

Communication Experiences of Long-Distance Relationship Students: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. This study aims to understand the communication experiences of Communication Science students, class of 2022, at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu in maintaining long-distance relationships. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study examines the meaning of communication, communication challenges, emotional dynamics, and relationship maintenance strategies through digital media such as WhatsApp, telephone, and video call. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving six students who had experienced a long-distance relationship for at least six months. The findings show that digital communication becomes the main medium for maintaining emotional closeness, trust, and commitment despite geographical separation. Students use verbal cues, extended time, selective self-presentation, and hyperpersonal communication to create a sense of symbolic presence. However, digital communication also produces challenges such as limited nonverbal cues, delayed responses, misinterpretation, overthinking, and emotional fatigue. The study concludes that communication in long-distance relationships is a complex, emotional, and adaptive interpersonal experience in which digital media functions not only as an information channel but also as a relational space for building intimacy and sustaining commitment.

Keywords: : *Long-Distance Relationship; Digital Communication; Phenomenology; Hyperpersonal Communication; Students.*

INTRODUCTION

Long-distance relationship (LDR) is a romantic relationship maintained by partners who are geographically separated, causing interaction to rely more on digital media than on direct face-to-face meetings. This phenomenon is increasingly common among students due to educational mobility, employment opportunities, family conditions, and the transition to early adulthood. Technology makes interaction possible across distance through instant messaging, telephone, and video call, but it also changes how intimacy, trust, and commitment are maintained.

Communication in LDR is not limited to the exchange of information. It becomes the main foundation for sustaining emotional closeness, confirming commitment, managing conflict, and reducing uncertainty. Couples who are separated by distance often experience miscommunication, delayed responses, jealousy, and different interpretations of digital messages. The absence of complete nonverbal cues can make a simple message seem cold, ambiguous, or emotionally distant. These challenges show that mediated interpersonal communication requires careful interpretation and relational maintenance.

Students are an important group to study because they are in a developmental phase marked by identity formation, emotional attachment, and the building of romantic relationships.

Communication Science students are especially relevant because they learn interpersonal communication theory, yet still encounter real relational challenges when applying communication practices in daily life. The context of Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu provides a local setting for understanding how students experience and interpret LDR communication through digital media.

This study focuses on the communication experiences of Communication Science students, class of 2022, at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu who are or have been in LDR. The study seeks to understand how students interpret communication with their partners, what challenges they experience, how emotional dynamics emerge, and what strategies they use to maintain the relationship through digital media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of messages between individuals who have personal relationships. DeVito (2016) explains that interpersonal communication involves emotional involvement, mutual dependence, feedback, and meaning construction. In romantic relationships, interpersonal communication helps partners express feelings, manage conflict, build trust, and maintain intimacy. In LDR, this role becomes more central because the lack of physical presence makes mediated communication the main relational channel.

Long-distance relationship is a romantic relationship in which two partners are separated by geographical distance and cannot meet regularly. Stafford (2019) states that LDR relies heavily on technology-mediated communication to maintain closeness and relationship stability. In this situation, partners must develop adaptive communication patterns to manage longing, jealousy, uncertainty, and commitment.

Social Information Processing Theory by Walther (1992) explains how interpersonal relationships can develop through computer-mediated communication despite the absence of face-to-face interaction. The theory emphasizes verbal cues, extended time, selective self-presentation, and hyperpersonal communication. Through repeated message exchange, careful word choice, and emotional interpretation, individuals can build meaningful relationships through digital media. This theory is relevant to LDR because students mainly use WhatsApp, telephone, and video call to maintain emotional closeness.

Phenomenology is used to understand lived experience and the meanings constructed by individuals. In this study, phenomenology helps reveal how students subjectively interpret communication in LDR, including the meaning of communication, the challenges they face, emotional dynamics, and relationship maintenance strategies. The approach allows the study to focus not only on what students do when communicating, but also on how they experience and interpret that communication.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. The method was selected because the research focused on the lived experiences of students in maintaining communication within long-distance relationships. The research sought to find the essence of students' communication experiences by exploring their narratives, reflections, and interpretations.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria were: Communication Science students of the 2022 cohort at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu, currently or previously in an LDR for at least six months, using digital media as the main communication channel, and willing to share their experiences openly. Six informants participated in the study, consisting of three women and three men.

Table 1. Informant Profile

No	Initials	Gender	Age	LDR Duration	Partner Location	Main Media
1	N.R.P	Female	22 years	1 year	Outside region	WhatsApp and telephone
2	M.D.A	Female	23 years	9 months	Outside city	WhatsApp and video call
3	A.W	Female	22 years	1 year 8 months	Outside region	WhatsApp and telephone
4	T.H	Male	24 years	4 years	Outside region	WhatsApp and video call
5	A.Z	Male	23 years	1 year	Outside city	WhatsApp and video call
6	R.B.H	Male	23 years	2 years	Outside region	WhatsApp and telephone

Source: Processed research data, 2026

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Interviews explored communication routines, emotional experiences, conflicts, and relationship maintenance strategies. Observations focused on the context of communication and the way informants explained their experiences. Documentation included interview records, call logs, and screenshots of delayed responses, with identifying details redacted for privacy. Data analysis followed phenomenological procedures through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing by identifying significant statements, grouping meaning units, and formulating the essence of experience

RESULTS

The findings are presented through two analytical frames. The first frame uses Social Information Processing Theory to explain how communication develops through digital media. The second frame uses phenomenology to describe the meaning, challenges, emotional dynamics, and strategies experienced by students in LDR.

Table 2. Findings Based on Social Information Processing Theory

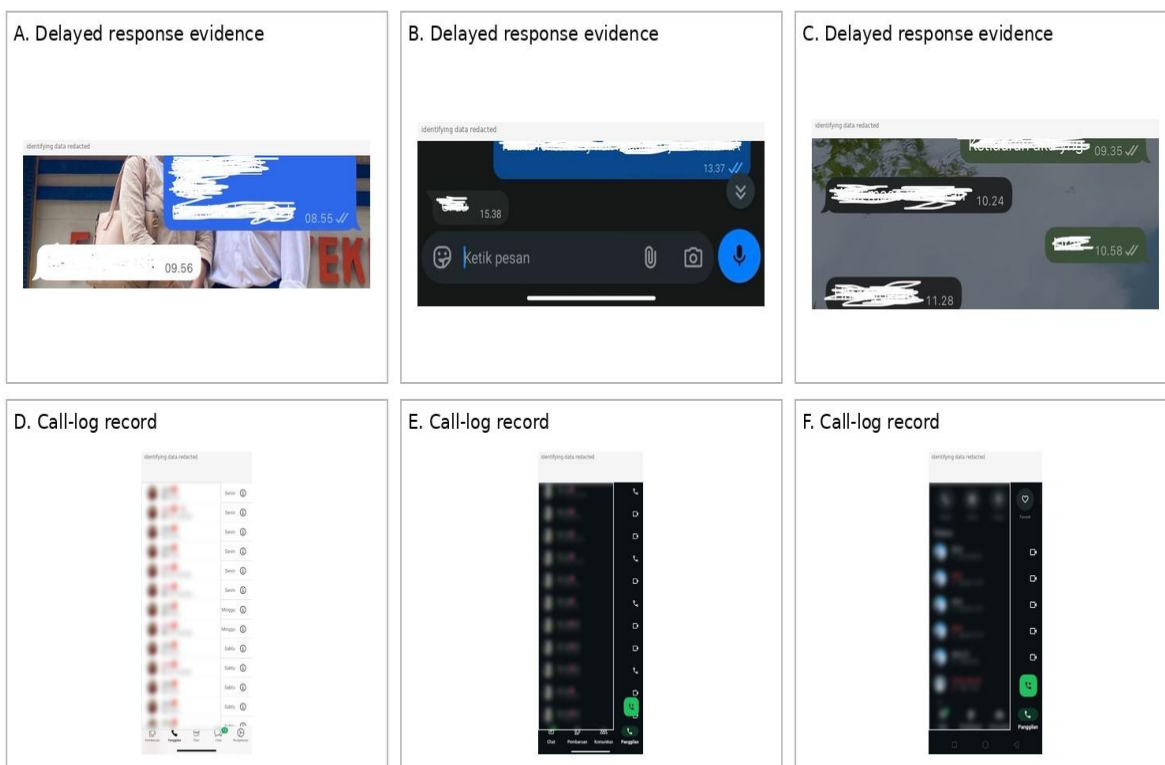
SIP Element	Student Experience	Evidence from Interviews and Observation	Meaning of Finding
Verbal cues	Students relied on words, greetings, emoticons, stickers, and simple questions to express attention and emotion.	Informants said that messages such as asking whether the partner had eaten or arrived safely made them feel cared for. Emoticons were used to reduce misunderstanding.	Textual and symbolic cues replaced some functions of face expression and tone of voice.
Extended time	Emotional closeness was built gradually through daily and repeated communication.	Informants communicated almost every day through WhatsApp, telephone, or video call. Longer LDR duration made some informants more able to understand their partner's habits.	Closeness in LDR emerged through continuity rather than instant interaction.
Selective self-presentation	Students chose words carefully and sometimes controlled or hid emotional conditions to avoid conflict.	Informants often delayed replies when angry, used softer words, or did not immediately share personal problems so that the partner would not worry.	Digital media gave students time to manage self-image and emotional expression.
Hyperpersonal	High digital interaction	Informants felt the partner was	Digital communication

communication	created a strong feeling of emotional presence and sometimes idealized perceptions of the partner.	always present communication frequently. Video call and chat made the relationship feel emotionally close.	because occurred	became an emotional space, but it could not fully replace physical presence.
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Source: Processed research data, 2026

The results show that digital media became the main medium for maintaining emotional closeness in LDR. Students used verbal cues to express attention and affection, while repeated communication over extended time helped build trust and familiarity. Selective self-presentation allowed informants to organize messages and emotions before responding. Hyperpersonal communication appeared when students felt emotionally close to partners through intensive digital interaction, although the closeness sometimes produced dependency and overthinking.

Figure 1. Redacted documentation of delayed responses and call-log records
Redacted Documentation of LDR Communication Records



Source: Research documentation, 2026

Table 3. Phenomenological Themes of LDR Communication Experience

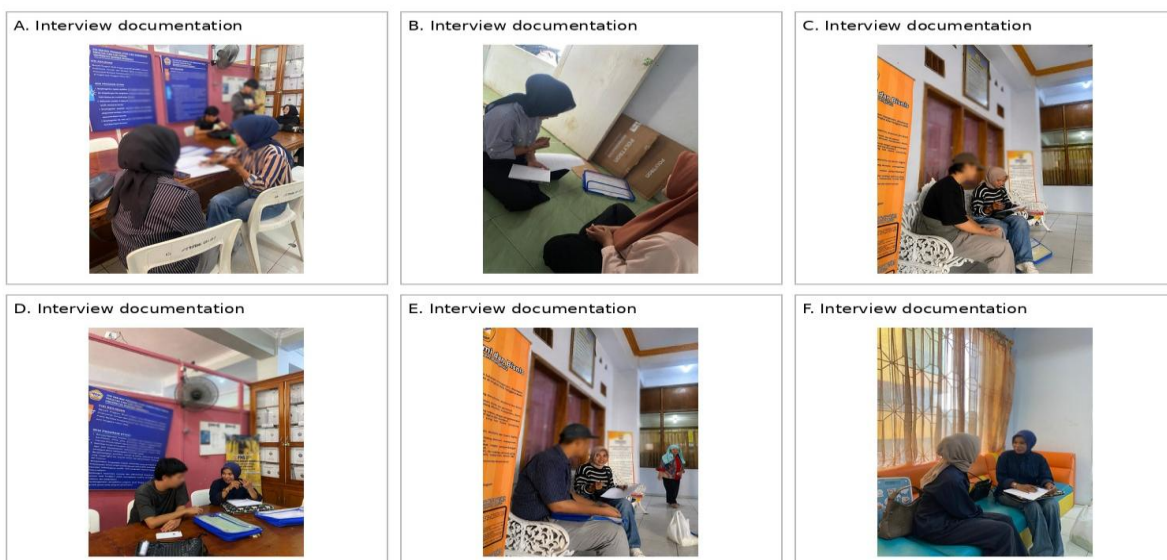
Theme	Core Finding	Illustrative Meaning	Interpretation
Meaning of communication	Communication was understood as the symbolic replacement of physical presence.	Without communication, students felt the relationship was empty and emotionally distant.	Communication was not merely technical exchange, but a sign of care, existence, and commitment.
Communication challenges	Misinterpretation, delayed responses, limited nonverbal cues, and emotional fatigue were frequent problems.	A late reply could trigger anxiety, suspicion, or overthinking even when the partner was simply busy.	Digital communication created uncertainty because many emotional signals were incomplete.
Emotional dynamics	Students experienced longing, closeness, jealousy, anxiety, uncertainty, and fatigue.	Smooth communication made students feel secure, while disturbed communication changed their mood.	Emotional stability in LDR was strongly connected to the quality and consistency of digital interaction.
Relationship maintenance strategies	Students maintained routine communication, openness, trust, direct conflict resolution, and commitment.	Conflicts were often resolved through telephone or video call because text messages could create more misunderstanding.	LDR required active and conscious communication efforts from both partners.

Source: Processed research data, 2026

From the phenomenological perspective, the essence of communication experience in LDR lies in the effort to maintain emotional closeness through digital media in the absence of physical presence. Communication was interpreted as a symbolic form of presence that provided attention, security, and emotional connectedness. However, the experience was ambivalent: digital communication helped sustain the relationship, yet it did not fully remove longing, uncertainty, or the need for direct physical interaction.

Figure 2. Documentation of informant interviews

Documentation of Informant Interviews



Source: Research documentation, 2026.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the communication experience of Communication Science students in LDR is complex, emotional, and strongly shaped by digital media. Communication is not simply a practical activity, but a relational process that creates symbolic presence, emotional closeness, and trust. This strengthens DeVito's view that interpersonal communication is central in creating and maintaining personal relationships.

The use of WhatsApp, telephone, and video call shows that students actively adapt to the absence of direct meetings. In line with Social Information Processing Theory, the lack of nonverbal cues does not stop relational development. Instead, students maximize verbal cues, repeated interaction, and selective self-presentation to maintain intimacy. Through hyperpersonal communication, students sometimes feel emotionally closer through digital media because messages are more focused, reflective, and personally meaningful.

Table 4. Discussion Synthesis and Implications

Discussion Aspect	Interpretation	Theoretical Link	Implication
Digital media as symbolic presence	Digital communication functions as a substitute for physical presence and a source of emotional security.	Supports SIP Theory and interpersonal communication concepts.	Students need to build healthy communication routines without making communication the only source of emotional stability.
Delayed response and misinterpretation	Delayed replies and unclear text messages often trigger anxiety, overthinking, and conflict.	Shows the limitation of verbal cues in mediated communication.	Couples should clarify expectations about response time and use voice/video when conflict appears.
Selective self-presentation	Students manage words and emotions to protect the relationship, but excessive self-control can reduce openness.	Reflects selective self-presentation in SIP Theory.	Balanced openness is needed so that relationship harmony does not depend on suppressed emotions.
Hyperpersonal closeness	High communication intensity creates emotional closeness, but may also produce dependency and idealization.	Relates to Walther's hyperpersonal communication.	Digital intimacy should be complemented with trust, realistic expectations, and emotional independence.
Relationship maintenance	The strongest strategies are routine communication, openness, trust, commitment, and direct conflict resolution.	Consistent with phenomenological understanding of lived relational experience.	Communication education can help students manage romantic relationships in a healthier digital environment.

Source: Processed research data, 2026

The study also shows that communication in LDR is ambivalent. It can create closeness, but it also creates pressure when students depend too heavily on digital responses. Delayed replies are not only interpreted as technical delay; they often become emotional signals that affect mood and relationship security. This finding confirms that digital communication carries symbolic meanings that must be negotiated continuously by partners.

Through the phenomenological lens, students are not passive users of media. They actively interpret communication, manage emotions, and build strategies to preserve the relationship. Their experiences show that LDR is maintained through conscious communication

practices: giving updates, providing emotional support, using telephone or video call to clarify conflict, and maintaining trust. The findings provide practical insight for students and educational institutions about the importance of healthy digital communication, emotional regulation, and interpersonal communication literacy

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital communication is the primary foundation for maintaining long-distance relationships among Communication Science students at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu. Through WhatsApp, telephone, and video call, students build symbolic presence, emotional closeness, trust, and commitment despite geographical separation. The communication process reflects verbal cues, extended time, selective self-presentation, and hyperpersonal communication.

The phenomenological essence of the experience is the effort to sustain emotional closeness through digital communication while negotiating the limitations of physical distance. Students experience affection, security, longing, jealousy, uncertainty, overthinking, and emotional fatigue. To maintain the relationship, they use routine communication, openness, trust, commitment, and direct conflict resolution through more personal media such as telephone or video call.

The study suggests that students in LDR should maintain regular communication while also managing expectations, emotions, and digital dependency. Educational institutions may use these findings as consideration for providing interpersonal communication guidance, especially regarding healthy digital communication and emotional management in student relationships.

LIMITATION

This study is limited to six Communication Science students from the 2022 cohort at Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu and does not include the partners' perspectives. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all LDR couples. The study also relied on personal narratives and documentation that informants were willing to share. Future research may include both partners, compare different student cohorts, or examine how cultural, family, and economic factors shape LDR communication.

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