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Together, but Alone: A Thematic Analysis of the Athletes' and Their Partners' Experience of Physical Separation in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Athletes and their romantic partners may experience physical separation as a result of the frequent athletes' training camps. Little is known about how such couples experience this separation. To fill this gap, the current interview-based research examined how three pairs of Polish athletes aged 22-30 ($M = 23.50$, $SD = 25.17$) experience separation in their relationships. The thematic analysis identified four themes: 1) Perception of separation as an element of the relationship; 2) Emotions during separation; 3) Maintaining contact during separation; and 4) Coping with separation. The findings revealed that athletes and their partners perceived separation as a stage, opportunity, necessity, and natural part of their relationships. Emotions related to separation ranged from negative through mixed to positive. Partners maintained regular contact, which provided closeness and continuity in their relationships despite the distance. Finally, partners coped with separation by accepting its necessity, enhanced by the awareness of the realities of sport life. They also coped with separation through mutual support, self-realization, distraction and being among other people and seeking support from them. This study suggests that physical separation in romantic relationships may be an essential and multifaceted part of the participants' experiences in the romantic functioning and sports careers.

Key words

athletes, training camps, romantic relationships, separation, thematic analysis

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Juntos, pero solos: Un Análisis Temático de la Experiencia de los Atletas y sus Parejas ante la Separación Física en las Relaciones Románticas

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Resumen

Los deportistas y sus parejas sentimentales pueden experimentar una separación física como consecuencia de las frecuentes concentraciones de atletas, pero se sabe poco sobre esta cuestión. Este estudio basado en entrevistas examinó cómo tres parejas de atletas polacos de entre 22 y 30 años ($M = 23.50$, $SD = 25.17$) experimentan la separación en sus relaciones. El análisis identificó cuatro temas: percepción de la separación como parte de la relación; emociones durante la separación; mantenimiento del contacto durante la separación; afrontamiento de la separación. Los resultados revelaron que los deportistas y sus parejas percibían la separación como una fase, una necesidad y una parte natural de su relación. Las emociones relacionadas con la separación oscilaron entre negativas, mixtas y positivas. Las parejas mantuvieron un contacto regular, lo que proporcionó cercanía y continuidad a su relación. Por último, las parejas afrontaron la separación aceptando su necesidad, reforzadas por la conciencia de las realidades de la vida deportiva, mediante la autorrealización, la distracción, el apoyo mutuo y la permanencia y búsqueda de apoyo en otras personas. Este estudio sugiere que la separación física en las relaciones románticas puede ser una parte importante y polifacética de las experiencias de funcionamiento romántico y carreras deportivas de nuestros participantes.

Palabras clave

Atletas, campamentos de cuadros, relaciones románticas, separación, análisis temático

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The issue of professional sportsmen's intimate relationships has been investigated, for instance, by Ortiz (2002, 2004, 2006, 2011, 2020, 2021), who analyzed sport marriages. In these marriages, women were found to be expected to enable their husbands to focus on the sports career by managing the couple's domestic life (Ortiz, 2020). Ortiz's studies also demonstrated that wives in sport marriages due to their husbands' job-related activities and travels were forced to accept that they would be alone for a great deal of time during their marriages (Ortiz, 2020). Moreover, sports families faced the necessity of adjusting to the seasonal life resulting from the husband/father returning to family life and its impact on all aspects of marital and family relationships (Ortiz, 2020).

The intimate relationships of athletes might also be considered from the perspective of physical separation resulting from athletes' frequent trips related to training camps and international events such as the World Cup or the Olympic Games. For instance, according to Polish canoeist Tomasz Wylenzek, canoeists spend approximately 250-300 days a year away from their permanent residence (Leniarski, 2008). Due to the demands of Olympic training only within the pregame phase, Olympic athletes are mostly apart from their home environments, family and friends (Henriksen et al., 2020). As a result, it is plausible to consider professional athletes' romantic relationships in terms of long-distance relationships (LDRs).

In recent decades, relationships were considered to exist only when people interacted in the same physical space or through indirect means (Goffman, 1983). However, individuals may remain in LDRs in which physical contact between partners is impossible, for instance, due to educational, professional or family reasons (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Beckmeyer et al., 2021; Pistole, 2010). LDRs are characterized by permanent or frequent separation of partners who are separated by some geographic distance, and the possibility of psychically being with each other is limited for them (Pistole & Roberts, 2011). The most distinguishing feature of geographically close relationships from long-distance ones is the distress felt by the latter caused by attachment to an object that is physically inaccessible (Pistole & Roberts, 2011).

The decision to be away from a loved one is related to the repeated separation-reunion cycle (Pistole, 2010). The need to switch between phases of being together and being apart in LDRs may contribute to the greater difficulty in switching to the separation stage compared to geographically close dating relationships (GCDR), and these difficulties may be associated with stronger negative affect after separation (Weber et al., 2022). Partners may perceive the separation as a minor inconvenience or despair, and the negative consequences of separation (e.g., insecurity, loneliness, domestic responsibilities) may significantly outweigh the positive consequences (e.g., sense of independence and career advancement) (Stewart & Donald, 2006).

Subjective perceptions of separation from a partner form "personal philosophies" about being in an LDR that often emphasize separation's temporary and necessary nature (Stewart & Donald, 2006). These personal meanings are a support in times of increased longing and make it easier for partners to maintain a positive attitude toward an LDR (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Finally, a recent study demonstrated that the absence of a spouse was negatively associated with the well-being and mental health of left-behind married men and women (Guo et al., 2022).

To cope with the above indicated difficulties, partners may use different strategies. For instance, spouses adapt to the circumstances of separation, creating and maintaining intimacy

through online conversations and stepping away from the physical aspect of a relationship (Bui, 2020; Muntean, 2019). Holtzman and colleagues (2021) found that LDR couples more frequently use video calls, voice calls and texting than GCDRs and that responsive texting is connected with greater relationship satisfaction, confirming previous results on the importance of social networking services (SNSs) in long-distance dating (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004; Kahlow et al., 2020).

Furthermore, individuals in LDRs to deal with loneliness were found to call to talk with a partner and indicated having other friends as a source of support (Firmin et al., 2014). Moreover, the dynamics of online communication in LDR were found to revolve around learning to communicate at a distance, interpreting a partner's tone of voice, compensating for the lack of context and making extra efforts to communicate well (Firmin et al., 2014). While couples rarely share physical space, they create shared social-mental spaces that strengthen their sense of belonging and broaden their definitions of intimacy (Kolozsvari, 2015). Furthermore, long-distance couples are not characterized by higher levels of relationship uncertainty than stationary couples (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). It is only in the case of LDR couples who do not have any direct "face-to-face" contact, even from time to time. However, more prolonged absences between direct visits and extreme idealization during separation predicted instability upon reunion (Stafford & Merolla, 2007).

The Current Study

The previously mentioned studies by Ortiz (2002, 2004, 2006, 2011, 2020, 2021), undoubtedly provided a significant contribution to our understanding of sports marriages. At the same time, these studies mainly focused on sport marriages and the experiences of wives in these relationships. Therefore, the experiences of both partners, as well as the experiences of individuals not only in marital relationships but also in nonmarital relationships, appear to be almost unaddressed issues.

Furthermore, close and intimate relationships are an essential domain of people's lives and a crucial factor affecting mental and physical health (Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). Therefore, the romantic relationships of athletes may also affect their mental and physical health outcomes per se and their performance (Chacon, 2022; Eggleston, 2020; Jowett & Cramer, 2009). As a result, romantic relationships may constitute one of the numerous factors determining sports success (Budnik-Przybylska et al., 2018). In particular, past research has documented the links between a long-distance love relationship and adverse outcomes such as increased individual and relationship stress (Du Bois et al., 2016) and loneliness (Stafford, 2010).

Therefore, the goal of the current interview-based investigation was to explore and reconstruct the experiences of physical separation of athletes and their partners in terms of their opinions, feelings and behaviors. Specifically, the current study represents an exploratory type of qualitative research that aims to generate new knowledge by exploring a topic that is investigated to a limited degree, in which research aims and questions are broad, and for which a priori hypotheses are not appropriate or necessary (Rendle et al., 2019).

Our investigation followed the standards and guidelines formulated for exploratory qualitative research (Rendle et al., 2019), including the utilization of a single, homogeneous purposeful sample, documentation of the interviews, development of a semistructured method of data collection adjusted in response to new issues raised by the interviewees, and employment of a clear analytic strategy guided by a theoretical proposition of performing thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data presented in the current manuscript were collected in the scope of the master thesis prepared by the first author under the supervision of the third author.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Participants included three heterosexual couples, in which one of the partners trained for classic canoeing professionally and traveled to frequent training camps and sporting events. In turn, the partners remained at their permanent residence, where they worked and/or continued their education. In the case of two couples, men were professional athletes, and in the third, it was a woman.

The athletes were recruited from among those who play at the international level. Their partners were, in two cases, people who had previously also trained in canoeing but never managed to play at the international level. In contrast, in the last couple, the athlete's partner was a person who has never trained in either canoeing or any other sport that would involve long and distant trips.

The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 30 years old ($M = 23.50$, $SD = 25.17$), the couples had been in a relationship for more than a year, and each was currently experiencing a separation or had had that experience in the relationship history. The detailed relationship characteristics of the participants are provided in Table 1. All names used to identify the participants in this article are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (e.g., Mary, John).

Table 1

The Major Characteristics of Participants

		Age	Sex	Job	Relationship type	Length of relationship	Living together
Couple 1	Mary	22	F	Canoeist	Nonmarital relationship	4 years	Yes
	John	22	M	Entrepreneur			
Couple 2	Lisa	30	F	Teacher	Marriage	6 years	Yes
	Richard	30	M	Canoeist			
Couple 3	Susan	25	F	Assistant	Nonmarital relationship	2 years	No
	Joseph	22	M	Canoeist			

Note. F = female; M = male.

Procedure

The current investigation was positively evaluated by the Ethics Committee of the Academy of Silesia in Katowice, Poland (Resolution no. 04/KEBN/2022). Informed consent and consent to publish were obtained from all participants included in the study.

The development of the final interview guide was proceeded by the performance of a bracketing interview (Tufford & Newman, 2012) and a pilot study involving two individuals. The narratives were evoked by the initial request. *As you said, you are in a relationship with a professional athlete. Could you tell me what this kind of relationship with a person who trains in a sport professionally looks like?* The entire interview schedule consisted of five questions pertaining to (1) general functioning in a relationship with a professional athlete, (2) functioning in the time of separation, (3) emotions experienced during separation and ways of coping with it, (4) building closeness and attachment, and (5) planning for the future of the relationship.

Semistructured interviews were conducted online and were audio-recorded by the first author. All interviews were conducted via FaceTime and were recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. The duration of the interviews ranged from 36-54 minutes ($M = 41$ minutes). The participants were not compensated for their participation.

All of the participants were provided with detailed information about the study's aim and procedure. Before the interviews began, informed consent to participate in the interview and to have the interviews recorded was gathered. The participants could stop answering any questions and resign from participation in the interviews.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by using the method of reflexive thematic analysis, that is an inductive technique of identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b). The analysis was performed in line with six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), that is 1) familiarization with the data, 2) creating codes, 3) creating thematic threads, 4) overview of thematic threads, 5) defining and naming thematic threads and 6) reporting/interpretation. The analysis was performed by the first author under the supervision of the third author.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed the following four main themes: 1) perception of separation; 2) emotions during separation; 3) maintaining contact during separation; and 4) coping with separation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Four Themes Identified Through the Thematic Analysis Reflecting the Athletes' and Their Partners' Experiences of Separation in their Romantic Relationships



Theme 1. Perception of Separation

The first theme concerns the perception of separation and includes four categories: a stage, an opportunity, a necessity, and an element of the relationship.

Perceiving separation as a stage in life and/or a relationship is characterized by the fact that it will end in the future and by having its own bright and dark sides. Lisa expressed this: *You can somehow explain it to yourself that it won't last forever. And also that it is just a period at that particular stage of life.*

Another way of looking at the separation is seeing it as an opportunity, on the one hand, to appreciate the partner's physical presence, which was illustrated by Joseph:

Many couples, other couples who live with each other on a daily basis, (...), do not appreciate the fact that they have the other person. I think that we as athletes think about it all the time and it is easier for us to appreciate having the other person next to us when they are actually next to us.

The most frequently manifested way of perception was the necessity resulting from an athlete's work and an inseparable element of the relationship, i.e., as a natural, well-known circumstance of the relationship. Lisa described the separation as follows:

We just kind of accepted it and it was kind of a bit inscribed in our life that these trips will be, are and later in some job after ending the career, they may also appear. I think that we have inscribed it somewhere into our family life and when there is a trip, then there is a trip, and when he's here, then he's here.

Theme 2. Emotions during Separation

The second theme reflects the emotions experienced by partners during their separation, which involved both negative (longing, sadness, anger, jealousy) and positive emotions, e.g., certainty and the feeling of closeness with a partner despite separation. The participants also simultaneously felt the opposite emotions in the situation of separation, e.g., athletes, on the one hand, desired to stay with a partner, and on the other hand, they desired to go away and pursue their sports goals.

The longing was associated with sadness, although it had different origins. For Lisa, it was experienced at the sight of other couples: Sometimes when I saw couples passing me by, I thought that "it's a pity that he is not here with me". Then I realized that "it would be nice if he was here too" and so on.

There were also concerns about the future of the relationship in the face of frequent separation: "I couldn't imagine what it would be like. I was terrified that this relationship, despite the fact that I felt he was such a soulmate for me, could fall apart without this closeness. That this closeness is so important".

Jealousy was also present in Joseph's partner's reaction to the imagined trips:

I had such a problem that he was leaving and I was thinking "oh there are girls who also train", "these girls are athletic". And so I was screwing in my head full of such things, that "there are also physiotherapists who massage him". It was quite so difficult for me to grasp too.

The difficult emotions associated with separation also involved anger, which in Mary's case concerned the too-short break at home between groupings: "During the year when I come home for two or three days, that's when I'm kind of angry precisely that I have to leave again".

However, in addition to the wide range of unpleasant emotions, the participants also spoke of pleasant feelings such as peace of mind about one's relationship supported by the belief in

the firm foundation of the relationship, confidence and trust in the partner, to which frequent separation is not a threat. Lisa noted:

I'm generally confident in Richard, so I don't have a problem with him going somewhere and having to worry if he's going to do something stupid. I think this is just the basis - trust from one side as well as the other.

Positive emotions during separation are also provided by frequent forms of contact via the internet - most often video calls, which give partners a sense of closeness despite being far away. John explained this as follows:

Obviously, I miss her there, and on the one hand, I would prefer her to be here, but on the other hand, I want her much more, however, to go there, to be fulfilled there. I want her to be 100% fulfilled and to be happy and satisfied.

Theme 3. Maintaining Contact During Separation

The third topic involved the communication between partners during times of separation and creating plans for the future in the context of frequent trips by one of them. Each participant referred to recurring actions allowing them to maintain contact during the physical separation. These repeated actions are considered by the partners a sort of custom in their mutual remote communication. One was the custom of starting the day together, despite being physically apart. Mary, a professional kayaker who is in a four-year relationship with a former kayaker, discussed this as follows:

Always in the morning, the one who wakes up first at our place, which is usually me, well, because I'm at the camp, always writes to the boyfriend just a message "Good morning", something there "Have a nice day". He, when he wakes up, writes me back.

Susan, the kayaker's partner, noted how important it is for partners to remain in constant contact despite physical separation:

I know all the time what's going on with him. I know how his day went and what's going on, I tell him about my life, what I've been up to, he tells me about his, and all in all, I don't have such a break in the relationship that this separation and suddenly he leaves, comes back and we continue to live our lives there.

In the situation of quarrels before leaving for a training camp, Mary noted that there was a custom of conflict resolution, that is, an attempt by the partners to reconcile before the separation occurred:

Also, always before I leave, if there is already a conflict, well, we try so... I think it is so... Not that it's fixed, but both he and I just want it to be already so good before this departure... So that I don't just leave if we have a conflict.

If conflicts within the couple arose during the separation, they were resolved on an ongoing basis with a phone call or, preferably, a video call, because as Lisa mentioned: “I think that this kind of eye contact also gives a lot in terms of the emotions that are hiding.”

Another aspect of staying in touch during separation involves nurturing closeness despite being apart. Susan emphasized the importance of frequent evening conversations:

Whether he is tired or not, we always talk to each other. Well really, maybe four days happened throughout our relationship that we didn't talk before going to sleep. And it's so cool, too, that we have this closeness established all the time.

Lisa highlighted the great helpfulness of technology, which provides increasingly more opportunities to feel closer to one's partner despite physical distance: “Well, when we are not together, close to each other, well, it certainly makes it easier for us now with these technological innovations to contact each other.”

The third category of the theme of communication in athletes' relationships includes the partners' approach to planning their future together under the circumstances of frequent travel by one of them. The athletes first emphasized prioritizing their sports career, subordinating their life to sports and clearly communicating this to their partner at the very beginning of the relationship. Richard explained this as follows:

As if starting our relationship, I played open cards and made Lisa aware of the importance of the sport for me on a good day. It was like it gave me that mental peace of mind that she knew and that at no stage until I myself said I was done with it, did she put any pressure on me.

The participants' statements about planning for the future show an avoidance of making long-range plans in favor of focusing on the present and possibly the immediate future. Joseph explained this as follows: “I don't like such planning, spinning some stories very far into the future. I prefer to live the day. To enjoy just what I have”.

The critical element in the respondents' statements about the future seems to be the moment when their partner's sports career ends. The moment at which the sports career ends is a reference point for future plans. Mary explains this as follows:

I have this mindset that I'm just training, I'm doing it because I'm earning money. Well, and like, I know that someday it's going to end, but when these camps are over and all, well, it's like I'll already have something. That, that, like, now with these camps I'm just working for something that I can have later when I'm done.

Theme 4. Coping with Separation

The fourth theme reflected the ways in which the athletes and their partners cope with physical separation. The interviewees emphasized the importance of accepting and understanding the circumstances in which their relationship operates. Often, this was accomplished through the partners having conversations about separation. Susan, for whom a relationship with a professional athlete was a challenging experience at first, explained this as follows:

Joseph also explained a lot to me, he always said that he would like to be here too, but he can't. And that's life, that's the way it is and you have to accept it. (...) And you can actually accept it, adapt to it, you just have to figure it out in your head.

What helped the athletes' partners understand and accept frequent separation was, first, being familiar with the world of professional sports based on their own personal experience of training in sports in the past. John's statements illustrated this:

I know why she only has time during these hours and not the other times. And I understand it through my prism. I know this from personal experience and I think it helps a lot, because if someone doesn't know it and doesn't know what it looks like, they can think differently.

Susan, on the other hand, explained how learning more about the world of professional sports allowed her to change her approach to her partner's trips:

I realized that he really doesn't have time right now because he's doing this and that. When he just told me about it, I couldn't imagine it. And such a trip also made me realize that it really is work and they have to take care of it.

The participants also reported the progressive habituation process to the circumstances of separation over time. Canoeist Richard expressed this as follows:

I was used to this lifestyle as a child. In fact, from the age of thirteen, these groupings and trips appeared. I don't experience a complete separation from either my parents, my family, or my girlfriend. It's entirely natural for me.

However, for the athletes' partners, this process occurred over the course of the relationship. This was how Susan's partner viewed this process: "Over time, the other person also gets used to the fact that I, as an athlete, am not around on a daily basis. She gets used to it and begins to accept it."

Overall, the awareness of the separation ending someday and being together proves to be helpful. Lisa remarked: "I think it's such a support that when she goes somewhere, I know he'll come back. The prospect of him being here one day is very, very helpful".

Mutual support between partners in moments of heightened longing, which often took the form of motivating each other to survive the separation, was another way to cope with separation. Joseph described his actions in moments of increased longing as follows:

I call Susan after work or in the evening and we talk about it. I'm just saying that I miss her, that I'd like to come back already. Then she usually keeps my spirits up, comforts me and says that there's not that much left. And I think it works both ways - both when she already has a hard time and misses me, I do a similar thing, and if I'm tired of being at the training camp and want to come back, or I just miss her, she (...) keeps my spirits up.

For the participants, other people around them also proved to be a source of support during the separation. Canoeist Mary highlighted being in a group:

I have a lot of people around me and the time passes well too. And then such thoughts about longing are a bit aside because there are always people who fill my free time. It's easier for me to bear this because I have friends here and the time is filled all the time.

Lisa emphasized the possibility of seeking support from her family: “I'm fairly close-knit with my family, so I can go to my sister or my mother there with any problems, and they will definitely help me”.

Interviewees who stayed at home while their partners were away also noted that focusing on their goals and self-realization helped them to cope better during periods of separation. John explained this as follows:

I also had this inner frustration somewhere, that I would rather do something else than sit here and so on, though. And now, as you know, when she's there it's fulfilling, and I'm doing my own thing, it's much better.

The last category of ways to cope with separation included various strategies for distracting oneself from thoughts of separation and the absence of a partner. Lisa explained this as follows:

Of course, longing appeared, but I am also such a person that I always just tried to plan my time as so not to think that he was gone. And this is my protection so that the longing may come a little later or just to minimize it.

Mary, in contrast, talked about diverting attention from the topic of separation during conversations and redirecting it to something that could arouse positive emotions in her partner:

We usually connect on the webcam and we just don't get into it so deeply that “I miss you because something...” but I always try to keep this conversation so that it's funny, to kind of forget about it a bit. That we can just talk on this webcam and it can also be fun, as if I was right there by his side.

Discussion

The current exploratory interview-based investigation aimed to explore how the participants who were Polish professional athletes and their romantic partners experience frequent separation in terms of perception, emotions and behaviors.

Theme 1. *Perception of separation* reflects experiences related to the perception of separation in various ways. To be precise, the athletes and their partners perceived the separation as a stage and an opportunity, as well as a necessity and a natural part of the relationship. Theme 1, to some extent, corroborates the study of Stewart and Donald (2006) that revealed that couples can perceive separation, for instance, as a minor inconvenience or despair, but their narrative focuses more on minimizing the losses they incur due to frequent travel rather than the negative consequences of separation. They also focus on positively reevaluating the circumstances of their relationship.

The perception of separation as an opportunity was related to the athletes' recognition of several benefits, e.g., the opportunity to explore the world, save money for a shared future, or

appreciate more the presence of one's partner when one is with him or her so infrequently daily. Among the partners, the temporality of the separation and the end of the partner's trips in the future were more important and provided encouragement in moments of intense longing. In general, the couples shifted from the limitations and longing brought by separation to the benefits of being in a relationship despite separation. The aforementioned ways of perceiving separation correspond with Arditti and Kauffman's (2004) findings on the attribution of personal meanings to separation among people in LDRs.

Separation is not new to athletes because they previously experienced it with family and friends, but it is different for their partners. If a partner was involved in sports in the past, they adapt to separation much faster because they are aware of the realities of the sports world and often have their own experiences. Thus, accepting the sacrifices and limitations of a relationship with a person who trains professionally in sports is understandable to them and appears essentially from the beginning of the relationship. In contrast, when the realities of the world of professional sports are something new to the partner of the person training, due to the lack of awareness of these realities, separation situations may be interpreted as neglect or abandonment on the part of the partner leaving. The adaptation process then takes longer because they have to gradually gain awareness of the world of sports. Over time, partners also become accustomed to frequent trips, which become part of a couple's life. This commonness and repetitiveness of separations mean that the emotions associated with temporary separations do not cause dramatic and extreme reactions.

However, the issue of the partners' inability to be in each other's physical presence as often as they liked, which caused a variety of feelings, recurs in Theme 2, *Emotions during separation*. This theme addresses the diversity of the participants' emotional experiences, which include more pleasant emotions, such as calmness and closeness, and more unpleasant emotions, such as anger, longing, jealousy, sadness or a sense of abandonment in connection with the separation. These results correspond with various reports, e.g., of the negative consequences of separation in LDR couples causing increased levels of stress, depression (Guldner, 1996), and loneliness (Helgeson, 1994), but, on the other hand, the findings do not indicate higher levels of relationship instability among such couples, instead confirming their experience of a sense of belonging and intimacy (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Kolozsvari, 2015).

Although separation is the source of feelings such as longing and frustration, individuals seem to adapt to their circumstances by creating and maintaining intimacy through online communication, as reflected in Theme 3, *Maintaining contact during separation*. This theme resembles the tendencies found in studies of Bui (2020) and Muntean (2019) of stepping away from the physical aspect of a relationship. Contact between athletes and their partners revolves around the internet (in the form of video chat or video calls) and the telephone. These findings are also consistent with prior studies that have shown that LDR couples more frequently use video, voice calls and texting than do those in GCDRs (Holtzman et al., 2021). Despite the limited contact, no elevated level of uncertainty about the relationship stability was observed - similar to Dainton and Aylor's (2001) study of land-based and long-distance relationships. In this theme, the ways in which couples nurture closeness and belongingness are also considered. We found repeated customs in the communication between partners that included daily greetings, evening talks about the day, or spending time with each other online. This

corresponds with Kolozsvári's (2015) conclusions on couples in LDRs creating nonphysical shared space through cyberspace, especially by being on the phone or texting.

Despite the focus on the opportunities rather than the limitations of separation, it can be considered a situation that causes stress, forcing couples to deal with these circumstances. This particular requirement is included in the fourth theme, *Coping with separation*. This theme involves the coping strategies used in a situation of separation, indicating mainly problem- and emotion-focused styles used by athlete partners and that the primary source of emotional support tends to be the partner and other close people who provide a social buffer to improve well-being. An example of active problem solving involved engaging in conversations with a partner about separation and creating solutions through regular contact during trips. In addition, optimism is evident regarding the sense of withstanding regular frustration in the form of separation and ensuring that it will not threaten the relationship's stability. These findings are consistent with the results obtained by Firmin and colleagues (2014) showing that students in LDR also utilized support from their partner and family or friends.

In the fourth theme, ways of coping with separation through distraction (e.g., scheduling time, working, studying), which were more apparent in the statements of those who stayed home during the trips, were identified. In contrast, more expressions indicating a positive reevaluation of separation were noticeable in the statements of athletes, which in their case is understandable since only through trips are they able to achieve that for which they strive. This theme, however, would require further research to determine whether the aforementioned ways of coping with separation are truly because each person in the couple has different perspectives (one always leaves and the other always stays) or there are other variables.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

Although the current study has provided essential and unique insights into the romantic relationship of athletes and their partners, it should also be considered in the context of its limitations.

First, our findings can only be generalized to the Polish setting or others characterized by a similar sport context. Future research could consider a cross-cultural study of the experiences in the relationships of athletes and their partners to investigate whether the characteristics discovered in the current study emerge in other cultural and sports contexts.

Second, it is worth noting that the participants in the study were individuals aged 22 to 30 years old who formed couples in relationships with a tenure of two to six years and who had not yet had children. Future studies may draw attention to the role of age in this phenomenon and may include older participants, as well as couples with longer relationship durations. It is probable that in circumstances of having children, the perceptions and experiences of separation would be highly different due to the high need for physical presence in raising a child.

Another issue worth pursuing in further research is the question of what happens in the described relationships of athletes after the end of their sports careers and how then the processes of adjustment to the circumstances of being with each other daily take place, given

the occurrence of the idealization mechanism that Stafford and Merolla (2007) repeatedly mentioned in their study of long-distance relationships.

Finally, although none of our respondents mentioned the issue of cheating on their partners during separation, the topic of infidelity among partners involved in LDRs would be another matter worth addressing in future studies, as previous research indicates that LDRs are predictors of infidelity (e.g., Dowdle, 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Extending the previous studies on sports marriages (2002, 2004, 2006, 2011, 2020, 2021), the current study provided important qualitative insight into the experience of separation in intimate relationships among participants who were Polish professional athletes.

Recognizing the similarities between professional athletes' romantic relationships and LDRs and focusing on the experiences of both romantic partners in marital and nonmarital relationships, the present investigation demonstrated that for our participants who were Polish professional athletes physical separation may be a crucial aspect of their romantic functioning and sports careers that is characterized by a dynamic and multifaceted nature. Finally, considering that separation is an inherent part of professional athletes' romantic relationships and their sports life, the recognition of how physical separation in romantic relationships is experienced by the athletes who participated in the current investigation may represent a springboard for the elaboration of constructive strategies allowing athletes to cope with separation and mitigate their adverse consequences that might negatively affect their sports performance.

Notes

Conflict of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability

The dataset generated and analyzed in the current investigation is not publicly available to honor the individual privacy of the participants but is partially available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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