbate misunderstandings during conflicts. He noted, *"For example, we are having an argument, and suddenly there is no connection. So, there are some ideas that are lost because of the Internet... so it's really frustrating."* This highlights a significant challenge in long-distance relationships: the reliance on stable internet connections for communication, which can fail at critical moments, leading to unresolved issues and increased frustration—in other words, the opposite of connection.

Patrick also pointed out the complexity of communicating across multiple platforms. He finds it difficult to process his emotions when he is simultaneously arguing with his girlfriend via WhatsApp and receiving light-hearted messages from her on Instagram. This fragmentation of communication channels can create confusion and emotional dissonance, making it harder for partners to resolve conflicts effectively. The same point was taken from the conversation with Peter, who also mentioned that besides WhatsApp, he uses Messenger, which creates another problem because communication with his closed ones is divided among multiple platforms and is therefore very chaotic.

Continuing with challenges, Patrick was one of the few who openly talked about sending intimate content to his partner. This usually involved sharing personal photos or playful messages with sexual hints. For Patrick, this was a normal and acceptable part of their relationship because, as he put it, *"well, sometimes you have no other options than just enjoy the nude your partner sent you"* (Patrick). However, most others in the study felt differently. They saw such exchanges as unnecessary and risky. *"No, we don't need this because it makes me look forward to seeing my husband even more, and I'm also a bit worried about who might get access to such a photo."*¹⁶ (Nela) Many participants associated these practices with younger people and were concerned about privacy and trust in technology. Some mentioned in this context that one partner was open to these practices, but the other did not feel comfortable, so they decided to stop engaging in them and just enjoy even more the physical meetings.

These issues highlight why it's important for couples in long-distance relationships to learn good ways to solve problems. By being aware of these challenges and finding better ways to communicate, couples can keep their emotional connection strong even when they're far apart. It's crucial for partners to be open and understand each other's comfort levels with technology and communication styles. As technology keeps changing, couples should also be careful about privacy and security to protect their personal information.

¹⁶ *"Ne, já tohle nepotřebuju, protože pak se o to víc těším na manžela a taky se trošku bojím toho, kdo by se k takové fotce mohl třeba dostat"*

In conclusion, due to certain situations and the practices associated with them, individuals in long-distance relationships tend to feel more distant from feelings of connection and especially intimacy. Keeping a long-distance relationship strong is not easy, and it involves dealing with various challenges related to communication, emotional closeness, and resolving conflicts. By talking openly and using flexible strategies, couples can stay connected and make sure their relationship stays strong despite the distance. This means understanding each other's needs and using technology wisely to bridge the gap between them.

6.1.6 Technologies

In the previous sections, I have already outlined that various communication technologies were used in different ways as part of practices for maintaining connection and intimacy. Now, I will specifically focus on which technologies long-distance couples used the most and what were the biggest benefits or, conversely, the greatest challenges they faced when using these technologies.

6.1.6.1 WhatsApp

Among all the technologies mentioned during the interviews, WhatsApp was the one that participants mentioned most frequently; to my considerable surprise, it was the main communication channel for almost everyone. Informants described it as an application that serves for everyday, easy, and personal communication with partners, family, and friends:

"Like WhatsApp, so it's in your pocket." (Charles); "We call via video on WhatsApp; that's the most common form of communication, the most ideal technology." ¹⁷ (Dana); "Yes, mostly, but maybe just through text messages on WhatsApp." ¹⁸ (Peter); "Recently, it has mostly been phone conversations using mobile, mainly WhatsApp" ¹⁹ (Lily).

The widespread use of WhatsApp underscores its effectiveness in bridging the gap created by physical distance. Its accessibility allows users to maintain a constant line of communication, which is crucial for sustaining emotional connections. The app's ability to support various forms of interaction—whether through text, voice, or video—makes it a versatile tool that caters to different communication needs.

¹⁷ „Voláme si s videem přes WhatsApp, to je nejčastější forma komunikace, taková nejideálnější technologie“

¹⁸ „Nejvíc jo, ale třeba jenom těmi jako textovkami na WhatsAppu“

¹⁹ „V poslední době to byly a jsou především telefonické rozhovory pomocí mobilu, hlavně WhatsApp“

WhatsApp also plays a significant role in facilitating dynamics and coordinating interactions across multiple platforms.

*"We have a family group chat on WhatsApp, where we communicate, including my husband. Our daughter occasionally scolds us for not being able to write just the two of us, but I see the group on WhatsApp as the main communication channel in general."*²⁰ (Nela).

WhatsApp also served to inform about other technologies; for example, *"I'll write on WhatsApp, 'You have the power of attorney in the email.'"*²¹ (Peter) or to arrange upcoming video meetings, which could take place on platforms like Zoom or Google Meet. Patrick, who did not use video on WhatsApp, noted that he uses this app to arrange calls with his partner, including agreements on platforms for video calls. Nevertheless, all respondents confirmed that WhatsApp is the easiest and most direct way to communicate about personal matters. Similar to them, I also used this network as the main communication channel with my actors because some of them suggested it as the easiest way to communicate compared to, for example, email. This integration highlights WhatsApp's role not only as a standalone tool but also as a facilitator of broader communication strategies.

Challenges and Adaptations

Although WhatsApp was the most frequently mentioned communication tool, informants also pointed out some shortcomings and complications associated with its use. For example, Peter mentioned that he uses WhatsApp on both his mobile and computer, while his wife does not know how to use the app on the computer, which sometimes complicates their communication, especially when it comes to sending documents or photos that they had to resolve through other technologies, such as email or storage services. Dana also recalled issues with calling via WhatsApp on the computer, where they spent the first ten minutes of the call trying to establish a connection:

*"No, we spent about 10 minutes figuring out what was happening... at the same time, it didn't work on the computer, and it was quite comical... texting on the mobile about what was happening on the computer"*²² (Dana).

²⁰ „S rodinou máme skupinový chat na WhatsAppu, kde komunikujeme i my dva s manželem. Dcera občas peskuje, proč si nemůžeme psát jen my dva, ale já to беру tak, že ta skupina na WhatsAppu je hlavní komunikační kanál obecně“

²¹ „Napišu do WhatsAppu 'plnou moc máš v mailu'“

²² “No, to jsme prostě asi 10 minut zkoumali co se děje jo... zároveň to na tom počítači nešlo a bylo to dost komické... psát si na mobilu, co se děje na počítači”

Patrick had technical problems with WhatsApp too, especially due to limited storage space and security settings related to the phone number. Due to limited storage, he often preferred Google Meet for video calls, which only happen when he is at the computer, significantly affecting the nature of their communication. He also mentioned that after he moved to Europe, when exchanging numbers or devices, messages disappeared, which was particularly unpleasant as he lost access to important documents and photos and had to reconstruct the context of previous conversations with his partner. On the other hand, he considered this aspect a small "cleansing" because it meant he did not have the tendency to look back for evidence in messages that were no longer retrievable.

All those small technicalities reminded me of the theoretical approach highlighted by Wajcman (2004), Chun (2006), and Gitelman (2006), which suggests that the inability to function with technologies is tied more to women than men. However, the example of my analysis on the one hand suggests that for example, Peter could underestimate his wife just because she is a woman; the overall expressions have shown that dealing with technicalities was sometimes an issue both for females and males.

Pictures

Several participants stated that WhatsApp is the easiest and most reliable way to send photos to each other.

*"Through WhatsApp, the quality kind of gets ruined, but I still feel like it's okay. So for viewing on the phone, it's enough. Yes, the quality gets reduced, but if you want to print them, it's still fine"*²³ (Dana).

"Yes, we send some pictures every day by WhatsApp; it is very easy, and like this, she can see what I'm doing. Even when we are together somewhere, afterwards we send each other pictures, so the other one has all of them" (Charles).

This is consistent with research showing that social messaging apps like WhatsApp are widely used for media sharing due to their ease of use and accessibility (Church & de Oliveira, 2013).

However, Dana mentioned that if it's photos someone wants to print, she prefers sending them via email. The reason for this was the common availability of shops where photos could be printed:

²³ *"přes whatsapp ono se ta kvalita jako zničí, ale mě to přitom přijde, že jako. Takže na to prohlížení na mobilu to stačit jako zmenší se kvalita, že jo, ale pokud je takhle chcete vyvolat tak to stačí"*

“Well, I just print the photos at the photo lab; I don’t have to carry anything with me; I simply find that email there and print them from it”²⁴ (Dana).

In summary, while WhatsApp is praised for its accessibility and functionality in maintaining connections across distances, users also acknowledge its limitations and adapt by incorporating other technologies as needed. This adaptability highlights the dynamic nature of long-distance communication strategies.

6.1.6.2 Other used technologies

The topic of "photos" emerged as a significant theme among participants, with Peter and others frequently mentioning the presence of printed pictures in their homes that evoke memories of their partners. Charles noted, *“Well, now we have some printed photos, like on the table...”* Peter elaborated further, describing how his wife had filled their home with framed pictures from the early days of their relationship. He expressed a desire to create a photo calendar again, both for its practical use and for the joy of seeing familiar faces:

“Yes, my wife has photos; like, back when we first started, she had lots of framed pictures. They’re still there... And I even said, we have to make a calendar again because I want a calendar to look at our photos. Now, because the sun shines here where I sit, I took photos from the old calendar and used them as a shade where the blinds don’t reach. So now I have pictures of my two girls, one of us in front of a theatre in Zlín, and pictures of my daughter”²⁵ (Peter).

The significance of printed photos extends beyond mere decoration; they play a crucial role in maintaining emotional ties, particularly in long-distance relationships. This aligns with broader research on material culture, which suggests that physical objects can help sustain connections across distances. Peter and Nela even mentioned engaging with these photos verbally. Peter shared that he uses a photo of his wife as his TV screensaver and greets her image daily: *“So every time I open it, Lucie appears on the big screen here on the TV, sitting on a pebble beach in Primošten. Yeah, like*

²⁴ *“no, ty fotky pak normálně vytisknu ve fotolabu, nemusím s sebou ani nic nosit, prostě si tam najdu ten email a vytisknu to z toho”*

²⁵ *“Jo to jo manželka tam má fotky, kdy už jako měla. Měla tehdy, když jsme, jako když jsme začínali, tak měla na spoustu fotek v rámečku. Ty tam ještě jsou pořád jo... a třeba jsem říkal, musíme zase udělat kalendář, protože já chci mít taky kalendář s sebou, a chci se dívat na naše fotky na kalendář a teď kon, protože my tady vlastně svítí slunce jakoby do já já sedím proti balkonu a proti proti bokům, který se baví, tak mě tady svítí slunce, tak z toho starýho kalendáře jsem vystříhal ty fotky a udělal si clonu na na místě kde nezasahují žaluzie, tak tam mám prostě svoje dvě holky... co to je... s ledovou tříští, sebe s manželkou, jak jsme před před divadlem ve Zlíně, jo a dceřiny fotky a tak.”*

that. And I say to the picture, 'hello.'"²⁶ This practice underscores how visual reminders can foster a sense of closeness despite physical separation.

In contrast to these traditional forms of connection, Charles introduced a unique artifact he encountered during his travels—a cuddle pillow designed to mimic the presence of a partner. He remarked on its appeal:

"The girl had a kind of cuddle pillow, like really a cuddle pillow with hands, even like a man. I think this thing was pretty cool. So, okay, you're sleeping alone, but you still have these cuddle pillows that remind you of your beloved one. So I really like this idea and I want to buy it."

While Charles found this idea intriguing and considered purchasing one, other participants were sceptical. Dana expressed concern that such substitutes might diminish her desire to see her partner in person, while Nela added that owning something like that would make her feel embarrassed. This divergence in opinions highlights ongoing debates about the role of technology and physical objects in emotional relationships.

Beyond photos and this unique mention, Lily brought up that she remembers her husband through jewellery he gave her: *"I wear a necklace that I never take off, even at night, which my husband gave me before we got married, and every time I look at it, I think of him"*²⁷ (Lily). Nela shared something similar regarding clothing her husband left at home: *"Sometimes, when I'm feeling sad, I take one of his shirts from the closet, and it's not just the scent, but it's nice to have something of his close by, you know..."*²⁸ (Nela). Charles also mentioned that his partner intentionally leaves some of her clothes behind, so he has something of hers to hold on to.

Overall, these narratives illustrate how various forms of material culture—whether traditional photographs or innovative artifacts—play critical roles in nurturing emotional bonds and bridging physical gaps between loved ones. While some embrace new technologies to fill emotional voids, others find solace in more conventional mementos that carry personal significance.

Not to forget to mention technologies that were unique; however, precisely because of this, they brought interesting insights to this section, as they provided specifics for maintaining connection in

²⁶ "Takže vždycky, když to vlastně otevřu, tak se mi na velké obrazovce tady na televizi objeví Lucie, jak sedí na oblázkové pláži v primoštnu. Jo tak jako. Jako tam tak tomu obrázku jako řeknu, „ahoj“" "Jo

²⁷ "nosím náhrdelník, který nesundávám ani na noc, který mi dal manžel ještě než jsme se vzali a pokaždé když se na něj podívám, tak si na něj vzpomenu"

²⁸ "No, občas... teda nevím, jestli to souvisí, ale když je mi smutno, tak si ve skříni vezmu jednu z jeho košil na sebe a vnímám hlavně tu vůni, ale i je fajn mít u sebe něco, co je jeho, takže tak..."

the intimate communication of couples at a distance. First, Patrick and Nela were the only ones to mention any connection via Instagram. But unlike Nela, Patrick used this app not for seeing what his girlfriend was doing but more to send funny content. He added that he does not consider the network very secure, so he sees it more as a form of entertainment.

"Yeah, sometimes Instagram. Yeah. We also use Instagram because it's okay. It's... it's a different social network, but we also like to send a lot of memes or a lot of funny videos" (Patrick).

Very interestingly, this fact correlates with a saying that Lily included in her responses: *"I would also add that humour and wit are important"*²⁹ (Lily). Since Lily was only responding directly to my questions by writing down the answer, this statement likely seemed important to her, as it was not directly in answer to any specific question. Both Patrick and Lily emphasized in this regard that maintaining a good relationship also requires a positive mindset and sharing lighter, more humorous content.

But to return to the question of Instagram, while other participants mentioned Instagram as something they know that some of their acquaintances or their children occasionally use, they otherwise think of this network only as something they do not need. On the other hand, in another unique case, a relatively new platform called BeReal was used for closer connections with family and a smaller circle of friends. I was even more surprised that this platform, which is according to the studies mostly used by women between 18 and 24 years old (Statista, 2022), was mentioned by Peter, who is outside of that category. He uses this platform in his family circle and says it is a daily way to see what other members are doing. However, he lamented that even though he can comment on a photo that his wife posts that day, it does not replace the possibility of saying it directly to her face:

*"No, no, BeReal is a photo of where you are and what you are doing at that moment... So it's also information, like she's on the tram... Oh, she's wearing that coat! Yeah, and that's nice information, but it doesn't replace the fact that when I come, I won't say, 'Wow, you wore this today, and that's nice, and this is my gift,' and I can't say that, you know"*³⁰ (Peter).

It is evident that some of these social networks can, and in Peter's case occasionally do, evoke feelings of sadness and separation rather than providing an opportunity to connect with loved ones. On the other hand, both Peter, Nela, and Patrick—who all use similar platforms like Instagram or BeReal—

²⁹ *"Taky bych ráda dodala, že humor a vtip jsou velmi důležité"*

³⁰ *No no BeReal jako je to je fotka že jo kde seš a co v tuto chvíli děláš... Takže i to je taková informace, jako je zrovna jela tramvají.. Jeeee, ona na sobě tenhle ten kabát! Jo i to je jako informace, která jako je hezká, že jo, jo a ale nenahradí to to, že když jako přijdu, tak jako neřeknu, jeee, ty sis dneska vzala jako tohleto a jako to je fajn a to je můj dárek a takhle to nemůžu říct, že jo no"*

appeared to ultimately be glad that through these, they can at least see what their loved ones are doing.

In general, the most frequently mentioned platforms for communication were through social media, specifically via WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Google Meet, and Zoom. Most informants also did not neglect to mention previous use of SMS, which, although no longer as common, is still present. This was followed by the use of emails, a brief mention mostly related to work but also, as previously stated, for sending documents or when a couple was dealing with something formal (loans, house purchases, etc.).

Staying with the different used technologies, Jack pointed out that since he and his wife often plan things for the future, they use a shared Google calendar to which both have access, so they can see what the other is doing, which is also very important for them:

"For example, we have a shared calendar where we put important things, like meetings, that need to be arranged. We use it a lot, and we also plan things over the phone, like a holiday... So we've already planned something in that calendar, as we agreed. We just need to confirm it"³¹ (Jack).

Studies have shown that maintaining regular communication through digital platforms helps couples feel emotionally connected despite physical distance (Holmes, 2010). Connection is thus created even through seemingly different platforms that do not always have a communicative nature but still support the connection of people in long-distance relationships.

6.1.7 Conclusion

To conclude, heterosexual monogamous couples in long-distance relationships employ a range of communication strategies and technologies to maintain their connection. The necessity of maintaining connection is paramount, as it not only preserves the romantic bond but also extends to family and social networks, providing a support system during periods of separation. Communication serves multiple roles, from reinforcing emotional bonds to managing daily tasks and offering mutual support. The frequency and nature of communication vary among couples, influenced by factors such as relationship stage, family dynamics, and technological access.

³¹ *"Třeba máme prostě sdílenej kalendář se toho asi dáme věci prostě důležitý, že jo, schůzky, co je potřeba zařídit no. Jakoby to využíváme hojně no a třeba i plánujeme po telefonu třeba nějakou nějaký volno dovolenou. No tak už jsme si něco naplánovali v tom kalendáři, jak jsme se dohodli. Ještě si to potvrdíme"*

The impact of reunion frequency is another critical aspect, with more frequent in-person meetings fostering a stronger sense of closeness. However, couples must navigate challenges such as financial constraints and work commitments to maintain these interactions. The use of a shared language significantly enhances communication effectiveness, reducing misunderstandings and fostering intimacy.

Regular communication through phone calls, messages, or video chats is crucial for sustaining closeness. Platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom facilitate these interactions, with WhatsApp being particularly popular for sharing photos and planning activities. Despite its benefits, couples face challenges such as technical difficulties and privacy concerns, which require careful management to maintain effective communication. Additionally, physical objects like photos or clothing serve as tangible reminders of partners, reinforcing emotional bonds.

Ultimately, the success of long-distance relationships hinges on open dialogue, flexibility in communication strategies, and a commitment to overcoming the inherent challenges of distance. By understanding each other's needs and leveraging technology wisely, couples can sustain their emotional connection and ensure the resilience of their relationship despite geographical barriers.

6.2 Multisensorial discoveries

To answer the second subquestion question, I will now share insights concerning the four senses: touch, hear, vision, and smell. Based on Sarah Pink thoughts, I am trying to understand how the participants are incorporating their senses into the experience of being apart from their partner.

6.2.1 Touch:

In long-distance relationships, the absence of physical touch is often one of the most challenging aspects for couples to navigate. Physical contact is irreplaceable in relationships, and its lack can leave a significant void that many couples find difficult to overcome. *"I would at least kiss her on the cheek or something like that... there's no passionate physical contact, but I miss it nonetheless. It's something that communication just can't replace."*³² (Peter). Similarly, Patrick shared that when his partner is struggling, *"it's like needing a hug, but it's not happening,"* he is very frustrated that he cannot do anything but virtually be there for her.

³² "Jo, já aspoň jako já nevím, políbila na tvář nebo nějak jako žádný, jako vášnivý politiky by to už stejně nebyly. Jo ale ale jako jo, to to jako chybí, že jo, a to na tom prostě ta komunikace neudělá, to si o tom můžeme jenom povídat."

Despite these challenges, couples often find alternate means of expressing affection. Sending gifts or handwritten letters can serve as substitutes for physical touch, reinforcing emotional bonds. Patrick noted, *"The most beautiful parts are having another channel to connect, like sending cards or letters by post."* Lily also shared, *"We often send postcards by mail and also letters, into which we sometimes insert a small gift or keepsake."*³³ These tangible items provide a sense of closeness that transcends digital communication, giving partners something they can hold and cherish.

Nela reflected on how communication has evolved: *"Back then, we didn't have mobile phones, so letters were how we communicated. I still have some saved, and it's special."*³⁴ Although digital communication has made interactions more immediate, the emotional depth of handwritten letters remains irreplaceable. That shows that tangible forms of communication often feel more personal and sentimental. These tokens of affection help couples maintain a sense of shared history and emotional closeness across distances.

The sense of touch is not only about the absence of the physical presence of a partner but also involves dealing with the physical aspects of technology used to connect with them. Lily discussed early challenges with technological limitations like foreign keyboards and French-language programs. Over time, she and her partner adapted and developed new ways of connecting emotionally and mentally from afar. Peter also mentioned practical issues with devices: sometimes even holding a phone can be cumbersome, though it allows flexibility in placement despite difficulties in finding the right spot for video calls.

While technology cannot fully replicate the nuances of physical presence, these creative solutions and symbolic gestures enable couples to sustain their connection despite geographical separation. By focusing on emotional closeness and leveraging available tools creatively, partners can navigate the challenges posed by distance and maintain their intimate bonds.

6.2.2 Sound and Hearing

The sense of hearing plays a significant role in emotional connectivity for many individuals in long-distance relationships. Participants often express how the sound of a loved one's voice can evoke emotions that text-based communication cannot replicate. Dana, for instance, mentioned, *"I look*

³³ *"Jsou to především pohledy zasílané poštou. A také dopisy, do kterých vkládáme například drobný dárek, upomínku."*

³⁴ *"Tehdy jsme neměli mobilní telefony, takže jsme spolu komunikovali přes dopisy. Některé mám stále schované a je to něco výjimečného."*

forward to hearing his voice."³⁵ highlighting the anticipation and emotional connection that come with auditory communication. Similarly, Jack noted, *"Sometimes we video call, but it's enough to hear her voice,"*³⁶ suggesting that for some, the auditory experience alone is sufficient to maintain intimacy.

Nela shared a practical aspect of this preference: *"Sometimes our Wi-Fi just cuts out, so we've gotten used to only hearing each other, and it doesn't bother us at all. You can still find joy in just hearing their voice, and it's much easier than texting."*³⁷ This underscores how hearing a partner's voice can provide comfort and emotional clarity, even when visual cues are absent.

However, preferences can vary significantly among individuals. While some are comfortable with only auditory communication, others find it challenging to fully understand the intent behind certain thoughts or emotions without seeing facial expressions. Patrick emphasized that auditory communication involves more than just words—it includes tone, rhythm, and background noise: *"It's way different to read something than to hear it, with the tone, the beat, and the noise behind"* (Patrick). He also noted the frustration when background noises interfere with clarity: *"Delft is so windy, so when we were like walking into, we were always complaining how shitty it is because we hear every third word."*

This aligns with studies suggesting that voice communication is often preferred over text in long-distance relationships because it conveys emotions more clearly through changes in tone and pitch. Hearing a partner's voice provides more emotional clarity than text alone, which lacks subtle cues necessary for understanding. While text communication filters out nonverbal cues, voice calls reintroduce these elements, enabling deeper emotional connections even across distances.

6.2.3 Sight and Vision

From all the interviews, it was evident that seeing a partner is crucial to feeling emotionally connected. Dana succinctly captured this sentiment: *"The relationship is completely different when you see each other versus when you don't."*³⁸ This underscores the argument that visual communication is not merely an enhancement but a necessity for many in maintaining intimacy over long distances.

³⁵ *"Prostě se těším na jeho hlas"*

³⁶ *"My si občas jako video pustíme, ale většinou stačí její hlas"*

³⁷ *"No nám někdy ta wifina prostě blbne, takže jsme si zvykli na to, že se jen slyšíme a to vůbec nevadí, i z toho hlasu člověk se může těšit a je to mnohem jednodušší než si psát"*

³⁸ *"ten vztah je tak úplně jiný, že jo, když se vidíte než. Když toho druhého nevidíte."*

Jack's experience illustrates this point further. While he finds visual communication indispensable for guiding his children through homework via video calls—*"We either use a shared screen or they turn on the camera, and I guide them"*³⁹—he doesn't find it as critical for his relationship with his wife. This difference might be attributed to the frequency of their face-to-face interactions, suggesting that the need for visual connection varies based on how often couples can meet in person.

In contrast, Patrick argues that facial expressions are vital during serious conversations: *"I really prefer video calls because I can see what's happening with the tone and facial expression."* This highlights how visual cues can significantly enhance understanding and empathy in communication. Charles supports this view, emphasizing that seeing reactions is crucial for effective communication in serious matters: *"I would say that if it's a more serious matter, I would definitely go for a video, because then you can see the reactions, or they can see your expressions."*

These perspectives indicate that visual communication, especially through video calls, provides a richer emotional experience than text or audio alone. Video calls incorporate facial expressions, body language, and visual context, adding layers of meaning to interactions. This ability to see a partner's expressions and gestures bridges the emotional gap created by physical separation, making interactions feel more immediate and authentic. Thus, the visual component is not just an added benefit but an essential element that allows individuals to interpret emotional cues more accurately and respond empathetically, thereby enhancing relational satisfaction and connection.

6.2.4 Smell

Even though I initially thought there would be no mention of smell in our conversations, it turns out that the sense of smell can indeed play a role in maintaining intimacy in long-distance relationships. Charles, for instance, left a shirt he had worn with his girlfriend, while she gave him one of hers in return. He occasionally smells it, reminding him of her presence. Nela also mentioned how she sometimes smells her husband's clothes, cherishing the lingering scent of his cologne. These actions highlight how olfactory cues serve as powerful emotional anchors.

Although smell can't be shared digitally, familiar scents associated with a partner, such as their perfume or clothing, can evoke memories and maintain a sense of connection. The scent of a loved one can evoke vivid memories and emotions, offering comfort and a sense of proximity despite physical separation. The power of smell lies in its direct connection to the brain's limbic system,

³⁹ *"to si prostě pustíme video a buď přes sdílenou obrazovku nebo přímo mi natočí kameru a já jí radím."*

which governs emotions and memories. This unique link makes olfaction particularly effective in evoking emotional responses and maintaining relational bonds. Thus, while technology facilitates visual and auditory communication, the scent remains an intimate and irreplaceable component of emotional closeness in long-distance relationships.

6.2.5 Conclusion

In summary, couples engage all their senses to maintain emotional and physical intimacy despite the geographical separation. The absence of physical touch presents a significant challenge, yet couples find creative ways to express affection, such as sending gifts and handwritten letters, which serve as tangible reminders of their bond. The sense of hearing is crucial for emotional connectivity, with the hearing partner's voice providing clarity and comfort that text alone cannot offer. Visual communication through video calls enhances intimacy by allowing partners to interpret facial expressions and body language, bridging the emotional gap created by distance. Although smell cannot be shared digitally, it remains a powerful emotional anchor, with familiar scents evoking memories and a sense of closeness.

These findings underscore the importance of leveraging all available sensory channels to sustain intimate bonds in long-distance relationships. By creatively utilizing technology and symbolic gestures, couples can navigate the challenges posed by distance and maintain a deep emotional connection. Each sense contributes uniquely to the overall experience, highlighting the multifaceted nature of human relationships and the enduring power of sensory memories in fostering closeness across distances.

6.3 Researcher's multisensory insights

Most of the insights I have on this last third question, mostly influenced by Haraway's emphasis on the subjective positionality of the researcher, were gained through my own observation and perception, as well as through the visual analysis of five videos recorded during interviews. The remaining two interviews were not video recorded, limiting my video analysis to these five. This limitation, however, does not diminish the validity of my observations; instead, it underscores the depth of insight that can be gained from even a limited dataset.

As mentioned above, due to my approach and communication with participants, I found that several issues can arise during any long-distance relationship, particularly concerning connection and lack of understanding. These challenges are significant and warrant further exploration as they fundamentally

impact relationship dynamics. However, conducting interviews with a diverse range of people also offered many positive perceptions. Despite how "monotonous" the videos might have seemed, several details helped me better empathize with their roles and perceive not only verbal responses but also body language and other sensory experiences. This suggests that video communication can be a powerful tool in understanding interpersonal dynamics beyond mere words.

From this perception, it was evident that interactions between partners in long-distance relationships, facilitated through video calls and messaging, showcase diverse multisensory strategies they employ to sustain emotional intimacy and a sense of shared experience despite physical separation. This finding is crucial as it highlights the adaptability of human communication in overcoming physical barriers. The use of video calls allows couples to see each other's facial expressions, body language, and gestures, providing valuable visual cues that enrich their communication.

For example, in the video call with Jack, I noted tired gestures, a head close to the monitor, occasional glances around, and a detached tone when discussing certain topics. These observations revealed insights into his emotional state and engagement. Similarly, in the call with Peter, I observed gestures accompanying speech—such as hand movements near the face when pondering a response—and shifts in posture when discussing more personal matters. These examples illustrate how non-verbal cues can offer profound insights into emotional states and engagement levels.

It was also very obvious that during the calls, almost all visible participants were not watching the screen or themselves most of the time; instead, when responding, they looked around or appeared to gaze into the distance when speaking about nostalgic topics. This behaviour suggests a deep engagement with their memories or emotions rather than with their immediate environment. It was important in such cases to know where they were located—some sat on couches, others at their desks—but their gazes mostly went beyond the light I could only partially register. This indicates that physical surroundings play a role in how individuals engage during conversations, further enriching our understanding of long-distance communication dynamics.

6.3.1 Expressions

No less important was their work with expression. During the interview itself, I focused on the answers and kept the conversation flowing smoothly. However, during the video analysis, I was able to examine in more detail the facial expressions, gazes, and general posture exhibited by the participants. This detailed analysis is crucial as it reveals underlying emotions and attitudes that might not be evident through words alone. In most cases, the facial expression was rather serious and

pensive, indicating the gravity of the topics discussed. It was evident that I was not asking for anything joyful or funny. However, in almost all cases, there was a moment of laughter during the interview when both the participant and I shared a hearty laugh. From that point on, facial expressions seemed more relaxed.

*“Hehe, it seems that you had the problem too? haha, well, I hope it won't happen again then.”*⁴⁰
(Peter)

*“Ooh, I remember once, hehe. I left my phone at home, and my daughter could not reach me... Oh, she was so angry, haha. She said, ‘Mum, Holly crap, how can you live in a world like this and not die? It is just the normal thing to do: you leave the house and check if you have your keys, wallet, and phone!!!!’ I think you all think of us like fossils, don't you? hehe”*⁴¹(Nela).

These moments of shared laughter are significant as they foster a sense of connection and ease between interviewer and participant, enhancing the quality of communication. The expression also changed depending on the topic being discussed. With Peter, for example, we gained insight into the "ticklish poems" he and his wife send each other. He recounted an amusing incident where he mistakenly sent a message to his parents instead of his wife:

*“So, then I realize that Grandma reacts to something else. You know, I send something about food somewhere, and she writes, ‘Oh my, that's terrible.’ And I don't even realize that she's also reading this part of our communication... So then I wrote something in response, not even noticing that I was writing in the group and that it didn't occur to me we weren't just messaging each other, hahaha”*⁴²
(Peter).

This anecdote highlights how humour can emerge from misunderstandings in communication technology, adding depth to interpersonal interactions. Similarly, with Dana, she laughed halfway through the interview when discussing communication between children and parents. A situation arose where I blushed when she asked how often I communicate with my parents:

⁴⁰ *“Hehe, vypadá to, že jsi taky měla tenhle problém, co? haha, tak snad už se nám to nestane”*

⁴¹ *“Oo, Vzpomínám si na jednu situaci, kdy jsem nechala svůj telefon doma, hehe. A moje dcera se mi nemohla dovolat, teeeda.. ta byla tak našťavaná. Tehdymí řekla, ‘mami, proboha, jak můžeš v tomhle světě vůbec přežít? normální člověk, když odchází z domu, tak si zkontroluje, jestli má klíče, peněženku a mobil!!!’ ... No jo no, pro vás jsme asi úplní fosilové, že jo? hehe”*

⁴² *“No a potom jako zjistím, že babička zase reaguje na něco jiného. Jo, já vlastně někam jako pošlu něco okolo jídla ona tam píše ježiš, no to je hrůza. No a vlastně si neuvědomím, že ona čte i tuhle naši komunikaci... tak jsem potom na to něco napsal, ani jsem si nevšiml, že to že že jsem psal do skupiny a, že mi nedošlo, že jsme si nepsali jen spolu.”*

This interaction underscores how personal questions can shift an interview into a more conversational tone, creating a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open dialogue. The video analysis thus revealed several visual elements that complemented my overall impression of the information gathered.

However, video calls also seem to be a tool that can conceal many things. Just like me, some other participants blurred their backgrounds during interviews; sometimes only their upper body was visible. This limitation in visibility can obscure nonverbal cues such as hand gestures that are key to understanding full communication dynamics. Peter even noted that in any long-distance contact, one essentially hides behind the camera or a non-visible screen and shows only what one wants:

This observation suggests that technology can significantly narrow "truthfulness," impacting authentic communication during video calls. Moreover, technological issues like image freezing or poor connection quality further hinder effective communication. Such disruptions are detrimental to maintaining emotional connections during intimate conversations and can spoil the overall "experience." If we return to facial expressions during these disconnections, it was clear both sides were very unhappy about this fact.

In some instances, partners incorporated multimedia elements, such as sharing photos or calendars, to add visual depth to their interactions. This incorporation of multimedia is crucial as it enhances the richness of communication beyond verbal exchanges. I noted the partner's eagerness to show the calendar with photos and their disappointment when technical limitations prevented this, highlighting the importance of being able to share visual experiences. These insights, while seemingly obvious, underscore how even small details can significantly influence conversations and complement verbal communication.

In addition to visual cues, auditory perceptions play a crucial role in maintaining connections. The auditory dimension is essential for conveying emotions and nuances that words alone might not capture. I focused on the undertones and general sound impressions of the conversations. For example, Jack's "lethargic tone" conveyed a sense of resignation about certain situations: *"Yeah, I guess... I mean... uf, If I think more about it..."*⁴³(Jack)

Despite discussing a wide range of topics, his voice remained calm and constant. This detail is interesting because it suggests that his tone might affect how others perceive his engagement level. Such vocal monotony can lead to disengagement from listeners, affecting the overall communication dynamic.

⁴³ "No, asi jo... teda... uf, když se nad tím víc zamyslím..."

On the other hand, Peter's "vocalizations and laughter" during reminiscing about shared experiences fostered a sense of warmth and intimacy. Peter's engaging tone demonstrates how vocal expressiveness can enhance interpersonal connections by making conversations more inviting and dynamic.

It is necessary to recognize that these subtexts are influenced by personal familiarity; knowing Peter's comfort in speaking with others makes his tone particularly engaging and pleasant. This highlights how individual speaking styles can alter the willingness to engage further or listen attentively during interactions.

6.3.2 Speech

Technology can distort voices during remote communications. When transcribing Nela's recording, I noticed her voice sounded different compared to face-to-face interactions. This distortion underscores a limitation in remote communication, where technological barriers can obscure emotional nuances conveyed through voice.

Hearing each other's voices with all their emotional inflections allows partners to detect subtle mood changes and energy levels, enabling them to provide empathy and support. Thus, despite technological limitations, auditory cues remain vital for maintaining emotional connections across distances.

The speech in which an interview is conducted has a significant auditory effect. Understanding the language fully is crucial for effective communication, especially in long-distance relationships where nuances matter. From my examination of the audio recordings, I concluded that intonation varies significantly when speaking a non-native language. Even with proficiency, language barriers can lead to misunderstandings, as seen in my interviews with Charles and Patrick.

For instance, Patrick struggled with pronunciation, leading to confusion:

"Ehhh, I think it was more about, you know, our hmm money" (Patrick) *"Your money? What do you mean by that?"* (Eliška) *"Noo. Our Harmony"* (Patrick);

Similarly, Charles used an idiom requiring cultural context:

"You know, sometimes she makes a storm in a teacup because I don't reply to her immediately, so that is annoying." (Charles) *"Pardon me, a storm in a tea cup?"* (Eliška) *"Yeah, you know... She freaks out because of nothing, hehe."* (Charles)

These examples highlight the importance of language proficiency and shared cultural context in maintaining intimacy and connection. Even when partners are fluent in a common language, subtle nuances in pronunciation and idioms can create misunderstandings that erode intimacy. Mishearing and cultural differences can significantly impact communication dynamics.

Understanding these elements is crucial for reducing misunderstandings in long-distance relationships. Shared cultural references aid in interpreting idioms and expressions correctly, enhancing the overall communication experience and fostering deeper connections. Recognizing the significance of spoken language—including intonation, pronunciation, emotional expressiveness, but also safety—is essential for understanding how long-distance couples leverage audio communication to sustain their relationships. Exploring these aspects provides valuable insights into the multisensory strategies employed to bridge physical divides and maintain strong emotional connections.

Beyond just the spoken word, the tone, pace, and emotional inflections carried through the voice play a crucial role in how messages are perceived and interpreted. These auditory elements are essential for conveying emotions and nuances that words alone might not capture. Participants who spoke in a more lethargic or reserved manner, like Jack, conveyed a sense of resignation. In contrast, those who incorporated animated vocalizations and laughter, like Peter, fostered a warmer, more intimate atmosphere. These auditory cues enable partners to detect subtle shifts in mood and energy levels, allowing them to offer empathy and support across distances.

I also observed how partners seamlessly transitioned from discussing work-related topics to more personal matters, such as sharing family anecdotes and offering mutual understanding about challenging experiences. These textual exchanges are crucial for maintaining an ongoing narrative and sense of togetherness, even when physically apart. This fluidity in conversation topics highlights the importance of sustaining a multifaceted connection in long-distance relationships. By moving between practical, work-oriented discussions and more intimate, emotionally charged exchanges, partners cultivate a rich, holistic bond that transcends physical distance. The ability to share both professional and personal aspects of their lives reinforces a sense of being fully known and understood by their partner.

In relation to maintaining this sense of connection, I also encountered instances where external factors, such as interruptions, played a role in the communication process. These interruptions underscore the challenges of maintaining focus and intimacy in remote communication. For example, during my interviews, my brother occasionally entered the room, leading to natural conversations about the challenges of finding a private space for long-distance discussions. This highlighted the

need for privacy and the importance of choosing the right environment for uninterrupted communication. Each time my brother entered, I paused the conversation to ensure privacy, making sure my laptop was positioned so he couldn't see who I was talking to. This seemingly minor disruption provided valuable insight into the potential obstacles of remote communication and the need to consider physical surroundings.

Although the exploration of visual and auditory cues has provided valuable insights into the multisensory strategies used by long-distance partners, it is important to recognize that touch and smell also play crucial roles in maintaining connection and intimacy across distances. These sensory elements are often overlooked but are integral to sustaining emotional bonds. As observed in the interviews, touch was present not only in the content of conversations but also in participants' physical interactions. From straightforward sensations like feeling a chair beneath me or strands of hair on my face to expressive gestures such as scratching heads or playing with phones, the tactile realm was clearly an integral part of their communicative repertoire. These tactile interactions highlight how physical sensations contribute to the overall communication experience, even when partners are apart.

6.3.3 Physical abilities

In this context, I must note a personal experience that made me reflect on the role of physical capability in long-distance communication. This reflection is crucial for understanding the practical challenges of remote interactions. During the writing process, I was temporarily unable to move two fingers on my hand due to a cast, which significantly hindered my ability to type or use my phone as I normally would. This seemingly minor event highlighted how even small physical limitations can make remote communication more challenging. For example, I found myself limiting messages to the bare essentials because typing was exhausting. This experience extended to writing the thesis itself, where typing on a keyboard became cumbersome, and attempts to dictate text were unsuccessful as the device only correctly captured every other word. Such challenges underscore the importance of physical capability in facilitating effective communication.

Similarly, while taste was not a major part of the experiences I observed in this study, the absence of this sense points to areas that could be explored further. The inability of long-distance partners to physically share meals or tastes may create a gap they need to creatively fill. Expanding research to explore smells and scents—such as exchanging fragrances through care packages or sharing meaningful odours—could reveal additional multisensory strategies that help foster intimacy and a feeling of being together, even when apart. These sensory exchanges can play a significant role in maintaining emotional connections across distances.

By delving deeper into the roles of touch, smell, and even taste, research can paint a more holistic picture of the multisensory landscape in which long-distance relationships unfold. Integrating these sensory dimensions with previously examined visual and auditory cues will enable a richer understanding of how partners leverage the full spectrum of their senses to bridge the physical divide and maintain a profound connection. This comprehensive approach is essential for appreciating the complexity and creativity involved in sustaining long-distance relationships.

6.3.4 Emotional state of the participants

The last topic related to the experience of being part of the “relationship” is concerning the emotional state of the participants. This focus is crucial for understanding the emotional dynamics in long-distance relationships. Through the research, I was directly present when participants experienced emotional gaps. Three participants revealed to me after the official part of the interview that discussing their partners and reminiscing about certain moments or looking at photos made them sad. This highlights the emotional toll that long-distance relationships can have.

For instance, Peter admitted after our recording ended that he nearly cried, realizing how far away he was and how much he missed his family. Such admissions underscore the deep emotional impact of physical separation. It was interesting to note that whether I knew the participant played a huge role, but more importantly, how long their separation had lasted was, in my opinion, the most important reason for these emotions being evoked during the interview. Nela had not seen her husband for just under a month, while the other two participants had been separated from their partners for several months. This suggests that prolonged separation exacerbates emotional vulnerability.

Even for me personally, this revelation was surprising, as I noticed nothing during the interview itself. If they had not told me, I might not have realized this fact. This experience reminded me that seeing and hearing each other through a screen is radically different from being close in person; some emotions can only be sensed rather than seen or heard.

These incidents underscore how long-distance communication can evoke intense emotional responses. Despite physical distance, these experiences suggest that the sense of connection remains strong. Participants expressed a need to communicate their vulnerability, indicating that emotional strain is an essential part of the long-distance relationship experience. Emotional breakdowns and feelings of isolation can be challenging, but open conversations help reinforce emotional closeness despite physical separation.

Research supports the idea that emotional expression and transparency in communication are fundamental to maintaining long-distance relationships. Studies suggest that partners who share their emotional vulnerabilities tend to have stronger bonds, as open communication about feelings of loneliness or anxiety can help bridge the emotional gap created by physical distance (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

6.3.5 Conclusion

To conclude this part and answer the third research question, the findings demonstrate that long-distance relationships are sustained through a variety of multisensory strategies that help bridge the physical divide and maintain emotional intimacy. My interpretations of the analysis of video interviews revealed how visual cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and gestures, play a critical role in enriching communication. These visual elements provide insights into emotional states and engagement levels, highlighting the adaptability of human interaction in overcoming physical barriers. Additionally, auditory cues, including tone, intonation, and vocal expressiveness, were found to convey emotions and nuances that words alone might not capture, further enhancing connection.

I also noticed the importance of shared cultural and linguistic understanding in maintaining effective communication. Subtle nuances in language use, idioms, and pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings but also offer opportunities for humour and connection when clarified. Furthermore, the tactile dimension—though less directly addressed—emerged as an integral part of communication through gestures and physical surroundings during calls. This highlights the potential for further exploration of sensory elements like touch, smell, and even taste in fostering intimacy across distances.

Emotional dynamics were another key aspect revealed to me during the study. Participants often experienced emotional vulnerability during interviews, particularly when reflecting on their partners or prolonged separations. These moments revealed the emotional toll of long-distance relationships but also emphasized the resilience of emotional bonds. Open communication about feelings of loneliness or longing was shown to reinforce intimacy and connection despite physical separation.

Overall, the insights highlight the complexity and creativity involved in sustaining long-distance relationships. By leveraging multisensory strategies—visual, auditory, and potentially other sensory dimensions—partners navigate the challenges of physical distance to maintain strong emotional

connections. This comprehensive understanding provides valuable insights into how individuals adapt their communication to preserve intimacy and shared experiences in long-distance contexts.

7 Discussion

In discussing how heterosexual monogamous couples in long-distance relationships (LDRs) maintain intimacy and connection, several key themes emerge that highlight the strategies these couples use to navigate physical separation. These strategies, which include communication methods, technological tools, and multisensory engagement, are supported by various theoretical frameworks such as feminist theories, ANT and multisensory approaches.

7.1 Communication, the Core of Emotional Connection

Communication is universally recognized as the foundation for maintaining emotional bonds in long-distance relationships. The actors in LDRs that I interviewed often emphasize the importance of frequent and meaningful interactions through phone calls, video chats, and social media. These interactions are not just about exchanging information but also about providing emotional support and solving problems together. This aligns with existing research by Stafford (2005) which underscores the importance of regular communication in fostering emotional proximity and intimacy in long-distance relationships.

Both human and non-human actors, such as digital communication platforms, play active roles in shaping social interactions (Latour, 2005). In this context, when participants like Dana, Lily, and Patrick highlight how communication helps them stay connected to each other's daily lives despite physical separation, ANT would argue that the technologies they use—such as WhatsApp or video calls—are not merely passive tools but integral components of the relationship network. These platforms facilitate emotional closeness by enabling frequent updates and shared experiences, effectively becoming part of the social fabric that sustains the relationship. As Latour (2005) suggests, technology is an active participant in these networks, shaping how partners interact and maintain their bonds. The use of these tools allows couples to transcend geographical barriers, demonstrating how non-human actors (technology) are essential in maintaining relational stability.

From a feminist theory perspective, the emphasis on communication as a tool for emotional connection can also be seen as a form of agency. Feminist scholars like Judy Wajcman (2004) argue that technology can disrupt traditional gender roles by providing new avenues for both partners to engage equally in emotional labour. In this case, Dana's efforts to work on the relationship from a distance and Lily's reassurance through emotional connection reflect how technology empowers individuals to assert their emotional needs. This perspective highlights how digital tools allow

partners to negotiate their roles within the relationship more flexibly, challenging conventional expectations about caregiving and emotional responsibility. By facilitating mutual support through communication, as seen in Jack helping his children with schoolwork or Nela assisting her son with household tasks via video call, technology enables both partners to participate equally in practical problem-solving and emotional labour. As also Anne Marie Mol (2002) suggests, technologies are not just neutral tools but are embedded within social practices that shape how people interact and care for one another, reinforcing the idea that technology plays an active role in redistributing emotional labour.

Thus, through the lenses of ANT and feminist theory, it is clear that communication technologies are not just practical tools but active agents that mediate emotional and practical support within long-distance relationships. These frameworks help understand how both human and non-human actors collaborate to maintain intimacy across distances while also challenging traditional power dynamics within relationships.

To continue with technologies, digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Google Meet were used by my participants to bridge the geographical gap by enabling couples to share experiences, plan future activities, and maintain a sense of presence. These technologies allowed couples to stay connected despite geographical barriers and helped them navigate logistical challenges inherent in long-distance relationships.

In this context, digital platforms like WhatsApp are integral components of the social network that facilitate interaction and connection between partners. Participants like Charles noted using WhatsApp for regular updates on each other's lives, while others like Nela mentioned using group chats to communicate with family members, but all of the participants noted that this tool was crucial to maintaining the connections with their loved ones.

However, reliance on technology is not without challenges. Participants like Patrick mentioned technical issues such as limited storage space affecting their communication preferences. Despite these challenges, technology remains indispensable for maintaining emotional connections across distances. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2006) adds to this discussion by highlighting that technological infrastructures often come with limitations that can reinforce existing inequalities or create new forms of dependency, which is evident when technical issues disrupt communication between partners.

The evolution of communication methods over time also reflects how couples adapt to technological advancements to maintain intimacy. For instance, Lily recounted transitioning from letters and postcards to SMS and emails over the years, illustrating how technological advancements have

influenced communication patterns within long-distance relationships. Lisa Gitelman (2006) contributes to this understanding by emphasizing that media technologies carry with them historical and cultural baggage, meaning that each new form of communication carries traces of older practices while shaping new norms for interaction.

7.2 Multisensory elements

While technology facilitates communication, it cannot fully replicate the richness of sensory experiences that are central to human relationships. Couples in LDRs often engage multiple senses—such as touch, smell, sight, and hearing—to maintain intimacy despite being physically apart. This multisensory engagement aligns with feminist theories that emphasize embodied experiences and the importance of all senses in creating meaning (Pink, 2011). Mol's (2002) work on the body multiple further supports this by showing how different sensory experiences are interconnected in shaping human relationships, suggesting that touch, smell, and sight are not isolated but work together to create a fuller sense of presence. Additionally, as Antunes (2019) notes, our perception is naturally multisensory, meaning that individuals do not experience the world through isolated senses but through an integration of all sensory modalities.

Touch is irreplaceable in relationships, and its absence is one of the most challenging aspects of long-distance relationships. To compensate for this absence, couples often resort to symbolic gestures such as sending gifts or letters. These tangible items serve as substitutes for physical touch and help reinforce emotional bonds even when partners are apart (Clarke, 2011). For example, Patrick mentioned sending cards or letters by post as a different and important emotional connection channel.

Research supports this notion that physical mementos hold significant emotional weight in long-distance relationships (Stafford, 2005). These symbolic gestures can be seen as part of the broader network of relations that sustain intimacy across distances (Latimer & Gómez, 2019). From a feminist perspective, these practices can be viewed as acts of agency where individuals use both digital and physical tools to assert their emotional needs (Wajcman, 2004). Howes (2003) further emphasizes that sensory experiences are fundamental to cultural expression and play a key role in how individuals maintain connections across distances.

Moreover, smell, although less frequently discussed than other senses like sight or hearing, also plays a role in maintaining intimacy across distances. Some participants mentioned exchanging clothing items infused with their partner's scent to evoke memories and maintain a sense of presence (Pink 2011). Research on olfactory cues shows that familiar scents associated with a partner can trigger

strong emotional reactions and reinforce bonds even across distances (McIntyre et al., 2018). Royer (2019) also highlights how sensory experiences like smell are closely tied to memory and emotional connection, further reinforcing their importance in maintaining intimacy over long distances.

Furthermore, auditory cues are particularly significant in maintaining emotional connectivity. Hearing a partner's voice provides emotional clarity that text-based communication cannot replicate (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). The tone of voice can convey emotions more effectively than written words alone and allows partners to pick up on subtle changes in mood or energy levels.

Finally, visual communication through video calls adds another layer of richness to interactions by providing important cues such as facial expressions and body language. These visual cues make conversations feel more immediate and authentic (Latimer & Gómez, 2019). From an ANT perspective, this reliance on video calls illustrates how non-human actors, like digital platforms, actively shape the emotional dynamics of long-distance relationships. The technology itself becomes a crucial participant in the relationship, facilitating deeper emotional exchanges that would otherwise be limited by physical distance.

In this way, video calls are not just tools but integral components of the social network that sustains intimacy across distances. As Callon and Law (1997) argue, non-human actors like technology are not passive; they actively contribute to the formation and maintenance of networks, influencing outcomes in ways that are often unpredictable. Therefore, video calls can be seen as mediators within the network of a long-distance relationship, transforming inputs (such as verbal communication) into richer emotional outputs by adding visual and auditory layers to the interaction. Gitelman (2006) adds that media technologies do more than transmit information; they shape human interactions by mediating how individuals perceive each other through their affordances and limitations.

Video calls allow partners to assert their emotional needs by creating a space where visual and auditory senses can be engaged simultaneously. This aligns with feminist perspectives that highlight that technology can empower individuals to maintain intimacy through creative means such as face-to-face digital interactions (Wajcman, 2004). By using video calls to convey emotions through facial expressions and body language, partners are able to negotiate and express their emotional needs in ways that challenge traditional gender roles in communication. Gitelman's (2006) work further contributes by showing how media technologies mediate human interactions, suggesting that video calls do not merely transmit information but actively shape the nature of interpersonal relationships through their affordances and limitations. Royer's (2019) discussion on synaesthesia further supports this by emphasizing how multiple senses work together synergistically during these interactions, allowing for richer emotional exchanges even when physical presence is absent.

7.3 Answering the research question(s)

Now I will attempt to reflect on whether and how I managed to answer my research sub-questions and the main research question. The first sub-question: *What specific technologies do heterosexual monogamous couples use?* I must say that heterosexual monogamous couples in long-distance relationships use various technologies to manage connection and intimacy despite physical separation. Each couple provided a unique approach to maintaining their bond, which aligns with the qualitative nature of this research. However, several common practices emerged across participants.

The simplest form of communication occurs through modern communication technologies, with some couples engaging daily while others connect based on mutual agreement. Regardless of frequency, participants emphasized that these interactions are crucial for their emotional and intimate connection. The most commonly used platform was WhatsApp, though some couples also utilized other platforms like BeReal or Instagram. These technologies not only facilitate frequent updates but also allow couples to share experiences and maintain emotional closeness. This finding aligns with ANT, which views technology as an active participant in social networks, playing a critical role in sustaining relationships over long distances.

It could be said that the practices couples used included communication through messages, video calls, voice calls, and also monitoring partners on social media. This fact corresponds with research conducted on younger respondents, particularly from a student environment, which indicates that to maintain connection, couples in long-distance relationships mainly use phone calls, text messaging, and video calls (Belus et al., 2019). However, in my case, it was evident that the WhatsApp platform is also used as a medium for sharing content such as photos or videos that couples send to each other, which are also an important form of connection.

Now I will focus on answering my second research sub-question: *How do heterosexual monogamous couples engage multiple senses to enhance their connection and intimacy despite being geographically separated?* Maintaining connection and intimacy goes beyond digital communication tools. Couples rely on various artifacts to engage multiple senses and reinforce their bond. For example, letters and physical photos serve as tactile reminders of their partner's presence, while clothing infused with a partner's scent provides olfactory cues that evoke emotional memories. At the same time, the sense of touch cannot be overlooked, which was present not only in the previously mentioned photos and letters but also in the form of gifts and items like jewellery that participants associated with their partners.

These multisensory strategies highlight the importance of engaging not just the mind but the body in maintaining intimacy across distances. From a feminist perspective, these practices can be seen as acts of agency where individuals creatively use both digital and physical tools to assert their emotional needs and maintain intimacy (Wajcman, 2004). It could be said that, contrary to my expectations, couples used almost all their senses (except taste) to connect with their partner in some way.

Next, I will attempt to outline the answer to my third research sub-question: *Which insights into the multisensory strategies used to maintain connection and communication are revealed during interactions with individuals in long-distance relationships?* Through my analysis as an active participant in this research, I uncovered several challenges and less obvious aspects of long-distance communication. The importance of reliable internet connectivity cannot be overstated; technical issues such as poor connection or device limitations can disrupt communication and lead to frustration. Additionally, factors such as body language, the ability to see or hear one's partner clearly, and the emotional complexity of remote communication all play significant roles in shaping the quality of interaction. This highlights how visual communication through video calls adds depth to interactions by providing non-verbal cues that enrich the conversation (Latimer & Gómez, 2019).

Moreover, participants noted that connecting remotely can sometimes cause more pain than joy, especially when emotional needs are not met or when external factors—like noise or poor lighting—interfere with the interaction. These elements underscore the complexity of maintaining intimacy from a distance and reveal that while technology facilitates connection, it also introduces new challenges.

It could be said that interactions with individuals in long-distance relationships reveal that there are several aspects one does not realize until they are part of a long-distance relationship themselves, as these must be experienced to understand their importance and relevance. One also becomes much more aware of the context of certain situations by experiencing them firsthand. However, it is clear that I could not perceive all the aspects that people in long-distance relationships do, as my role in this case was different. Nonetheless, the opportunity to be part of the research allowed me to gain new insights that I could not have discovered merely by conducting interviews and listening to my participants, for example, in face-to-face interactions.

In conclusion, and in answer to my main research question: *What practices do heterosexual monogamous couples employ to manage connection and intimacy when physically separated by distance?* Couples employ a variety of channels to maintain connection when physically separated by distance. These include not only digital communication tools but also multisensory strategies that engage touch, smell, sight, and hearing to sustain intimacy. The role of technology is pivotal in

enabling immediate communication; however, it is not without its complications. Couples often turn to alternative methods—such as exchanging physical mementos—to supplement their digital interactions and maintain a sense of closeness. These findings demonstrate the intricate balance between technological mediation and sensory engagement in long-distance relationships.

7.4 Possible future studies

While current research provides valuable insights into how couples maintain long-distance relationships through communication technologies and multisensory strategies, several promising areas for future exploration remain.

To begin with, larger-scale studies that incorporate diverse cultural contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different types of couples navigate geographical separation. Cultural norms often influence communication practices and emotional expression, and expanding the scope of research to include a wider range of participants could reveal how these factors shape the dynamics of long-distance relationships.

Another area for exploration is under-researched sensory dimensions. While sight and sound have been extensively studied, other senses like taste and smell remain largely unexplored. Investigating how couples use food or scents to evoke shared experiences could uncover additional multisensory strategies that help maintain intimacy across distances. For instance, exchanging items with a partner's scent or sharing meals remotely could play a significant role in reinforcing emotional bonds.

Finally, longitudinal studies tracking couples over time could provide valuable insights into how relationship dynamics evolve with changing technologies and life circumstances. Such research would help identify long-term strategies that couples develop to sustain their relationships despite physical separation, offering a more nuanced understanding of how technology and multisensory engagement adapt over time.

7.5 Limitations of the study

The findings from this research are significant, yet they come with several limitations that must be acknowledged. One primary limitation is that the research is not strongly based on any particular theory, which could help give a clearer way to understand the data. Although these theories are mentioned, the study doesn't fully correspond to them in its methods or analysis, which might reduce its depth and strength in terms of theory. This is related to the fact that my study is very extensive and

does not have one clear objective but several interconnected ones, which I also consider a significant drawback that should be avoided in the future.

Another significant constraint was the sample size; with a small number of participants, the data may not be sufficient to draw definitive conclusions or claim universal applicability (DiVA Portal, 2019). This limitation underscores the need for larger studies to validate and expand upon these preliminary findings.

Additionally, while the research explored multisensory strategies in long-distance relationships, it did not fully address all sensory dimensions, such as taste or the broader implications of these sensory interactions. Insights were primarily gained through hermeneutic analysis and a feminist approach, which allowed for "reading between the lines." Fortunately, some participants independently discussed the importance of touch or scent without prompting. However, this aspect of the study could have been more thoroughly investigated with additional interviews focusing specifically on sensory engagement. These limitations highlight areas for future research to explore these dimensions more comprehensively.

8 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have focused on understanding the practices of individuals over 30 years old in long-distance relationships (LDRs) which helps to maintain connection and intimacy. The research highlights various strategies employed by these individuals. The capacity to support each other remotely strengthens the feeling of connection and mutual responsibility within the relationship. The routines and established rituals have also taken an important part in the process. Not to forget that paradoxically, a certain selective disclosure and challenges are also connecting the couples in LDRs, because when thinking about the well-being of the partner, it also shows affectionateness; on the other hand, conflicts and inconveniences were practices that couples mostly avoided (or at the very least did not report on).

From other important insights, strategies varied; some had daily routines, while others planned specific virtual meetings. For these purposes, media platforms such as WhatsApp, Google Meet, Instagram, and BeReal were mostly used for connection. Additionally, shared calendars, printed photographs, letters, and memorabilia play crucial roles in sustaining emotional closeness because they allow for a different type of connection, including multisensory experiences.

The analysis, inspired by theoretical approaches such as multisensoriality, feminist theories, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), reveals the diverse use of senses in these relationships. Interestingly, all senses except taste are employed to connect with partners. Participants found mere text messaging insufficient; they valued hearing and seeing their partner and even engaging with objects that evoke their partner's presence.

Through my chosen methods and theories, I was able to perceive some multisensory aspects personally during interactions with other participants. This experience underscored the importance of context in these situations, emphasizing that some things must be experienced firsthand rather than just understood as written facts.

Regarding the research objectives, I hope this study has at least partially addressed and expanded much needed awareness of LDRs practices among individuals who did not grow up with technology. The insights gained offer new perspectives on this phenomenon, particularly through the multisensory approach that allowed a deeper understanding of these relationships' dynamics.

Nevertheless, I believe this work enriches existing knowledge about LDRs by focusing on less-studied population groups. It contributes to academic discussions on multisensory perception and the

integration of various research approaches like feminist theories and ANT. It significantly expands our understanding of interpersonal relationship dynamics in the context of modern communication technologies.

Moreover, my thesis not only provides a deeper understanding of current trends in interpersonal communication but also raises new questions about the future of these relationships in a rapidly changing technological environment. Future research could also explore the use of emerging technologies like virtual reality to support emotional closeness in partnerships. There is potential to investigate how these technologies can be further developed to enhance emotional intimacy in relationships. Additional studies could also explore cultural differences in technology use in LDRs or analyse the psychological impacts of these relationships on individuals. I hope my findings will inspire further research in this area and contribute to a better understanding of how technology can support human connections despite geographical distances.

Finally, I would like to highlight the importance of maintaining emotional bonds despite physical distance and encourage further exploration of this fascinating phenomenon. Thank you to all colleagues and mentors for their support during my research.

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Zusammenfassung: Diese Forschung untersucht, wie Personen über 30 Jahre Fernbeziehungen (LDRs) gestalten, indem sie die Rolle von Technologie und multisensorischen Praktiken bei der Aufrechterhaltung von Verbindung und Intimität analysiert. Fernbeziehungen haben sich mit den Fortschritten in Kommunikationstechnologien erheblich verändert und sind von traditionellen Methoden wie Briefen zu digitalen Plattformen wie Videoanrufen, Messaging-Apps und sozialen Medien übergegangen. Obwohl diese Technologien Verbindungen erleichtern, stellen sie auch Herausforderungen dar, insbesondere bei der Nachbildung physischer Präsenz und sensorischer Interaktion.

Mithilfe qualitativer Methoden, einschließlich Interviews und multisensorischer Ansätze, untersucht diese Studie, wie Paare digitale Werkzeuge kreativ anpassen und sensorische Elemente – Berührung, Klang, Sicht und Geruch – integrieren, um Verbindung und Intimität zu fördern. Die Forschung basiert auf feministischen Theorien und der Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie (ANT), die kritische Einblicke in Geschlechterdynamiken, Machtstrukturen und das Zusammenspiel zwischen menschlichen und nicht-menschlichen Akteuren bei der Gestaltung relationaler Praktiken bieten. Feministische Perspektiven beleuchten gesellschaftliche Normen, die emotionale Arbeit und Kommunikationsstile beeinflussen, während ANT untersucht, wie Technologien Interaktionen vermitteln.

Ein zentraler Fokus liegt auf älteren Erwachsenen, die als „digitale Immigranten“ oft erst später im Leben neue Technologien adaptieren. Diese Bevölkerungsgruppe ist in der Forschung zu Fernbeziehungen unterrepräsentiert, die sich überwiegend auf jüngere Generationen konzentriert. Durch die Schließung dieser Lücke bietet die Studie ein differenziertes Verständnis dafür, wie ältere Menschen emotionale Verbindungen über Entfernungen hinweg aufrechterhalten.

Die Ergebnisse zielen darauf ab, theoretische Rahmenwerke zur multisensorischen Interaktion zu erweitern und praktische Anwendungen für die Entwicklung inklusiver Technologien zu liefern, die Intimität in Fernbeziehungen verbessern. Durch die Verknüpfung technologischer und sensorischer Dimensionen liefert diese Forschung Einblicke in die Komplexität moderner Beziehungsdynamiken und trägt zur Gestaltung von Werkzeugen bei, die emotionale Verbindungen über physische Distanzen besser unterstützen.

Abstract: This research explores how individuals over 30 navigate long-distance relationships (LDRs) by examining the role of technology and multisensory practices in maintaining connection and intimacy. LDRs have evolved significantly with advancements in communication tools, transitioning from traditional methods like letters to digital platforms such as video calls, messaging apps, and social media. While these technologies facilitate connection, they also pose challenges in replicating physical presence and sensory engagement.

Using qualitative methods, including interviews and multisensory approaches, this study investigates how couples creatively adapt to digital tools and integrate sensory elements—touch, sound, sight, and smell—to foster connection and intimacy. The research is grounded in feminist theories and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which provide critical insights into gender dynamics, power structures, and the interplay between human and non-human actors in shaping relational practices. Feminist perspectives highlight societal norms influencing emotional labour and communication styles, while ANT examines how technologies mediate interactions.

A key focus is on older adults who are "digital immigrants," often adapting to new technologies later in life. This demographic has been underrepresented in LDRs research, which predominantly centres on younger populations. By addressing this gap, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how older individuals maintain emotional connections across distances.

The findings aim to inform theoretical frameworks on multisensory interaction and practical applications for developing inclusive technologies that enhance intimacy in LDRs. By bridging technological and sensory dimensions, this research offers insights into the complexities of modern relationship dynamics and contributes to designing tools that better support emotional connections across physical distances.