

Spouses' Differences in Love and Commitment among Commuter Marriages

Perbezaan Cinta dan Komitmen dalam Kalangan Pasangan Perkahwinan Komuter

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Abstract: This study explored the differences between commuter marriage relationships in terms of love and commitment. A total of 110 respondents were involved, who are married individuals and who have a long-distance marriage with a partner. This study involved secondary and primary school teachers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. The study design is quantitative using a set of standard questionnaires to test the study variables. The Triangular Love Scale was used to measure love and the Investment Model Scale (IMS) was used to measure commitment variables. Pearson Correlation Analysis was used to analyse the relationship between love and commitment among commuter marriages. In contrast, the t-Test for Independent Samples was used to look at differences in love and commitment in terms of gender and the first marital status of respondents. Based on Pearson Correlation analysis, it was found that there is a significant relationship between love and commitment among commuter marriages ($k = .335^{**}$, $p > .001$). While the t-test for Independent Sample analysis between loves by gender found no significant differences, in contrast, commitment there was a significant mean difference between males and females. The results of this study found that there was no significant difference between love and commitment according to the respondents' first marital status. The implications of this study emphasized the importance of husbands committing to marriage to protect their marriage. The spouses are responsible for maintaining the marriage despite being far away from each other.

Keywords: Love, Commitment, Relationship, Commuter Marriage

Abstrak: Kajian ini meneroka perbezaan antara hubungan perkahwinan komuter dari segi kasih sayang dan komitmen. Seramai 110 orang responden terlibat iaitu individu yang sudah berkahwin dan yang melakukan perkahwinan jarak jauh dengan pasangan. Kajian ini melibatkan guru sekolah menengah dan rendah di Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. Reka bentuk kajian adalah kuantitatif menggunakan set soal selidik standard untuk menguji pembolehubah kajian. Skala Cinta Segitiga digunakan untuk mengukur cinta dan Skala Model Pelaburan (IMS) digunakan untuk mengukur pembolehubah komitmen. Analisis Korelasi Pearson digunakan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara cinta dan komitmen dalam kalangan perkahwinan komuter. Sebaliknya, Ujian-t untuk Sampel Bebas digunakan untuk melihat perbezaan cinta dan komitmen dari segi jantina dan status perkahwinan pertama responden. Berdasarkan analisis Korelasi Pearson,

didapati terdapat hubungan yang signifikan antara kasih sayang dan komitmen dalam kalangan perkahwinan komuter ($k = .335^{**}$, $p > .001$). Manakala ujian-t bagi analisis Sampel Bebas antara cinta mengikut jantina mendapati tiada perbezaan yang signifikan, sebaliknya komitmen terdapat perbezaan min yang signifikan antara lelaki dan perempuan. Hasil kajian ini mendapati tidak terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan antara kasih sayang dan komitmen mengikut status perkahwinan pertama responden. Implikasi kajian ini menekankan kepentingan suami beriltizam dengan perkahwinan untuk melindungi perkahwinan mereka. Pasangan suami isteri bertanggungjawab mengekalkan perkahwinan walaupun berjauhan antara satu sama lain.

Kata kunci: Cinta, Komitmen, Hubungan, Perkahwinan Komuter

Introduction

When an individual becomes an adult, he is normally involved in a romantic relationship. Upon entering the marriage phase, some couples must stay away from their partner instead of living a normal life as a married couple, but still maintain the relationship. Due to economic factors, long-distance relationships between married couples are a common occurrence and are increasing nowadays (Butler & Goodfriend, 2015).

Long-distance marital relationships refer to intimate relationships between two couples who are married but do not live in the same house or in the same geographical area (Cameron & Ross, 2007; Dainton & Aylor, 2001, 2002; Guldner & Svensen, 1995; Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, 2005). Long-distance married couples are also often referred to as commuter marriages, which mean couples who live far apart but have a specific set of times to meet such as once a week or once a month (Bergen, 2010; Reuschke, 2010; Rhodes, 2002). Usually, the factor of living apart between the two married couples is due to employment factors; both of whom have their careers but must live separately to maintain their careers.

Maintaining a romantic relationship between a couple can be a difficult thing to do even if the couple lives close to each other. Especially when the couple lives far apart, the effort to maintain a romantic relationship becomes more challenging. This is because being away from a partner requires a higher level of love and commitment between the couple to maintain a healthy and strong relationship. Appreciating any relationship usually involves an expression of love and commitment in action and requires a physically 'active' presence between the two couples. Spending quality time with a partner is a special benefit for both couples, however; if the two couples have a long-distance relationship, then both need to love each other and actively give each other commitment to protect the relationship. Financial support is also very crucial for the stability of the marriage (Sawai et al, 2018).

Commuting marriage between married couples is not a phenomenon that is considered unkind to the couple. This is because there are situations that suggest that the distance relationship between the couple is better than the proximal relationship with the partner. According to Stafford and Merolla (2007), the relationships between couples are better with couples living together if romantic idealization is the key to the relationship. Romantic idealization refers to the feeling of love, in which a couple living far apart is found to show a higher sense of love than a couple living together. This is because, for couples who are far apart when they meet at a set time, the quality time spent together is fully utilised, as well as being filled with a full sense of love to fulfill their commitment to the couple. For couples living far apart, meeting time is considered very valuable time and is not wasted on anything other than being together with the couple.

According to Rusbult (1980), the strength of marital relationships for commuter marriage is influenced by commitment factors. The quality and quantity of time spent with the couple at each meeting are important for ensuring commitment maintain one's relationship.

Therefore, this study was conducted based on the following objectives:

1. To analyse the relationship between love and commitment among commuter marriages.
2. To analyse the differences in love according to gender and first marital status.
3. To analyse the differences in commitment according to gender and first marital status.

Hypotheses of this study:

- (H1) Love and marital maintenance do not significantly correlate among commuter marriages.
- (H2) There are no significant differences in love according to gender and first marital status; and
- (H3) There are no significant differences in commitment according to gender and first marital status.

Literature Reviews

Trending around the world, including Malaysia, shows that the phenomenon of long-distance marriage between husband and wife has become commonplace. Determining the statistics or the actual number of couples in Malaysia undergoing long-distance marriage is difficult. This is due to the lack of official statistics that can be used to identify the couples (Rusbult, Haslinda & Samsilah, 2013). In Western European countries, it is estimated that most couples between the ages of 25 and 54 choose to travel long distances during the day or week to work. In other words, the group chooses to have a long-distance marriage and set a time once a week to return to their partner. Meanwhile, international data based on migration records indicate that since 1999 long-distance couples in the United States have long existed and have increased from 700,000 to over one million couples (Jackson, Brown & Patterson-Stewart, 2000).

Caryl Rusbult's Investment Model of Commitment (1980) is a framework for understanding commitment in relationships, which emphasises three key factors (i) satisfaction, (ii) alternatives, and (iii) investments. Satisfaction refers to the extent to which a person feels fulfilled and happy in their relationship. It involves assessing the balance of positive versus negative experiences and how well the relationship meets emotional and practical needs. Meanwhile, alternatives consider the perceived quality and availability of alternative relationships or options. If alternatives are seen as less desirable than the current relationship, commitment tends to be stronger. For the third factor, investments take into consideration the resources (time, energy, emotional ties, shared possessions, and mutual connections) that an individual has contributed to the relationship. The larger the investments, the harder it becomes to leave, as these investments are perceived as costly to lose. The model posits that these three factors interact to influence the level of commitment in a relationship, which, in turn, drives behaviors and decisions to maintain the partnership. High satisfaction, low-quality alternatives, and substantial investments foster strong commitment, promoting relationship persistence and stability.

According to the theory of Triangular Love, love can be understood as comprising three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. The intimacy component in loving relationships refers to close, connected, and bonded feelings. It therefore includes feelings that create warmth in a loving relationship. The component of passion refers to the drive in a loving relationship which leads to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and the like. Passion makes us vulnerable to jealousy and envy. The love part of decision/commitment consists of two aspects: both short-term and long-term. The short-term choice is the person you love, while the long-term aspect is the commitment you go through to keep the love alive (Sternberg, 1988). All three components relate to envy and jealousy. In terms of intimacy, one is more likely to feel jealous if one feels the relationship is threatened, despite one's caring behaviour, trust, and fairness. In terms of passion, one is more likely to feel jealous if the fulfilment of one's intense needs is jeopardised. The commitment part sees that if a valued relationship's long-term viability is in danger, one is more likely to feel jealous. Similarly, if one feels intimacy, passion, and/or commitment towards a person, one is more likely to become envious of the other if those feelings are not reciprocated and are instead directed towards another individual (Sternberg, 2019).

Based on previous studies such as Ferk (2005), it was found that the advantage of long-distance marriage is that couples can maintain their respective careers as well as potentially have a high income. However, long-distance marriage makes a relationship challenging. According to Stutzer and Frey (2008), long-distance marriage is difficult to manage well due to the distance factor between spouses. This is because one of the couples must sacrifice time for traveling back and forth every week and requires a high cost. In addition, among the challenges are the dynamic changes in relationships with spouses, family, and friends. During a long-distance marriage, the couple will spend more time with friends than with their partner, except once a week. Because individuals have limited time to spend with spouses and family compared to friends, an important issue that is a problem between long-distance married couples is their commitment to the couple (Coontz, 2005). This can cause the challenge of long-distance marriage to be a source of stress and burden that will have a negative impact on the health and the well-being of the life of a long-distance marriage partner.

Several previous studies have identified challenges from the aspect of commitment between commuter marriages. Among them is the pressure in terms of the division of time and energy between the responsibilities of spouses and careers. The difficulty of individuals dividing commitment between spouses and career pressures tends to lead to

poor time management and a lack of understanding between spouses (Stutzer & Frey, 2008). This will be more burdensome if one of the spouses is responsible for the management of the child, especially if the child is living with the couple. The distribution of the burden of commitment that should be borne by the couple equally has to be borne by one partner only. Thus, it is not surprising that the issue of long-distance marital commitment affects the dynamics of the marital relationship (Gross, 1980). According to Peterson (2014), 'distance makes the heart grow fonder', but if the burden of commitment is borne by one partner only, feelings of love and relationship dynamics will tend to be affected and couples will tend to see their partner who does not live with the children as an irresponsible partner.

Theoretical Framework

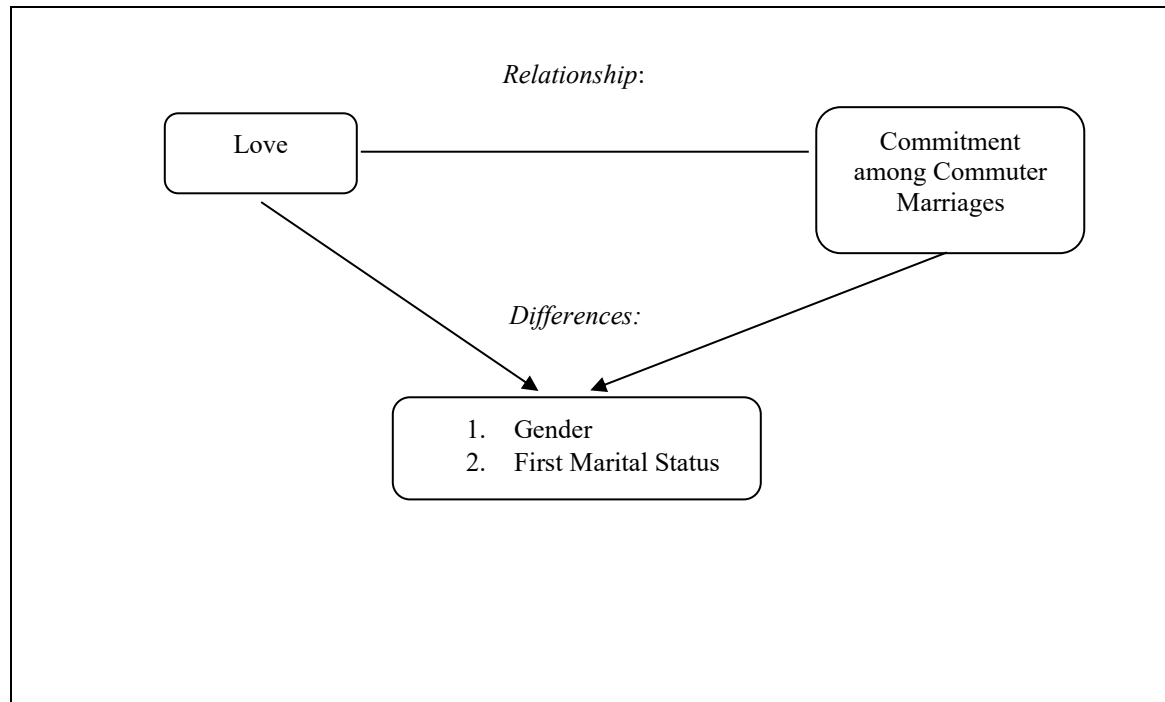


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Study

Based on the theoretical framework in Figure 1, it explains the relationship between love and commitment in commuter marriage, as well as the differences between couples according to gender and first marital status in love and commitment. The theory used in this study is Sternberg's Theory of Triangular Love, in which the elements of love and commitment were taken into consideration. Theories of love and commitment have been extensively studied in psychology, sociology, and relationship research. Here are key theories and concepts, along with citations for further reading: Proposed by psychologist Robert Sternberg, this theory posits that love consists of three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. The combination of these components results in different types of love. Intimacy: Emotional closeness and connectedness; Passion: Physical attraction and sexual desire; Commitment: The decision to maintain a relationship over time. Sternberg (1986) suggests that the balance of these components can define the nature of a relationship.

Methodology

a. Study Design

The quantitative research method was used in this study. A set of standardised questionnaires was selected to represent every variable. The study design was selected because it is suitable to look at causal relationships or relationships between variables (Fischer, Boone & Neumann, 2014). In this study, we investigated the relationship between love and commitment to marriage maintenance.

b. Respondents and Location of the Study

The respondents of this study involved teachers in commuter marriages. A total of 110 teachers were recruited using purposive sampling techniques. The sampling technique was used as it is appropriate to obtain a sample of studies that have the characteristics specified in a study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As in this study, the priority feature set was the teacher who is in a commuting marriage with a partner. The study areas were primary and secondary schools around Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

c. Instruments

Two sets of questionnaires were used to measure each of the variables represented. The love variable was measured using the Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988). The instrument consists of 19 items measuring love.

Meanwhile, commitment was measured using the Investment Model Scale (IMS) (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). The instrument consists of 15 items and was used to assess the degree to which individuals committed to valuing their relationship.

d. Procedure

The researcher obtained permission from the Malaysia's Ministry of Education and the Sabah's Education Department to conduct a study among teachers. The duration of consent granted to conduct the study on the target respondents was 6 months (April 1 to September 2, 2019).

After receiving the permission letters from the Malaysia's Ministry of Education and the Sabah's Education Department, the researcher conducted a simple rapport with the headmaster of every school visited to identify the teacher who is living in a commuting marriage. Through the information received, the researcher administered a set of questionnaires. The time allotted to the respondents to complete a set of questionnaires was one week.

e. Data Analysis

The data were analysed descriptively to see the background distribution of respondents. The hypotheses of the study were tested using the correlation method to see the relationship between independent variables and bound variables. The IBM SPSS programme was used to analyse the study data.

Results

The sections below present the findings of the study. Firstly, a brief background on the respondents is presented. Then, based on the data collected, the hypotheses have been tested.

a. Information on Gender and First Marital Status among Commuter Marriage

Table 1

Background Information among Commuter Marriage Teachers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

	Frequencies (N)	Percentages (%)
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	44	40
<i>Female</i>	66	60

First Marriage

*Respondent**Yes*

94

85.5

No

16

14.5

*Partner**Yes*

80

72.7

No

30

27.3

A total of 110 teachers involved in the study, consisted of 44 males (40%) and 66 females (60%). Most 94 persons (85.5%) claimed that the current marriage was a first marriage and only 16 persons (14.5) were reportedly in a second marriage. The same goes for their partner, where 80 persons (72.7%) claimed it was a first marriage and 30 persons (27.3%) a second marriage.

a. Hypotheses Testing

Table 2

Correlation between Love and Commitment among Commuter Marriages

<i>Commitment</i>		
	R	Sig.
Love	.335**	.000
R<.001**		

Based on Table 2, it shows that there is a significant relationship between love and commitment among long-distance married couples ($r = .335^{**}$, $p > .001$). The significant positive correlation between love and commitment among long-distance married couples ($r = .335$, $p < .001$) highlights the role of emotional connection in sustaining relationships across physical distances. This finding suggested that when couples maintain strong feelings of love, it fosters a greater sense of commitment despite the challenges of separation.

In long-distance marriages, love acts as a key motivator for commitment. The affection and emotional connection between partners help them overcome the barriers of physical separation, reinforcing their dedication to the relationship. Long-distance couples often invest significantly in maintaining emotional intimacy through communication, trust-building, and shared goals. These efforts enhance their sense of commitment, as they feel the relationship is worth the additional effort. In addition, for long-distance couples, commitment may serve as a stabilising force that mitigates insecurities caused by the lack of proximity. The assurance provided by strong feelings of love strengthens the resolve to maintain the relationship.

Table 2

Independent Samples Test Love and Commitment Based on Gender and First Marital Status among Commuter Marriages

<i>Commitment</i>				
	Sig.	T	df	Mean Value
Gender	.014	.623	108	93.81 (Men) 93.13 (Women)
First Marital Status	.355	.490	18.77	93.53 (First) 92.68 (Not First)

Table 2 reports that there are differences in commitment between men and women. The results explained that men showed a higher level of commitment (mean = 93.81) compared to women (mean = 93.13). Meanwhile, the status of first marriage shows that there is no significant difference for individuals who are married for the first time and those not married for the first time. In other words, an individual who is married for the first time or not for the first time shows the same level of commitment to his or her partner.

The findings in Table 2 highlighted nuanced gender-based differences in relationship commitment, with men reporting a slightly higher level of commitment than women. This result, while not drastically different in magnitude (mean for men = 93.81, women = 93.13), suggested that commitment levels in relationships may be influenced by gender-specific psychological or social factors. Some studies suggest that men may over-report commitment as part of societal expectations to display loyalty or stability in relationships, while women may internalise commitment differently, potentially emphasising emotional satisfaction over quantitative measures.

Regarding marital status, the data indicated no significant difference in commitment levels between individuals experiencing their first marriage and those who are not. This suggests that commitment is not necessarily contingent on the novelty of the marital bond but may instead be influenced by individual or relational factors like personality, communication, and shared values. Such findings align with broader research that underscores commitment as a complex construct shaped by satisfaction, alternatives, and investments, rather than situational variables like marriage sequence.

Discussion

Commitment is not a concept that is viewed as something that pleases the couple; in fact, it can be misinterpreted as a burden of responsibility that should be borne by the married couple. Commitment to a partner involves a different dimension than a mere feeling of love (Rusbult, 1983). Rusbult (1980, 1983) suggests that commitment is closely related to the satisfaction of a relationship. When an individual has a positive sense of love for his or her partner, they will be more open to meet the needs or wants of the partner, sacrifice for the partner, avoid getting into alternative relationships, and have a positive belief in the relationship (Rusbult, 1983). Love is also undeniably rooted in the understanding of the religion that cherishes the love relationship between individuals and God (Idris et al., 2013; Syaidatun et al., 2017).

Commitment tends to make the marriage bond more meaningful and valuable (Agnew, 2009). This is because the implementation of an individual's commitment to his partner causes the partner who receives that commitment to feel appreciated. The same is true for couples who are married but live far away from each other; commitment becomes very important to ensure that the marriage bond is more meaningful. Understandably, the factor of living far away makes it difficult for each couple to fulfill their respective commitments to their partner. Commitment is usually more enjoyable if the couple lives together and is not hindered by distance. However, for couples living geographically far apart, commitment becomes a challenge to be maintained by the couple. Therefore, the commitment that tends to be understood as the implementation of commitment to the partner is in material and financial support or taking care of the partner.

Typically, the intensity of togetherness tends to decrease which can lead to conflict among commuter marriages. Due to the distance factor, the couple finds it difficult to meet the common needs, which affects the marital satisfaction they feel. The commitment formed greatly influences a long-distance marital relationship. Generally, commitment also involves the inner needs that need to be met to maintain a relationship that includes dependence and the belief that one will not abandon or neglect the marriage relationship that has been built (Wulandri, 2009).

Commitment is closely related to feelings of love. According to Zakiah (2012), individuals who have a sense of love for their partner will show higher commitment than individuals who do not love their partner as much. Turner (1970) states that the feeling of love between husband and wife makes them give a high commitment to the couple because they do not want to lose each other. The commitment received from the couple increases the sense of security for the relationship. This is because, individuals value the sense of security that comes from the impact of commitment and do not prefer barriers to freedom. However, the commitment received based on sympathy but not love is unsatisfactory (Swensen & Trahaug, 1985). Because individuals who make such commitments are likely to pretend, even as individuals easily develop a sense of anxiety that their partner will leave them (Swensen & Trahaug, 1985). Besides love, commitment also involves financial support in the family. It has been discovered that finances contribute to the stability of the marriage (Sawai et al, 2018).

Commitment from the aspect of men and women shows differences and was found to show significant differences. As obtained in this study, it is explained that men show more commitment to their partners than women. This

coincides with the cultural context in Malaysia where men are the head of the family and have a greater responsibility in caring for their families. The commitment that should be given by men in marriage includes external and internal aspects to ensure marital satisfaction for the couple (Shackelford & Buss, 2000). External aspects include material, financial, and leisure commitments with spouses (Poortman, 2005), while internal aspects include commitment in intimate relationships with spouses. Men who act as family heads tend to pay more attention to the commitment to ensure the marriage relationship that is built to be safe, comfortable, and intimate between the two partners (Siti Marziah, Salina, Abdul Rahman & Nor Hazila, 2019). Driver and Gottman (2004) explain that the ability of men to entertain the heart of a partner in daily life has a positive effect on the relationship. Sawai et al. (2023) discovered that passion, trust, and long-term commitment orientation are likely to enhance marital preservation among long-distance married couples. The implications are that passion, trust, and long-term commitment orientation are crucial to protect and strengthen long-distance marriage bonds among such couples.

However, this study found that there was no significant difference in commitment in marriage in terms of first and non-first marital status. For individuals who are getting married for the first time or who are not for the first time, the commitment aspect remains the same. In other words, married individuals have a commitment that must be borne to ensure that the marriage relationship that is built is lasting and strong. Even if the individual has married for the second time or vice versa, the commitment he has remains the same as that of the marriage performed for the first time. This is because, commitment needs to be given attention and taken into account. After all, it guarantees the continuity of the marriage relationship (Mrinali, 2015). For individuals who marry a second time and take it easy in terms of the implementation of commitment to the couple, the marital relationship that is built will tend to be fragile and not lasting because the couple will be dissatisfied with the quality of the relationship (Nichols, 2011).

Limitations

This study has had several limitations. A total of 110 respondents were taken from Sabah, Malaysia, only. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to the Malaysian population. Using secondary data, this analysis is constrained by the lack of data on several factors that are relevant to the study.

Conclusion

In short, commuting marriages are a challenging form of relationship for both spouses. This is because both partners need to stay apart to meet the needs of a career but must strive to maintain a strong marital relationship. Therefore, to ensure that the marriage relationship lasts, it requires a high level of commitment in the relationship. This study found that a sense of love for a partner has to do with commitment in marriage. In other words, couples who still have a positive sense of love for their partner tend to show high commitment in marriage. It was found that men, i.e., husbands show a higher commitment than women, probably because men play a role as the head of the family in the context of marriage culture in Malaysia. Meanwhile, marital status does not show a difference in commitment for individuals who are married for the first time or those who are not for the first time. This is because permanent commitment needs to be emphasized by the couple to ensure that their marriage relationship is strong and lasting.

The finding underscores the importance of nurturing love in long-distance relationships to boost resilience. Positive emotions tied to love can act as a buffer against the stressors of being apart, enhancing overall relationship satisfaction. This result aligns with relationship theories like the Investment Model, where emotional satisfaction, including love, increases commitment. It also supports the Triangular Theory of Love in which commitment, emotional closeness and effective communication play a vital role in the success of long-distance relationships. This finding emphasizes that love is not only a feeling but also a functional component that facilitates enduring commitment across physical divides.

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