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12

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# **IMAGINING THE ABSENT PARTNER - INTIMACY AND IMAGINATION IN LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS**

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## **Abstract**

The dominant discourse on relationships in modernity argues for the importance of intimacy, including the intimacy of bodies, for the relationship to be continuous. This raises the question as to how couples that cannot meet face-to-face on a regular basis due to geographical distance maintain intimacy during repetitious non-co-presence. In this article, intimacy is seen as a relational quality that is created and maintained by individuals themselves through practices of intimacy (Jamieson, 2011). The study aims to analyse practices of intimacy in long-distance relationships (LDRs) that enable long-distance couples to make their relationship continuous beyond face-to-face encounters. The study is based on 19 in-depth interviews with individuals in Latvia with LDR experience, and argues that the intimacy practices in LDRs trigger imagination. Imagination, in its turn, enables practicing four dimensions of intimacy: embodied, emotional, daily and imagined.

**Key words:** imagination; intimacy; long-distance relationships; mediated communication; practices of intimacy.

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## **Introduction**

While in former times partner choice has been a societal responsibility, nowadays love relationships have increasingly become the concern of the individual (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007, 2012). Anthony Giddens, in his discussion about social changes in the institution of marriage in modernity and the emergence of romantic love, defines a relationship form called pure relationship as being “continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it” (1992: 58).

Intimacy is considered to be an important part of relationship maintenance (Illouz, 2012; Jamieson, 1998). Following authors such as Mjöberg (2009) and Morgan (2011), intimacy is a relational quality. Mjöberg (2009: 18) argues that “using the word quality also implies something that can emerge and disappear”. In other words, for intimacy to appear it needs to be worked on; and for it not to vanish, it has to be maintained. Hence, as individual responsibility increases, the individual engaged in a love relationship has to invest more and more to maintain the level of relationship satisfaction and intimacy (Illouz, 2012). One could say that relationship maintenance requires intimacy work.

Furthermore, this intimacy work is employed in an environment where “(...) [i]nvestment in the relationship is unsafe and bound to remain unsafe even if you wish otherwise” (Bauman, 2003: 15). In Bauman’s view, modern love is “liquid” and instable. One may think, then, that a long-distance relationship (LDR) where partners cannot meet face-to-face every day or at least on a frequent basis, is even more unstable as geographical distance may prevent from partner control and intimacy that includes bodily contact. In this regard, Holmes (2004: 185) argues that “distance relationships challenge common assumptions (...) based on the notion that intimacy necessarily involves physical proximity”. How is intimacy created and maintained over geographical distance then? What practices do long-distance partners employ for creating and maintaining intimacy when they are geographically separated? These are the questions dealt in this article.

The study takes the stance of Sigman (1991) who argues that some social relationships can be defined as continuous if they are “stretched” beyond the face-to-face meetings. To study how intimacy is created and maintained in LDRs and, thus, how the relationship is made continuous, the article derives from Jamieson’s (2011: 1) concept of ‘practices of intimacy’ that are “practices which enable, generate and sustain a

subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other” (emphasis added).

Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews with individuals from Latvia with LDR experience, the article argues that it is imagination that enables the relationship to be continuous beyond face-to-face meetings and intimacy to be experienced without co-presence. According to symbolic interactionism, imagination is part of any social interaction as imagination is necessary for interpreting social action, predicting and responding to it. Imagination is created in one’s mind and, hence, does not require physical co-presence.

The article is structured as follows: First, three dimensions of intimacy as defined by Morgan (2011) are introduced and an additional fourth dimension, derived from the empirical data, is suggested. Then, empirical data and employed methods for the analysis are described, followed by the analysis itself. The analysis shows how practices of intimacy trigger imagination and allows for practicing four dimensions of intimacy: embodied, emotional, daily and imagined. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

### **Intimacy and Imagination**

Intimacy has been suggested to be multi-dimensional. Family scholar Morgan (2011) distinguishes three dimensions of intimacy, all of which are developed through verbal and non-verbal communication with a partner: embodied intimacy, emotional intimacy and intimate knowledge. Embodied intimacy is body-focused and, hence, includes bodily contact in the form of everyday touching and bodily care as well as sexual intimacy. Emotional intimacy is similar to what Jamieson (1998) has conceptualised as “disclosing intimacy” and it involves the sharing and disclosure of one’s emotional world as well as attempts to understand the partner. Intimate knowledge relates to everyday routines and emerges from the former two, thus, providing the couple certain privileged knowledge about each other, such as sleeping patterns or personal preferences. Given that intimate knowledge emerges from everyday encounters, and for the sake of linguistic consistency, in this article Morgan’s intimate knowledge is referred to as daily intimacy. All three of these dimensions of intimacy are the result of a mutual process of caring, touching, interacting, and having conversations.

Drawing on the interview data, the article suggests the fourth dimension of intimacy conceptualised as imagined intimacy. Some of the long-distance partners in this study have developed their own individual intimacy practices that enable them to develop imagined intimacy. While

embodied, emotional and daily dimensions of intimacy require mutual interaction with the partner, imagined intimacy is an individual practice of intimacy that one carries out to cultivate feelings of intimacy and attachment without the necessity for the partner to respond.

Moreover, the article argues for the crucial role of imagination in intimacy creation and maintenance in all four dimensions of intimacy. As mentioned earlier, imagination is central in the symbolic interactionist approach to study the social world. It was Cooley (2009 [1902]: 121) who called the attention of scholars to not study phenomena “as they are” but to focus on how individuals imagine them. Furthermore, Cooley claims that “an invisible person may easily be more real to an imaginative mind than a visible one; sensible presence is not necessarily a matter of the first importance” (2009: 95-96). Based on her study about Internet dating, Illouz (2007: 74-108) distinguishes two kinds of romantic imaginations: traditional imagination and Internet imagination. Internet imagination is self-generated through textual and visual mediated communication. Yet, self-generated imagination as already Cooley argued, “in time, loses the power to create an interlocutor who is not corroborated by any fresh experience” (2009 [1902]: 95). When the online daters have met, Internet imagination, according to Illouz (2007), leads to a disappointment about the mismatch between the image and reality. Traditional imagination, on the other hand, is based on a combination of face-to-face encounters with and imagination of the dating partner. LDRs can therefore serve as a very interesting case to study the role of imagination in intimacy creation during non-co-presence as it presupposes a mixture of imagination and face-to-face encounters, instead of a perceived dichotomy of face-to-face and virtual relationships (see Stafford, 2005: 95-96).

### **Data and Method**

This empirical study is based on 19 face-to-face semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals with LDR experience. Interviews, 60 to 90 minutes long, were conducted in Riga, Latvia. The interview language was either Latvian or Russian, and all quotations used in the text are the author’s own translations. All names of informants are fictitious, and the information in brackets contains their sex and age.

To recruit respondents, the Latvian social network draugiem.lv was used, where primarily young adults were found. In order to collect informants across a range of ages and to find more male respondents, the help of the market research company GfK CR Baltic was obtained gaining access to their online panel participants. The study participants were not promised any reimbursement for the interview. The panel

members were asked the following question: "Have you had a romantic relationship from a distance (or a long-distance relationship, when the geographical distance between you and your partner is so large that you cannot meet every day or whenever you would like to)?" Those giving a positive answer were, then, asked to participate in a further face-to-face interview. No criteria were set on how rarely the couple could meet or how large the distance separating the partners should be in order for an individual to qualify for the study. Secondly, the sample is based on the participants' own definitions of their relationships, and, thus, the terms "couple" and "relationship" are used as synonyms here.

The interviews were conducted in two stages. In the first stage, (via the internet portal draugiem.lv in 2008), six interviews were conducted. In the second stage, in August 2011 and January 2012, 13 additional interviews were taken. In total twelve women and seven men, aged from 22 to 60 years, were interviewed.

The length of the long-distance period of the relationship varied from five months to ten years. Five of the interviewees told about their LDRs within Latvia, while the rest talked about their cross-border relationships. Ten of the interviewees were engaged in an LDR at the time of the interview, and nine talked about their past experiences because three had started cohabiting and six had separated from their long-distance partners. Twelve interviewees had begun their relationship as a long-distance relationship; while the remaining seven had started a relationship when being geographically close with the partner, but the relationship had transformed into an LDR. Thus, interviewees talked about their LDR experiences from different time/distance perspectives. Moreover, three of the interviewees talked about distant partners with whom they had adulterous relationships. As it was the respondent deciding if it was a relationship, these interviews were included in the sample. In fact, the narratives did not differ significantly from the other narratives. One of the interviewees had common children with her long-distance partner, but parenting was not addressed in the interviews.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then coded into categories using the computer program RQDA, which allowed the data to be retrieved and compared in line with themes common to all cases. The interview questions analysed for this study included such questions as: How do you communicate when you are apart? What are your conversations about? How do you show attachment to each other when you are apart? What are the moments when you miss each other the most? What do you do then?

For data analysis, the process of abduction (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) was employed, that encourages analysis that is based on the synthesis between data and existing theory. Each reported practice to maintain intimacy was interpreted through the lens of Morgan's (2011) dimensions of intimacy; then, based on data, the fourth dimension of intimacy, imagined intimacy that is practiced in solitude, was distinguished.

### **Dimensions of Intimacy in Long Distance Relationships**

In the empirical analysis, four dimensions were identified: imagined, embodied, daily and emotional intimacy. As the name indicates, imagination plays critical role while practicing imagined intimacy. Yet, imagination is present also in the other three dimensions of intimacy where the embodied, emotional or daily practices of mutual communication activate imaginative processes in sustaining intimacy while the partners are geographically apart.

Furthermore, the identified dimensions of intimacy analytically are ideal types while in practice individuals may practise them simultaneously. This is, for instance, exemplified by a quote from Kalvis (m, 34) where he tells what his Skype communication with his long-distance partner is about:

“How are you? What did you eat? What will you cook for dinner? How did you sleep? What did you dream about?” Such a human relationship, you know. Also “Miss you, kisses”. Like a standard. But it also happens that you are sitting and [writing] “Aaaah, I want to be with you, I want to sleep next to you!”

This very concise quote shows how imagination is employed in many directions to create Morgan's three dimensions of intimacy. First, it concerns temporality. Kalvis asks his partner how she is (now), what she ate (in the past) and what she will cook (in the future) which together enables Kalvis to fill in gaps of knowledge about everyday activities in which he cannot co-participate. Second, by asking these questions, Kalvis learns about his partner's everyday life, practicing daily intimacy. Third, by saying “Miss you, kisses”, Kalvis expresses his attachment and longing, thus practicing emotional intimacy. Last but not least, the Kalvis is practicing embodied intimacy by expressing his wish to physically be with his partner and to sleep next to her.

Despite the fact that the individuals tend to blend all these dimensions of intimacy, they will be presented as distinct categories and in more detail, starting with the fourth dimension of intimacy, imagined intimacy, that is

suggested as complementary dimension to Morgan's three dimensions of embodied, emotional and daily intimacy that all contribute to the imaginative aspects of imagination.

### **Imagined Intimacy**

Imagined intimacy in its pure form is here defined as activities or practices that one carries out to cultivate feelings of intimacy and attachment without the necessity for the partner to respond. Writing a letter in solitude or carefully picking items for sending in a parcel could also be seen as individual practices of intimacy, as they are taking place in solitude, but these activities are intended to solicit feedback at some point in time, and could rather be seen as communication delayed in time. However, adding a symbolic meaning and "iconising" those items by giving them a special place and meaning could be seen as a practice of imagined intimacy when the co-presence of the partner is imagined. Karina (f, 30), for example, dried the rose her partner gave her on their first face-to-face meeting:

He asked me to throw it out, because it's a bad omen. I told him that maybe in his country it is a bad omen, but here such things don't exist. Because it's the rose with which everything started, it is the very beginning. How can I throw it out!?

Diana (f, 52), on the other hand, talks about her partner's garment in the bathroom that has become a reminder of her long-distance partner:

He had his slippers and a dressing-gown here. Now I have brought it [the dressing-gown] upstairs. But before that I had his dressing-gown in the bathroom all the time. He said to me: "And when I come back, the dressing-gown has to be back in its place". I told him: "It's already enough that when I wake up I have your plant in front of me. When I go to the bathroom, I have your dressing-gown. So I have to think about you, to remember".

While a few more interviewees talked about "iconising" and symbolising material items, two of them talked about the strategies they used in solitude to handle emotions or longings and to create some kind of imagined or created intimacy. Karina (f, 30) for instance, was rewriting all the text messages she and her partner had exchanged in a paper notebook. Not only the fact that she rewrites text messages that are products of technology into something more tangible (a paper notebook, thus including embodied intimacy), but also the rewriting as a process allows her to practice imagined intimacy. When Diana (f, 52) feels sad, she re-reads the text messages or looks through pictures taken during

the times she was together with her partner. Although she cannot be with her partner in the same place, nor share time together online, she can be together with him in her imagination.

Karina's and Diana's examples illustrate how their previous communication with their partners is "recycled". First the text messages are sent in a form of communication, which shows the partners' attachment to each other. Afterwards, these items gain a more symbolic meaning and can be re-used in order to create memories and trigger imagination about the absent partner. Letters, the importance of which will be discussed later, can also be re-read again and again, and gifts exchanged during the face-to-face meetings can be kept "as relics" (Alise, f, 22).

Moreover, imagined intimacy allows one to cope with distance. In the following quote Maxim (m, 38) talks about writing a diary as a coping strategy:

Interviewer: I was talking to some younger people and they said that such [long-distance] relationships could not exist without the Internet.

Maxim: I will tell you something. At home, no, not at home but in the garage, I have a box full of letters; my letters to her and her letters to me. I still keep them. What's more, I also had a diary where I wrote my experiences, feelings, everything. I could not talk in the way I would have liked to, so I wrote things down and it felt better. When you have those feelings so much, you need to do something ... otherwise you can explode. I am an emotional person; it was very difficult for me. There was a phone and letters, nothing else. The key is not the Internet, the key is what you want. If you want a relationship, if you like her, if you love her, you have to sacrifice something. Nothing will grow, otherwise. You need to want it.

The examples above show that in order to cultivate feelings of intimacy one does not always need a medium and/or a response from the partner, as one can also practise imagined intimacy. Imagined intimacy in this context should not be considered inferior to "real" intimacy or shared intimacy. Thus, imagined intimacy should not be confused with the notion of an "imaginary friend" from childhood that exists in one's mind only, but should be seen as a dimension of intimacy completing those dimensions discussed next that require interaction with the long-distance partner.

### **Embodied Intimacy**

In cohabiting relationships partners often exchange glances, passing touches and other forms of nonverbal communication, which express one's attitude towards others (Fitzpatrick, 1988: 207; Andersen, Guerrero & Jones, 2006). The periodic lack of body-to-body co-presence is what first of all distinguishes long-distance partners from cohabiting ones. Yet, the interviews in this study show that bodies are involved in the intimacy creation during non-co-presence on an imaginative and/or sensual level. For example, Diana (f, 52) talks about sexual longing. Yet, she also talks about mediated communication as a coping strategy for such longing:

Just physically, when you just need a man, yes. (..) Sometimes I cannot stand it. I simply need this other person. Well, now it's somehow calmer. Now we also communicate a lot. Then I live with those emotions, because every day I get a text message (looking at her mobile phone to search for some favourite messages she has saved).

Diana indicates that the lack of bodily contact cannot be replaced but only communicated and imagined. One cannot hug or kiss when being physically apart, one can only express the wish to do so to the partner, and many do express this wish. The lack of embodied intimacy in the form of hugging, kissing, promenading or having sexual intimacy was mentioned by many of informants as one of the disadvantages of LDRs.

Embodied intimacy can also be practiced using mediated communication means that can be sensed. The majority, or 14 interviewees out of 19, used additional means of communication in addition to those that enable real-time communication such as phone calls or Skype. Sometimes online communication is simply not possible, and therefore Laima (f, 25), for instance, sends a postcard to her partner whenever she travels without him. Some talked about "surprise" postcards, "long" "romantic" letters "because he likes receiving and reading them" (Rasma, f, 55), as well as exchanging pictures or music. However, these means of communication by tangible items (such as letters and postcards, parcels, or leaving some small surprises when departing) not only communicate caring and attachment, but involve human senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. These sensual experiences together with imagination, the article argues, enable the creation of embodied intimacy during non-co-presence.

The sense of sight is used during an online conversation by the use of web cameras, or by exchanging or printing out pictures of the partner or

of shared past events. Like Maija (f, 26) who bought a new smart phone to be able to better communicate with her long-distance partner:

Pictures are a must. He goes somewhere, - click -, takes a picture and sends it to me. I do the same. [...] He has seen all my friends this way.

Exchangeable items that can be looked at create memories of the past and they let the partners imagine how the daily life of the other one looks like. The daily life is not physically shared but it can be shared in their imagination facilitated by the visual material.

The next sense, hearing is used during phone or Internet calls, ensuring the immediate feeling of here and now; three interviewees (all male) mentioned that they called their partners in order to “just [...] hear her voice”, and one of them even claimed that it was sometimes more important for him to make an expensive international call and hear her voice than to have a meal. Listening to music associated with the particular person, on the other hand, creates memories of shared events.

The sense of touch is present when partners prepare and receive parcels for each other. Rasma (f, 55) was giggling shyly like a teenage girl as she said: “We also sent parcels to each other. Well, small things, but it was nice, for a birthday, for the New Year”. Laima (f, 25) and her partner, on the contrary, have decided to stop sending parcels by post because once one got lost. She referred to the things in the parcel as “some crap”; they had no monetary value but rather a symbolic one, and what was anticipated as something permanent and full of symbols important to the couple suddenly became as transient as on-line conversation history that can be deleted due to a technical failure. By caressing a stuffed animal received as a present, rifling through letters, postcards or other gifts, and also by touching the pictures, in addition to verbalising their fantasies of touching or caressing each other, or falling asleep together, embodied intimacy is facilitated.

Although mentioned by only one interviewee, the sense of smell can also be used in creating intimacy. Karina (f, 30) and her long-distance partner had exchanged their perfume bottles: “when we miss each other we can use a drop of perfume and remember each other”. The quote clearly shows that using the smell of the partner’s perfume is used as a strategy to cope with longing. The smell triggers imagination and the past can be recalled and imagined in the present.

Taste, for its part, can be felt by receiving a parcel with favourite delicacies or edibles that are associated with the common past of the partners. Of course, not all of these practices are used by all of the long-distance partners, but they illustrate the variety of creative sensory practices partners can use to develop embodied intimacy during the non-co-presence.

Although, according to Morgan (2011), embodied intimacy includes body-to-body interaction, the study reveals a number of creative communication strategies that enable the long-distance partners to practise embodied intimacy even while geographically apart. The importance of embodied social presence in virtual 3D reality has already been shown and discussed by Mennecke and colleagues (2010; 2011). They argue that avatars used in virtual reality represent real bodies, and thus, the users of those avatars cognitively perceive embodiment. This study is in agreement with the argument about the importance of embodiment in the imaginative aspects of mediated communication. Furthermore, the exchange of tangible items that enable the long-distance partner to touch some symbolic objects that communicate attachment, e.g. smelling the perfume of the partner, listening to the partner's voice or watching pictures of their shared past events, indicates that nonverbal communication takes place even in long-distance arrangements and some sort of embodied intimacy is being created through creative ways of communication. Technology has developed so that the partners can hear and see each other better and more frequently, but touch and smell is still not transferable<sup>1</sup> and thus a special effort has to be invested to practise embodied intimacy when the partners are apart. The senses trigger imagination and allow for creating a feeling of intimacy with the absent partner.

### **Emotional Intimacy**

Emotional intimacy is based on mutual disclosure and learning about each other's personalities in order to understand each other (Morgan, 2011). Thus, emotional intimacy is similar to what Jamieson defines as disclosing intimacy, which is based on mutual disclosure and the exchange of thoughts and feelings, "it is an intimacy of self rather than intimacy of the body" (1998: 1).

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<sup>1</sup>Some companies, however, have developed high-tech products for long-distance partners, such as "touching" underwear or pillows with the heartbeat of the partner.

Conversations play a crucial role in intimacy building (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Wiley, 1985). The interviewees mentioned intense and disclosing mediated communication as important practice of intimacy during geographical separation. This is stressed more strongly by respondents who physically meet their partners seldom and who try to spend their shared online time as qualitatively as possible, meaning that the time they spend apart in space but together in time is filled with textual and/or verbal information exchanges. The following quote by Karina (f, 30) illustrates how mediated communication has enabled her and her partner to practise emotional intimacy:

I believe that those things we have discussed now at a distance we would never have discussed face-to-face. Then there would be other things to do: outings, friends, TV, Internet, whatever, but those things steal your time and don't let you talk. Now we have this time, so will we sit online and not talk about anything?

In a similar vein, Maija (f, 29) suggests that the extended and disclosing online communication they have now is more disclosing and reflexive than if they were cohabiting:

We have analysed this relationship. And that [analysing the relationship] is the positive aspect. Does a normal relationship involve [such analysis]? Yes, then there is a TV and routine, but what do we have? We have only conversations.

The intense communication and its content in long-distance relationships are qualitatively different from geographically-close relationships. This is in line with a number of other studies showing that LDR partners perceive their mediated communication as more qualitative (Stafford & Merolla, 2007) or (emotionally) intimate (Stafford, 2010). Because of the lack of nonverbal cues online, the long-distance partners fill the time with textual or verbal conversations when they communicate with each other. They talk about their everyday lives, explore each other's lifeworlds and develop emotional intimacy. To some extent, it is non-co-presence that allows for more emotional intimacy than would be possible if they spent more time together in the same place.

Letter-writing is another way to develop emotional intimacy, and imagination is part of it. All interviewees who used paper letters in their communication stressed the particularity of letters as being something more special and "romantic" than other real-time means of communication. Here, Imants (m, 24) summarises his experience with writing letters:

It is something that people nowadays rarely do or don't do at all, and that, let's say, makes it somehow more special. It is not closer, but it is more special. You can change [the text] a hundred times; think how to express it more beautifully. I didn't really change much there, though. I was writing about my feelings. During the phone calls we also talked about our feelings somewhat, but not as much, then it was more about events. In the letters we tried to express our feelings.

Letter-writing could be seen as a pure example of emotional intimacy, where the individuals disclose their feelings, dreams and images of a shared future. In letters, an account of everyday life would be inappropriate, as it would be out-dated by the time the letter arrives. Thus, in letters the partners write about more permanent things, such as emotions, or personal matters such as the writer's current emotional state. With time, Inese (f, 28) changed from writing letters to making Skype calls as these were more convenient, but she also admitted that this has therefore changed the content of their communication. Imants (m, 24), on the other hand, used letters in addition to regular phone calls, which reassured him that he could reach his partner at any time, and enabled daily intimacy, while letters rather enabled emotional intimacy.

According to Giddens (1992), emotional exchange and disclosure to the partner is one of the changes in intimate relationships in the modernity. In reality, however, not everybody may be comfortable with disclosing emotions to the partner. While for some physical distance creates more space for emotional intimacy, for others, like Elmars (m, 54), physical distance is the only way to open up emotionally:

It is even easier on the Internet, then one has time to think, to read and to consider the answer. In everyday life anyway, when sitting in a park, in a cafe or sitting in a room, not everybody would like those pauses, to wait for the answer. The confusion is more obvious. (...) Then it is difficult to say - should we hurry, is this relationship getting deeper or not, or not hurry?

For Elmars, it has been the ability to control the flow of the conversation offered by mediated communication that has enabled him to gradually disclose to his partner. Mediated communication eases disclosing one's self as it also provides distance for those for whom emotional disclosing is more difficult. The interview data suggests that emotional intimacy is an essential part of LDRs; and that geographical distance is not an obstacle but, on the contrary, rather a facilitator of it.

## **Daily Intimacy**

In former times when the main means of communication over distance were letters and long-distance phone calls were expensive, mediated communication often lacked immediate feedback from the partner. Thus, everyday trivia has been mentioned as something that LDRs lack and miss (Gerstel & Gross, 1982; Magnusson & Norem, 1999). Gerstel and Gross (1984: 54) argued that intense, personal communication as well as “the opportunity to engage in informal conversations and to share daily experiences” makes single-household couples different from those in other personal relationships. That would mean that long-distance partners cannot develop daily intimacy that emerges out of embodied and emotional intimacy as well as from shared everyday life (Morgan, 2011) because they live apart.

However, the possibilities of the Internet have increased mutual and immediate reflexivity in mediated communication. As the Internet became present in our everyday life, it has become an integral component of LDRs; and some of the respondents expressed that they communicate “all the time”. The Internet has provided the opportunity for partners to share their everyday lives and to create daily communication routines, which enable daily intimacy and allows imagining the everyday life of the other. Therefore, for recent long-distance couples, being in LDR means being online:

Our relationship is built on mundane communication. (...) Maybe somebody can sit not knowing anything and dreaming, but I am not one of them (Maija, f, 29).

Maija’s quote suggests that the Internet and the possibility of making communication mundane ensure the credibility of relationships, a sense of security, and the exchange of daily intimacy. Ensuring daily intimacy requires certain logistics. Respondents whose partners live in the same or close time-zones talked about creating a communication model that is adjusted to the daily routines: “Good morning!” text messages in the morning, “How are you?” e-mails during the day, and more extended conversation through Skype in the evening. Yet, creating such a communication model is more challenging for those who are not in the same or close time-zones as, for instance, in the case of Maija (f, 29) and her partner who live on different continents and have an eight-hour time difference. For them it took about a year to create a communication model that suited both of them and that ensured shared everyday life or daily intimacy. Maija gets up an hour earlier in the mornings and gets ready for work with a laptop in her hands as she communicates with her

partner, while it is nearing midnight where he lives. When she comes back from work, she calls him from Skype on his mobile phone; he is at work then, but has a job where communication on the phone does not cause any problems.

Due to technical problems Darta (f, 24) is now facing a situation where the Internet is not always available, and thus they cannot follow the routines she and her partner had developed. This causes a situation in which their practice of intimacy through daily communication is hindered:

Because I also have moments when I feel so sad, but there is no Skype and it's not possible to talk [with him] in the evening. But given that nowadays it's really habitual that everything is always around you, that you switch [the computer] on, and immediately that person is there, I admit that in the course of time some problems could arise.

The quote shows how the possibilities of daily communication enabled by the Internet have changed expectations from mediated communication. The inability to communicate every day and the consequent loss of daily intimacy creates uncertainty. In the past when daily intimacy in LDRs was not possible, an important part of intimacy work was waiting for the next piece of information mostly in the form of a letter. Although waiting for the next face-to-face meeting is still an essential part of LDRs, waiting for communication or daily intimacy is increasingly expelled or not accepted by the partners. The Internet not only enables long-distance partners to communicate daily and to share their everyday lives, but has also created a certain pressure to communicate. Imagination alone without any cues is not enough and that may create conflicts. In the next quote, Nikolay (m, 45) refers to an argument between him and his long-distance partner when they negotiated the form and frequency of mediated communication while being geographically apart:

"OK, I didn't answer you!" [refers to his girlfriend] But the issue is of a different kind; I don't sit all day long in front of a computer, I don't. She knows that I receive e-mails on my mobile phone. "You get a message [that you have got an email]", she tells me. "OK, I get it [the message]. But you know that I don't like writing e-mails via the phone. I won't be pressing buttons on the phone!" Well, such situations occur.

The quote illustrates the couple's negotiations around daily intimacy. Nikolay's long-distance girlfriend is claiming her right to daily intimacy, while he is not ready to engage in such a practice. Thus, although the availability of Internet communication creates an opportunity to

communicate nearly constantly to practice daily intimacy, some experience it as a pressure since the expected communication frequency can differ between the partners. The quote also informs that the Internet technology is expelling the imaginative aspects of non-co-presence where the imagination is not confirmed by “data”. The imagination needs a trigger that is based on cues.

## **Conclusions**

This study has analysed how long-distance partners maintain intimacy and make their relationship continuous beyond face-to-face meetings in times that some call liquid and instable (Bauman, 2003) with regards to relationships. Therefore, the study aimed to analyse what practices of intimacy long-distance partners employ during their geographical separation. The article argued for the critical role of imagination in the process of intimacy creation and maintenance.

Intimacy in LDRs proved to be multidimensional. The practices of intimacy through mediated communication that can be sensual, routinized, emotional and imaginative enable four dimensions of intimacy: embodied, daily, emotional and imagined intimacy. The data showed that intimacy practices trigger imagination and it is through imagination that all dimensions of intimacy become available for partners who are not co-present. For instance, the bodies may not be co-present but the bodily experiences become available on an imaginative and sensual level. Emotional intimacy seems to be even easier to practice over distance than if the partners were mainly co-present, thus, suggesting that geographical distance enables to gradually tear down the emotional barriers and emotional distance that may be present in a face-to-face interaction. Daily intimacy becomes available through routinized and instant communication where the everyday habits are revealed allowing for imagining the spatio-temporal setting of the long-distance partner.

While embodied, emotional and daily intimacy are triggered and imagined through communicative intimacy practices with the long-distance partner; the fourth dimension of intimacy discovered and suggested in this article - imagined intimacy - is triggered by individual practices where the communication is internal, in one's own mind. Hence, findings of this study suggest for more attention to be paid to imaginative in addition to practice-like aspects in understanding intimacy. The imagination was not treated as something where the unreal is created as in the case of Internet imagination (Illouz, 2007), but rather where the lack of the 'obvious' cues between the face-to-face meetings is compensated for. The empirical data showed that

imagination is triggered by sensual experiences, and maintained by everyday updates on each other's daily routines as well as continuous disclosures of each other's selves. Moreover, the practice of imagined intimacy illustrates how the distant partner becomes a part of the other partner's self: the spatio-temporal environment of the partner is imagined, her daily schedule is remembered, and by necessity the imagined absent partner is communicated with in one's mind. Therefore, the imagination employed in intimacy creation in LDRs rather should be seen as a hybrid between traditional and Internet imagination.

In addition, the immediacy in the communication that is provided by the Internet and other new technologies has removed waiting for communication cues as a part of long-distance relationship work. Thus, the imagination that used to be practiced in solitude only, has gained also dyadic and shared, textual and verbal dimensions. Moreover, time-space compression enabled by Internet communication has replaced the waiting for mediated communication occasions, that used to be part of LDR work in the past, with an increased obligation to communicate and, thus, to practice daily intimacy.

This study has discussed intimacy creation and maintenance in LDRs in general. Yet, further research could focus on the complications that this increased access, and possibly also the external pressure, to use immediate communication in the form of video-calls, cameras, pictures and alike may cause in the relationship and in the relationships outside the romantic dyad.

In addition, there is room for further research on what happens with intimacy practices after LDRs transit into a cohabiting relationship. Internet imagination, Illouz (2007) argues, leads to disappointment. Would the imagination developed in LDRs, which is a mixture of traditional and Internet imagination, also lead to the same outcome? Stafford, Merolla and Castle (2006) showed that after becoming proximate, long-distance partners experienced less perceived positive change than what they expected, and although some couples broke up, some continued their relationship even though also their expectations were not fully met. It is also well worth asking whether the missed expectations may not be explained by changes in intimacy practices.

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