

MEMENTOS OF A LOVE FARAWAY: EVERYDAY OBJECTS WITH GREAT MEANINGS

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ABSTRACT

Mementos of a Love Faraway: Everyday Objects with Great Meanings

This article explores the role of everyday objects in long-distance relationships (LDRs) that connect two geographically distant partners. Focusing on LDRs within Europe, the study is based on interviews with people in such relationships. The article discusses one of the practices of creating a partner's abstract presence, called recognizing the sentimental value of objects. As part of developing and maintaining intimacy in the relationship, imagining the partner's presence is reinforced through emotional objects. The article contributes to the intersection of material culture and mobility studies by exploring the role of objects in emotionally linking geographically distant partners.

KEYWORDS: emotional objects, long-distance relationships, love, intimacy, abstract presence

IZVLEČEK

Spominki na ljubezen daleč stran: vsakdanji predmeti z velikim pomenom

Avtorica v članku raziskuje vlogo vsakdanjih predmetov v zvezah na daljavo, ki povezujejo dva geografsko oddaljena partnerja. Študija se osredotoča na zveze na daljavo v Evropi in temelji na intervjujih z ljudmi v tovrstnih odnosih. Avtorica obravnava eno izmed praks ustvarjanja partnerjeve abstraktne prisotnosti, imenovano prepoznavanje sentimentalne vrednosti predmetov. Kot del razvijanja in ohranjanja intimnosti v odnosu se predstavljanje partnerjeve prisotnosti krepi s čustvenimi predmeti. Članek prispeva k presečišču materialne kulture in študij mobilnosti z raziskovanjem vloge predmetov pri čustvenem povezovanju geografsko oddaljenih partnerjev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: čustveni predmeti, zveze na daljavo, ljubezen, intimnost, abstraktna prisotnost

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INTRODUCTION

Love is an emotion that has a great influence on the lives of human beings. A historical review shows that the concept of love is present as a strong inspiration in literature, fine arts, music production, and philosophical thought, which often draws inspiration from ancient Greece, where they questioned the epistemology of love and wrote about its various manifestations (e.g., the idea of the lost half, which is found in love). Even today, love can be conceived as free and inspiring, but on the other hand, especially in societies with a tradition of arranged marriage, falling in love might also be seen as disturbing or even dangerous, as it can threaten the stability of the family (Fox, 1975: 180). Even though Fox's study (1975) was done in a particular social context of arranged marriages, this view on love is also very much the case in "modern Western marriages," where falling in love might threaten an established relationship and can lead to infidelity or pursuing a new partner. Understanding love as a social institution with strong underlying norms, values, and traditions reveals that it can be a commodity or an ideology. In this manner, we could see love as a force that inspires humanity to create priceless works of art, but (for the most part, combined with anger or jealousy) it can also spur horrid acts of violence. As Horvat derives in his book *The Radicality of Love* (Horvat, 2016), love is a wonderful momentum that always threatens to make the social order implode, especially as we are radical social beings who continuously strive to connect to each other in different ways, often in a romantic, intimate, loving way. In light of the mechanisms underlying love, intimacy, and other romantic feelings, multiple psychological theories have addressed the questions of *how* and *why* exactly we connect to one another. Researchers in developmental psychology have posited an object as a key term in early attachment (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1982; Fairbairn, 1954; Kernberg, 1976; Klein, 1984; Winnicott, 1953). For Klein (1932), a key author in object-relations theory, an object represents a significant other (e.g., mother) or a part of them (e.g., mother's breast). It subsequently predicts the attachment style later in life, becoming an important (conscious and subconscious) influence on the choice of a romantic partner (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

As we know, objects that surround us in our daily lives can have significant emotional value. Objects can be bridges to places, feelings, and times that create meaning and comfort for their owner. Most of us hang items on the walls, possess photo albums covered in dust, or wear an inherited piece of jewelry from one of our ancestors. Artifacts, mementos, souvenirs, heirlooms, personal keepsakes, or special functional objects play an important role in remembrance, emotional dynamics, and processes of identity formation for individuals and communities (Csikszentmihalyi & Halton, 1981). Although we are in the field of romantic love and objects, it is important to point out that we will not talk about romantic or sexual attraction to specific objects, called *objectophilia* (Gatzia & Arnaud, 2022), but rather a loving relationship between two people imbued in them. These objects have many names

as scholars continuously try to conceptualize their roles in representing or manifesting a significant relationship. We will look at these objects from three different points of view and explore whether they could be perceived as transitional (Winnicott, 1953), biographical (Hoskins, 2013), or memory (Marschall, 2019) objects. Since they encompass emotions and, specifically, sentiments of love imbued in them, I propose they can also be called *emotional objects*. More so, creating objects together is considered a practice of love (Clarke-Salt, 2018), and such objects might play an essential role in emotionally linking geographically distant individuals.

Growing research evidence in psychology suggests that sustaining a satisfying partnership is crucial for physical and mental health (Barr & Simons, 2014; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Berli et al., 2021; House et al., 1988). Although psychological closeness is a key factor in a partnership (Collins & Feeney, 2004: 164), physical closeness is not always possible due to many factors (e.g., overseas employment, academic pursuits, and military duty). Many modern couples live part of their lives together at a physical distance, which we call a long-distance relationship (LDR). Couples can live apart due to study and job mobility since the global society offers increased possibilities for pursuing one's educational and occupational goals. Compared with the past century, when travel options were limited, and communication mainly took place through letters and later through the telephone line, we now have ever-more accessible travel options and information-communication technology (ICT). A palette of options for connecting with loved ones across time and space enables couples in LDRs to more easily navigate or maintain an LDR (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012; Pettigrew, 2009). Are mainstream communication tools, however, truly adequate to support the full spectrum of communication needed in intimate relationships? Since physical forms of intimacy (e.g., touching, hugging, sexual contact) are equally crucial as psychological (e.g., self-disclosure) for individuals to express their true selves (Collins & Feeney, 2004: 164), it is worth investigating how they compensate it over distance.

According to some estimates, LDRs represent an increasing share of romantic relationships in late modern Western societies (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Partners in such relationships face unique challenges that they overcome with different long-distance intimacy strategies, where objects might play an important role. As current studies focus on everyday objects and their role in creating subjective meaning, little is known in the field of emotional objects. Despite the vast research on material culture, there is a lack of understanding about the influence that objects have on attachment bonds between partners. Two contemporary books, *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (Moran & O'Brien, 2014) and *The Materiality of Love: Essays on Affection and Cultural Practice* (Malinowska & Gratzke, 2018), delve deeply into the questions of love imbued in objects, but after a broad literature review in the field of psychology, there is still no investigation, particularly into how emotional objects might offer an aide in creating an abstract presence of a geographically distant partner.

The participants in the study shared different experiences with everyday objects, from clothes left behind that still carry the smell of a beloved to a forgotten pistachio shell under the mattress, hard proof that the partner exists somewhere in real life. In the testimonies, unique elements with one's memory of the partner emerged, which can be seemingly completely insignificant, be it a partner's sweater, a typewriter, packed food for a trip, or a forgotten sock. Thus, I aim to focus on understanding the meaning behind ordinary objects that represent a specific aspect of how romantic partners in LDRs negotiate and maintain intimacy or emotional closeness (as a part of love between them). The main goal of this paper is to explore one of the practices of creating an abstract presence of a partner: the perception and use of emotional objects.

METHODOLOGY

The article discusses one of the six practices of creating a partner's abstract presence, called *recognizing the sentimental value of objects*. The other practices are 1) *virtual communication*, 2) *virtual activities and rituals*, 3) *virtual sexuality*, 4) *planning visits*, and 5) *sending surprise packages*, but we will not investigate them further in this article. The presented material with findings based on the data analysis is taken from my research project in which I explore how humans experience and develop intimacy in LDRs (Gostič, Forthcoming). The practices mentioned above result from a grounded theory approach to conceptualizing intimacy at a distance.

The primary purpose of the dissertation is to investigate how partners in LDRs understand intimacy and how they maintain a partnership despite the lack of face-to-face interaction. The doctoral research comprises eighteen semi-structured interviews carried out in Ljubljana, Slovenia (either in person or over video call) in 2019 and 2020. They describe intimacy at a distance through the experience of people who were in such relationships at the time of the interview and met the following criteria: Slovenian was defined as a first language, they were aged from 23 to 32, they had been in an LDR for at least six months, the total duration of the relationship was longer than 12 months, and they had spent a maximum of 30 days together in a time interval of six months. The participants were interviewed separately in cases when both partners from a couple spoke Slovenian as a first language, and both decided to be part of this research. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Most interviews lasted around 45 minutes, ranging from 22 to 67 minutes. The interview topics spanned from the perception of intimacy to the maintenance of intimacy using different strategies in LDRs. The questions were open-ended but also focused, e.g., *How do you experience intimacy in your relationship? How does physical distance affect your intimacy? Or, How do you develop and maintain intimacy?*

At the beginning of data collection, I conducted the interviews without explicitly asking about specific emotional objects. When it became apparent that most participants found this topic relevant, I added some direct questions about objects with sentimental value. Conducting semi-structured interviews enabled me to navigate more freely around topics that arose and offered me unique insight I could not have conceived or hypothesized alone. I used a constructivist grounded theory approach for data collection, analysis, and conceptualization. As Charmaz (2000: 510) argues, "Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge [...] and aims toward an interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings." Thus, I aimed to build an understanding of *what* intimacy is and *how* it is maintained over distance directly from individuals in an LDR during the time of the interview.

Eleven of the eighteen participants reported having at least one such item, and the present article is based on unique stories shared by five participants. In connection with the discussed topics, specific quotes are selected from these interviews, which succinctly show the theoretical starting points and connect the findings of previous research with the findings of the present study. The demographic characteristics of the study participants chosen for this article are shown in Table 1.

| Code | Gender | Age | Education | Field of work | Duration of the relationship | Duration of separation | End of separation | Relationship type |
|------|--------|-----|-----------|---------------|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| P1 | F | 26 | MA | research | more than 2 years | 2 years | known | monogamous |
| P3 | F | 27 | BA | student | more than 1 year | 8 months | known | monogamous, international |
| P5 | F | 27 | MA | culture | 5.5 years | 5 years | unknown | monogamous, international |
| P9 | F | 31 | MA | culture | more than 2 years | more than 2 years | known | monogamous, international |
| P17 | M | 32 | MA | NGO | 1 year | 1 year | unknown | monogamous, international, homosexual |

Table 1: The demographic characteristics of the five chosen participants.

The majority of the chosen respondents were women in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, with a specific focus on explorations in love that involve a deeper level of intimacy than adolescence, according to Arnett (2000: 473). Their education level was higher than a BA degree, and all were employed at the time of the interview, except for one participant who was concluding her studies. The duration of their relationships was at least 12 months long, and the duration of the geographical separation was at least 8 months. Three of five respondents knew the approximate time when the geographical separation would end. All participants

categorized their relationship type as monogamous; four were international couples, and one stated he was in a homosexual relationship.

Although they also mentioned digital mementos as important points of reference to a partner (e.g., photos or videos), we will focus exclusively on physical objects. Quotations from the participants are included in the text to highlight theoretical assumptions. They are translated from the Slovenian language, written in italics and followed by a notation in the manner of, e.g., (P5), where P represents the participant, and the number 5 depicts the sequence number of their participation in the study. All names in the quotations have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

BECOMING EMOTIONAL OBJECTS

The term *object* has a very important place in psychology and psychotherapy. In fact, there is a unique theory in psychoanalytic psychology called *object-relations theory* (Fairbairn, 1954; Kernberg, 1976; Klein, 1984; Winnicott, 1984). It is closely tied to Freud's legacy, who initially identified people in a subject's environment with the term "object" to identify them as the objects of drives. The theory suggests that family experiences during infancy shape how people relate to others and situations in their adult lives. In fact, Bowlby, one of the creators of attachment theory, suggested that attachment to objects can take the place of attachment to people. He was especially influenced by Lorenz's (1935) study of imprinting which showed that attachment was innate (observing that young ducklings form an attachment to the first large moving object that they meet, such as boots or brooms) and therefore had a survival value:

Lorenz had put his Wellington boots next to duck eggs. As the ducklings hatched out and saw the boot, they became "imprinted" with its image; wherever that boot went, the little ducks would follow. They mistook Lorenz's boot for their mummy. When Lorenz wore his Wellingtons he was slavishly followed by a trail of ducklings, each of whom [was] captivated by the image of the boot (Hill, 1997: 11).

With this innate dynamic in mind, we can also think of things as repositories for the meaning people project onto them (e.g., a cross is just two pieces of wood, but to Christians, it represents a lot more) and a way for people to express themselves through them (Miller, 2008: 1). According to Marschall (2019: 1), they can "represent links with home, loved ones and the autobiographical past, providing a sense of identity continuity." As Belk (1988: 139) states, they might represent parts of ourselves or, in his own words, an "extended self." He provided the first exhaustive argument that possessions were meaningful to people beyond their utilitarian sense, and thus people can become attached to them. Attachment to possessions is commonly

understood as a close association that individuals perceive between themselves and a specific object in their possession. That said, it is important to acknowledge that an individual might also associate unpleasant memories, feelings, or images with a specific object. A unique museum in Zagreb (Croatia), called the Museum of Broken Relationships, shows the stories of real people who, after the breakup of a romantic, intimate relationship, donate to the collection of personal artifacts that were once a symbolic representation of a significant relationship. The collection of seemingly unrelated and mundane objects offers a specific insight into the personal lives of people as each object embodies the story of a love that has failed to last (Vištica & Grubišić, 2017).

For Afshar (2014: 1), “things play a momentous role in defining individual and group identity, developing affiliation to or differentiation from others, expressing social status and lifestyle, establishing political and social power, influencing interpersonal relationship and enabling self-development.” Couples commonly keep memories in the form of gifts, pictures and other objects that symbolize their shared past and represent an investment in the relationship (Rusbult, 1980: 174). The mere sight of an object with sentimental value can revive a mental image of a partner and provide similar calming effects as actual physical proximity to a partner (Master et al., 2009; McGowan, 2002; Smith et al., 2004).

Maybe I keep some physical objects with me, whether they are his or ours. And they remind me that he exists. Because this is what I think, especially in this corona time, this virtual relationship it becomes so ... Abstract almost. And you don't even know how—unfortunately—you forget that this is a physical person. At some point, you're like ... It's a really weird feeling that's hard to describe, so some physical objects—it could be socks that he forgot—remind you that this is a physical person. It's not just a name on your phone screen, he exists. And he's somewhere waiting for you. Or you him. So, things like that are a very good reminder. [...] He has many of them on his bedside table... When I got up one morning and wrote to him that I was going to come ... He saved such things, and it is very nice that he saves such things. I think we both like things like that—because maybe they can be just some seemingly insignificant things, but it seems to me that we both feel that there is some meaning in these objects (P9).

The above vignette illustrates the physical and abstract nature of LDRs, and how intimacy as a practice of romantic love is embodied, understood, and felt. It is important to point out that we cannot conceptualize intimacy within late-modern Western societies without considering the past social changes and the modern paradigm of individualism. Giddens's book *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (1992) explores how cultural and structural factors influenced the transformation of interpersonal relationships, mainly by separating the private from the public sphere of life. Intimacy, love, and sexuality did not play such a transparently important role in the past as they do today, as it was mainly about

following traditional norms (e.g., the requirement of heteronormativity) and satisfying prescribed social structures (e.g., the creation of a nuclear family). Today, for the first time in Western history, the position of women in society is gaining greater equality with men than ever before. According to Giddens (1992), this is shaping the emergence of “plastic sexuality” freed from reproduction and “pure relationship” that presumes sexual and emotional equality between partners.

Like the many other couples in this study, this couple spent much of the early part of their relationship living in different countries, negotiating their relationship and love for each other over distance. The participant speaks about a strange feeling of almost forgetting her partner exists in physical form since the relationship becomes so abstract over time. Contemporary understandings of intimacy include both psychological and physiological aspects of this broad concept. Disclosure with confluent love being dependent on complete openness between partners on the one hand (Giddens, 1992) and of sex as “an expression of intimacy” (Giddens, 1991: 164) on the other, suggest we see intimacy as a “coming together of two people to become one, where the distance between romantic partners, both intellectual and physical, is eliminated” (Clarke-Salt, 2017: 5). It is important to point out the distinction between physical and psychological closeness, as proximity does not necessarily equate to intimacy (Thien, 2005: 453). Thus, physical closeness is not the only relevant factor for developing emotional intimacy. This said, it is compelling to consider how physical and psychological closeness might be created, intertwined, transformed, and maintained in the context of partners who live apart.

Hence, I introduce the term “abstract presence” to denote a psychological presence of a physically distant partner and distinguish between a *conceptual presence* and a *disembodied presence* (Gostič, Forthcoming). They differ in the sense of groundedness in so-called “real life.” One can feel a strong connection with their god, their late-loved one, or a person they only met online, but their presence is only conceptual; it is not grounded in real-life experience with the entity or person (or not anymore). Even though it is hard to find “objective” proof that a god, a late beloved or a person they never saw really exists, we cannot argue they do not, in fact, “exist” in one’s psyche. A disembodied presence, on the other hand, presents the presence of a specific beloved person that comes and goes in the physical form. In this way, their mental picture of the beloved is “upgraded” with new information every time they see that person.

Similar to my division is one of Illouz (2007: 74–108) as she distinguishes between two styles of romantic imagination: *internet imagination* and *traditional imagination*. Internet imagination is created through verbal or visually mediated communication, which, over time, loses the power of representing an imaginary person (Cooley, 2009). As it is based on much textual and pictorial material, it is overshadowed by language and recognition processes. Illouz (2007; 2012) writes that internet imagination often leads to disappointment when meeting in the real world because the imaginary does (normally) not match reality. Moreover, internet imagination is

future-oriented and therefore detached from retrospective, intuitive, tacit knowing. On the other hand, traditional imagination rests both on the live encounter and the partner's imagination, thus representing a mixture of reality and imagination, where both are grounded in the body. She concludes that while traditional romantic relationships combine reality and imagination, online relationships uncouple the two and, paradoxically, make face-to-face contact indispensable. From this point of view, LDRs are interesting case studies of how both types of imagination intertwine in creating intimacy as the experienced traditional romantic imaginaries are accumulated, composed, and sometimes mixed with internet imagination.

As we will see in the next chapter, some couples create memories together and materialize the relationship, giving it substance (e.g., a joint book of the beds in which they slept). In this manner, the objects become substitutes for otherwise lacking physical presence. For some of the study participants, emotional objects represent the central point that connects them with their partners, as we will further discover through reading the testimonies of five participants. We will look at unique stories behind a forgotten sweater, a photo album of beds where they slept together, a snapshot with a written recap of their year together, a pistachio shell, and a bracelet.

SYMBOLIC VALUE OF OBJECTS

The symbolic value of everyday objects can be understood through a psychoanalytic perspective, where the notion of a *transitional object* was first introduced by Winnicott (1953). Transitional or substitute objects play an essential role in early development, especially in the process of separation-individuation (Mahler, 1963), where the child learns to withstand the frustration of short separations from the primary object of attachment (Praper, 1996). According to Winnicott (1953), transitional objects serve to self-soothe, which is an important aspect of learning self-regulation (e.g., for a certain period, the child falls asleep only with a specific blanket or toy). Transitional objects, therefore, serve as a mediator between the external and internal worlds, where creativity and imagination reside.

There are some small things ... I have his sweater here [laughs], and I sometimes wear it because it reminds me so much and it makes me feel so good ... Well—I don't know how to say it—some things, which give me the feeling that this is serious, and that this intimacy is perhaps not limited to what we talk about (P1).

The quote above demonstrates that the traces and evidence of the physical existence of the partner serve to cope with the separation. This participant had been in a relationship with her partner for two and a half years at the point of the interview, and they currently live together. We can see that, for her, intimacy is more than talking; it is remembering her partner, feeling good about the relationship,

and knowing that the mutual commitment is serious. In order to make the absent present, the imagination thus relies on perceptions, feelings, and emotions, thereby primarily relying on reality (Illouz, 2007). Sigman (1991) wrote about the importance of keeping physical objects (such as clothes or ornaments) to maintain continuity in relation to distance.

It seems to me that at some point when you are in such a relationship, you start clinging to physical objects as well. Even if they are yours, but maybe you connect them—“Ah, I bought this here and there when we were here and there.” These are really some such artifacts that remind you physically (P9).

This particular participant talks about perceiving the continuity of the relationship when she remembers all the places (mental and physical) where they have been together. To keep the notion of continuity, it is a common practice for people to document their lives through writing diaries, letters, or journals. The periods of separation in love relationships can materialize emotion, as some couples create books from their correspondence (Clarke-Salt, 2018: 55). These books might offer a way to note certain aspects of their relationship in real-time and thus allow not only to write but also to re-write their own story. As Hochschild (2012) puts it, the emotional labor invested in making these artifacts shows us how love is constantly being made and re-made. Indeed, it would be interesting to draw conclusions about whether this emotional labor is the same for men as for women, according to their age, frequency of seeing one another, and other determining factors. However, it is crucial to stay aware of the tendency to overgeneralize from the sample to the population, which qualitative methods do not allow us to do. Inductive reasoning is possible, that is, reasoning from an individual to the majority, which does not mean generalization to the entire population.

Because our relationship is long-distance or “on the road” (Marko calls it a “traveling relationship”), we don’t really have a common nest of our own. Therefore, the beds in which we sleep together during visits/travels are compensation. So, for the first three years of our relationship, we had a notepad in which we pasted photos of all the beds we slept in. Then it died down a bit, mainly because of my lack of systematicity, but I still have it in my mind and take pictures of almost every bed when we travel (P5).

As we can see from the quote above, creating a shared artifact across distance and time can serve as a ritual that bonds two people together in mutual remembrance. Purbrick (2014: 19) asserts that these commodities represent a mnemonic device that evokes the relationship’s qualities and adds value to their owners. The participant used an interesting word to describe the photos of the beds she had slept in with her partner; she sees them as “compensation,” which can be understood as a substitute for a nest of their own. As Purbrick (2014: 14) describes, when the object

exists, it is present, and so is the person, despite the physical distance: "Having and holding, looking at or touching, a once given thing can overcome the separation of persons over any distance." The album of beds they slept in becomes a monument of their shared experiences, their love, and their commitment to one another.

When we got together in September, each of us took one photo every day. Of anything. Then we put them side by side. [...] I will send him a couple of photos, and on the back, I will write what we did this year... Because it is hectic, and I write everything in my calendar, but he doesn't. He said, "I forget everything" (P3).

This participant purposefully wrote a little memoir on the back of the photos to remind her partner of their shared experiences. It shows that she knows him deeply and accepts his characteristic of "being forgetful" and thus wishes to show her care through this gesture. As we can see from the last two quotes, objects can be handmade. These so-called *biographical objects* (Hoskins, 2013) are imbued with the personality traits of their creator and bear the imprint of the time and place where they were created (e.g., a photo album, a diary, postcards, an album with glued travel clippings, memory books from childhood, a guest book from a wedding, a handmade necklace). They live with us, grow old, provide us with memories, a reinterpretation of events, and represent our own transience (Hoskins, 2013). As Derrida (1996) observes, people have a need to archive, to show their own presence in a particular space and time.

We could also say these objects contain the time spent together. Memory is tangible and important in creating a couple's history (Clarke-Salt, 2018: 56). The emotional labor invested in these objects shows how love is a joint product of invention and reinvention (Hochschild, 2012). With this in mind, we can also think of them as *memory objects* (Marschall, 2019) since they are special objects or personal belongings that elicit deliberate or involuntary memories not only of homeland, home culture, and memorable places but also episodes in one's own autobiographical past and significant social relations (Marschall, 2019). Whether they be conceptualized as transitional, biographical, memory, or emotional objects, they have an important function.

The object-relations theory further explores the object's function for the psyche. In this theory, objects are *usually persons*, parts of persons (such as the mother's breast), or symbols of one of these. Klein (2017) asserted that splitting off parts of the self and projecting them into objects is of vital importance for normal development. She imagined this function as a defense that contributes to an infant's normal development, including ego structure and the development of object relations. The introjection and projection of the *good object*, first of all, the mother's breast, is a precondition for normal development. She proposed the term "projective identification" in her work "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," first published in 1946 (Klein, 1996), which encompasses *idealization*, a mechanism that is closely tied to romantic relationships.

Once I found a pistachio shell in my bed. I know that he always ate them in my bed. And then I saved it because I was so [emotionally] "I'm not going to throw this away." I missed him so much. This was during corona. And when I found that in the middle of the mattress, "I'll keep this in my jewelry box" [laughs], I know it's probably really romantic, but whatever, things like that remind you [excited]. "Aha, he was here! And he exists." It can really be some things like that (P9).

The participant was very lucid in conveying the importance of the pistachio shell and showed awareness of this strange mental process that occurred in the time of missing her partner very deeply. Therefore, the perception of the individual with the subjective story attributed to the object in question is the key distinguishing circumstance when the pistachio shell is a waste in the garbage and when it is an important relational object that finds a place in a casket with valuable jewelry. It shows how people can transform ordinary things into meaningful symbols. One could argue that it is crucial having these objects that demonstrate the substance of the relationship for those couples that live apart. When coming across an emotional object, the space can become alive with the presence of a beloved who cannot be physically present.

ABSTRACT PRESENCE: CONCEPTUAL AND DISEMBODIED

As we mentioned before, we can understand shared artifacts as manifestations of a relationship. We respond emotionally to many aspects of physical objects. Thus, objects are not mere objects; they contain meanings deeply rooted in emotional layers and make objects into parts of ourselves. As previous studies show, LDRs commonly include particular challenges (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Cameron & Ross, 2007; Tseng, 2016) and sometimes their importance is minimized and discredited compared to "normal" relationships (Kolozsvari, 2015). However, research has shown that LDRs are felt just as strongly as those in physical proximity (Baldassar, 2015; King-O'Riain, 2015; Longhurst, 2013; Parreñas, 2005).

The participants of my study highlighted items and clothes that carry the emotional value of the *abstract presence* of the partner. In fact, results from my study show that the mere sight of an emotional object can revive a mental image of a partner and, for some participants, offer a substitute for the lack of physical closeness. It can facilitate the process of making the geographically distant partner present in another way, more specifically, forming an abstract presence. In some cases, it can even provide similar calming effects as actual physical proximity to a partner, consistent with findings from previous studies (Master et al., 2009; McGowan, 2002; Smith et al., 2004). It is important to point out that this form of a romantic relationship involves many meetings and partings, continuously flowing from hellos to goodbyes, sometimes in one month, at other times half a year or more. For some participants, this was an unpleasant part of the relationship encompassing powerful

feelings of expecting to see the partner in a couple of days or months and overwhelming sadness (sometimes even before) saying goodbye to them. They describe periods of being apart as *waiting* and periods together as *life in transit*. Namely, when they spend time together in one or the other city, they, in a way, “interrupt” the routine life of a partner and wish to spend every long-awaited shared minute in a feel-good state. This tendency alone can also be a part of idealization and wishing they would not experience uncomfortable feelings when together, which can, in turn, also lead to postponing other disagreeable topics of conversation to a time when it can slowly but surely become a conflict.

Having this dynamic at hand, these objects “can be held onto in the absence of a partner so their physical form can become a body substitute,” as Clarke-Salt (2018: 64) asserts. This conceptualization is very close to the notion of disembodied presence, where the object is considered proof or substantiation of a partner’s existence. According to the division of abstract presence into conceptual and disembodied, we could place the artifacts of the LDR partners in the category of disembodied abstract presence as it is tied to a real-life person and represents their disembodied presence. These artifacts can become emotional companions to our lives and the focus of contemplative memory, generating a sense of love (Sarup, 1994). Moreover, the materialization of their relationship strengthens their identity as a couple. It can provide a new way of knowing oneself through things, give substance to their relationship, and serve as a testament to their affection.

He stole one of my t-shirts that he sleeps in—one of the better ones, so [laughs] now I’m thinking I’d take it back from him, heh. [...] It was my birthday when I was here, so he gave me one bracelet, but here I bought the same one or something similar—so now these are two additional items that connect us. [...] This bracelet has a magnet that you ... You put on to play with, and it unfastens and closes, and I think that I often find myself ... I have it in my hand, well, it’s really fun, but on the other hand, it often reminds me of him; it is a special/central object that connects me to him ... Even when you go take a shower and see it, you think of him. But yes, he sleeps in this shirt because he says it smells like me even though it’s been two months now; I don’t think it really does anymore [laughs] (P17).

For this participant, remembering is fostered with the help of two additional items, a bracelet he plays with and a t-shirt his partner sleeps in. For him, remembering that his partner sleeps in his t-shirt evokes a feeling of “being connected” to him. Recent studies (Ahmed, 1999; Clarke-Salt, 2018; Malinowska & Gratzke, 2018; Marschall, 2019; Miller, 2001; Moran & O’Brien, 2014; Purbrick, 2014) show that such special personal objects can be said to have agency since they trigger feelings and emotional and bodily responses, stimulate thought and fuel the imagination. Moreover, they have therapeutic value by causing consolation and feelings of well-being and enforcing a sense of identity and belonging.

For him, touching the bracelet is also crucial in feeling the emotions connected to his partner, thus creating his partner's abstract presence. Similarly, the importance of touch for remembrance is indicated by research in the field of museum activity, which shows the connection between touching objects and the construction of social reality; that is, that touch helps visitors develop connections with objects through their own experiences and memories (Jewitt & Price, 2019). Touching artifacts can form a sense of their body knowing another across time and space (Candlin, 2010). It is crucial in establishing the objects' social, cognitive, and therapeutic value (Chatterjee & Noble, 2016). Marschall (2019: 2) conceptualizes them as *aide-mémoires*, precipitating memory and facilitating the process of remembrance.

Based on the analysis, I have found that both the physical presence and the psychological presence of a partner are important for creating closeness, which can be replaced for a certain period. However, each form of presence contains its own irreplaceable qualities that cannot be recreated (e.g., touch as a unique physical and trust as a psychological quality). Namely, a person can be physically present but emotionally absent (e.g., after years of living together), as well as vice versa, where there is a strong abstract presence in the physical distance of a person (e.g., LDRs).

CONCLUSION

Living together at a geographical distance motivates couples to create, develop, and maintain specific strategies of intimacy that can differ from those couples who live in a shared geographical space. The article discusses one of the six practices of creating a partner's abstract presence, called *recognizing the sentimental value of objects* (along with *virtual communication*, *virtual activities and rituals*, *virtual sexuality*, *planning visits*, and *sending surprise packages* which are not further investigated in this article). These strategies result from a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis and represent a new insight into relating at a distance. Each participant used more than one practice, but since the methodology was qualitative, we can only establish that more than half of the participants (eleven out of eighteen) used emotional objects to relate over distance. Further studies could approach the topic from a quantitative perspective and focus more specifically on how these strategies are represented in a larger sample. As the opening vignette highlights, one of the mechanisms of creating, developing, and maintaining intimacy across distance is the use of everyday objects as mementos that embody love. Couples create or save specific physical objects that serve as a manifestation of their relationship and facilitate the feeling of closeness and connectedness between them. My main goal in this paper was to explore one of the practices of creating an abstract presence of a partner, more specifically, to focus on the perception and use of objects as a practice of creating an abstract presence of a partner.

The synthesis of the findings suggests that couples have developed a holistic coping with the deficits of the physical presence of the partner, where the use of imagination is key. Imagining the partner's presence, smell, proximity, or sight is reinforced through emotional objects with sentimental value. It is not the aesthetics, form or even price that gives value to them; it is the memory of when it was given or made. In other words, these objects acquire value in the eyes of the owner because of the connections they have with their past (e.g., a romantic memory with their partner), what they represent in the present (e.g., the love between them), and what they imply for the future (e.g., commitment to the relationship and imagining living together). In this way, an object can become "priceless" to someone, yet, without the knowledge of its story, to another, it simply represents an everyday object or even trash (e.g., the story of a pistachio shell).

Moreover, these testimonies demonstrate that making and remaking shared objects helps shape the identity of an individual in a relationship and the identity of a couple. Emotional objects help them write the story of two people sharing their lives in a way that presents unique challenges and encompasses a mutual commitment to resolving them. For some, they may strengthen the bond, facilitate an abstract presence of the partner, and generate a sense of love. Creating something together is considered a practice of love, and through these practices, we can more deeply understand the substance of virtual, abstract, constantly changing relationships. Being aware of these internal psychological processes (like the role of idealization) is an integral part of the relational work which goes on to sustain relationships.

The present study opens and addresses issues of constituting psychological and physical closeness. It shows how the object is not only a metaphor for the self but an opportunity for introspection and representation of a deep bond with another human being. Gaining insight into the dynamics of intimacy, which illustrates a key component of an individual's physical and mental health, is of paramount importance within increasingly frequent long-distance relationships.

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POVZETEK

SPOMINKI NA LJUBEZEN DALEČ STRAN: VSAKDANJI PREDMETI Z VELIKIM POMENOM

Maja Gostič

Vsakdanji predmeti, ki nas obdajajo v življenju, imajo lahko veliko čustveno vrednost. Ljudje jim pripisujemo različne pomene in jih dojemamo kot mostove do krajev, občutkov in časov. Večina nas obeša predmete na stene, hrani albume s fotografijami ali nosi podedovan kos nakita. Avtorica v članku raziskuje vlogo vsakdanjih predmetov v zvezah na daljavo, ki povezujejo dva geografsko oddaljena partnerja. Veliko sodobnih parov v zahodnih družbah pozne moderne namreč živi fizično narazen, čemur pravimo zveza na daljavo. Pari lahko živijo geografsko ločeno zaradi študijske in delovne mobilnosti, saj globalna družba ponuja več možnosti za uresničevanje izobraževalnih in poklicnih ciljev kot pretekla obdobja. Paleta možnosti za povezovanje z ljubljenimi v času in prostoru sicer omogoča lažje vzdrževanje odnosov na daljavo, ker pa so v romantičnih razmerjih fizične oblike intimnosti (npr. dotik, objem, spolni stik) ravno tako pomembne kot psihološke (npr. samorazkrivanje), je vredno raziskati, kako jih partnerji kompenzirajo na daljavo.

Glavni cilj prispevka je raziskati vlogo čustvenih predmetov kot prakse ustvarjanja abstraktne prisotnosti partnerja. Avtorica obravnava eno od šestih praks ustvarjanja partnerjeve abstraktne prisotnosti, imenovano prepoznavanje sentimentalne vrednosti predmetov. Druge prakse so še 1) virtualna komunikacija, 2) virtualne aktivnosti in rituali, 3) virtualna spolnost, 4) načrtovanje obiskov in 5) pošiljanje paketov presenečenj, vendar v tem članku niso podrobneje obravnavane. Predstavljeno gradivo z ugotovitvami je del večjega projekta, v katerem avtorji raziskujejo, kako ljudje doživljajo, razvijajo in ohranjajo intimnost v zvezah na daljavo. Udeleženci raziskave so delili različne izkušnje z vsakdanjimi predmeti, od zapuščenih oblačil, ki še vedno dišijo po ljubljeni osebi, do pozabljene pistacijeve lupine pod žimnico. Enajst od osemnajstih udeležencev je poročalo, da ima vsaj en tak predmet, pričujoči članek pa se osredotoča na izseke intervjujev petih udeležencev. Ob obravnavanih tematikah so iz intervjujev izbrani določeni citati, ki povedno prikazujejo teoretična izhodišča in povezujejo spoznanja predhodnih raziskav z ugotovitvami pričujoče študije.

Sinteza ugotovitev nakazuje, da so pari razvili celostno soočanje s pomanjkanjem fizične prisotnosti partnerja, kjer je ključna uporaba domišljije. Zamišljanje partnerjeve prisotnosti, vonja, bližine ali pogleda se krepi s pomočjo čustvenih predmetov s sentimentalno vrednostjo. Vrednosti jim ne dajejo estetika, oblika ali cena, temveč spomin na to, kdaj je bil predmet podarjen ali narejen. Pričevanja nakazujejo, da je lahko izdelovanje skupnih predmetov prepoznano kot praksa ljubezni, ki krepi vez med dvema posameznikoma. Z drugimi besedami, ti predmeti v očeh lastnika pridobijo vrednost zaradi povezav, ki jih imajo s svojo preteklostjo (npr. romantični

spomin na partnerja), zaradi tega, kar predstavljajo v sedanjosti (npr. ljubezen med njima), in zaradi njihovega pomena za prihodnost (npr. zamišljanje skupnega življenja). Tako lahko nekomu na videz nepomemben predmet postane »neprecenljiv«, spet drugemu pa predstavlja le vsakdanji predmet ali celo smet (npr. zgodba o pistacijevi lupini). Predmeti torej niso zgolj predmeti; vsebujejo pomene, ki so globoko zakoreninjani v čustvenih plasteh in se spreminjajo v dele nas samih.