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When Distance Enhances Closeness: How Vietnamese International Students and their Back-home Parents Experience Their Long-Distance Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Exploring international students' long-distance relationships with their back-home families is important for understanding how to support their stability and growth. Using qualitative interviews and surveys, this research explored perspectives from both international students and their parents about their remote interactions while oceans apart. Findings indicate three transformative shifts that enhanced the quality of student-parent relationships through their distance: a) incidental to intentionally motivated interactions, b) task-oriented to person-centered attention, and c) authoritarian to communally-oriented dispositions. These shifts fostered a greater sense of trust, support, and intimacy between international students and their back-home parents. Interweaving Construal Level Theory with the findings, this study offers implications for informing international students and their parents on developing effective, long-distance relationships.

Keywords: long-distance relationships, construal level theory, parent-child interactions, resilience

An ever-increasing number of international students are mobilizing to the United States for higher education, according to *Open Doors 2023* published by the Institute of International Education (2024). Surrounded by new customs, values, and lifestyles, these students can explore new ways of being in the world. Meanwhile, their parents, who often remain in their countries of origin, are not privy to experiencing the novelties encountered by their children. How do

international students and their parents maintain healthy relationships across geographical distances, especially as such students may adopt new ideas and values that are seemingly foreign to their parents? This question guides the trajectory for this study.

While previous research has examined technologies used by international students to communicate with family (Kline & Liu, 2005), fewer studies have examined how these students and their parents have experienced their remote interactions. This experiential dimension bears significance for understanding how international students and their families perceive the quality of the relationships across distance. Given the increasing number of Asian international students currently attending and recruited by American universities (Baer & Martel, 2023), we focus our study on these students (specifically Vietnamese) and their back-home parents. The differences between Asian and American cultures, particularly in their traditions and values, also make this demographic intriguing to explore. For instance, while valuing humility and decision making that benefits the collective family are common Asian values, developing assertiveness and independence are common American values promoted to college students. Given the contrasts between these values, what challenges might Asian international students and their parents encounter with maintaining their relationships? To explore this curiosity further, our study proceeds by first reviewing literature about a) the contrasts between Asian and American cultural beliefs and the role that family plays in international students' cultural adjustment, and b) the known challenges Asian international students encounter with their families while abroad. Then, having conducted qualitative interviews and surveys, we report the transformative shifts we observed in our participants' long-distance relationships. Drawing from Construal Level Theory, we discuss how these shifts occurred and the value they add for enhancing international students' relationships with their back-home parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Values and Family Relationships

Asia is known for its collectivistic values such as preserving remembrance of family achievements, demonstrating humility, and upholding filial piety (Yim, 2022). Meanwhile, individualistic values such as personal achievement, autonomy, and assertiveness are prevalent in America. These competing value systems can create tensions for international students as they navigate what values to adopt and preserve, especially as they try to acclimate to their immediate surroundings while also remaining connected with their heritage (Ma et al., 2020). While few if any studies have explicitly explored how international students negotiate these tensions with their families, research has examined the role families play in providing social support (Jin & Archarya, 2021). Support, particularly from the family, is vital for international students to adjust to their new environments (Chavoshi et al., 2017) as well as their ability to adapt to new life situations and develop better coping mechanisms (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Conversely, students who receive minimal social support from family are more prone to face excessive stress and mental health difficulties throughout their acculturation experiences (Ma et al., 2020).

Given the extent to which international students' relationships with their back-home families contributes to their well-being, understanding the nature of the interactions between these students and their parents is important for knowing what promotes their relational development. With this interest in mind, we turn our attention towards exploring the known challenges Asian international students may encounter when trying to maintain relationships with their back-home parents.

International Students' Challenges with Family Relationships

Undergoing long-distance relationships is an inevitable part of studying abroad. Students and their parents must devote effort from both sides to effectively maintain their relationship (Rachmadi et al., 2022). Such effort is needed for coordinating ways of interacting across different time zones. Furthermore, students may experience acculturation and stress-related difficulties completely foreign to what their parents may know or understand, leaving them to discern what is necessary to share with their parents and what is best to keep to themselves. For instance, while many international students may experience mental health difficulties, they may refrain from disclosing them to their parents due to the stigma they perceive of being under psychological distress (Constantine et al., 2005) and/or the desire to avoid worrying their parents. Withholding personal struggles of this nature can result in relationship gaps between students and their back-home parents (Rachmadi et al., 2022).

Parenting styles can also complicate the quality of child-parent relationships (September et al., 2016). An authoritarian style, which tends to be direct (Baumrind et al., 2019), is one of the most prominent parenting styles in Asian cultures (Riany et al., 2017). While this style proves to optimize children's academic performance by upholding studious habits (Juang et al., 2013), it can put considerable pressure on children to perform at high levels of achievement to honor their family (Li & Lin, 2014). In Asian households heavily influenced by this upbringing, children often isolate and/or avoid talking with their parents to prevent unwanted conflicts and criticisms (Qin, 2006). Therefore, an authoritarian parenting style, prevalent among many Asian households, may complicate international students' willingness to communicate openly with their parents and thus exacerbate their personal and academic distress (Jin & Archarya, 2021).

Reflecting on our review, previous studies demonstrate that the quality of relationship between international students and their parents plays a profound role in students' acclimation and well-being. Yet, other studies suggest these relationships may be troubled by their parents' high expectations for their child's academic success. In addition to these conflicting observations, few if any studies have examined how both international students and their parents interpret the meaning and value of their long-distance interactions. Therefore, the current study

explores both parties to look closer at their perceived experiences of their long-distance communication with each other. Henceforth, we question:

RQ1: How do Asian international students and their back-home parents interpret their interactions with one another across geographical and cultural distances?

RQ2: How do such interactions impact how they experience and conceive their relationship with one another?

METHOD

Setting, Participants, and Data Collection

Conducted throughout the summer following the 2022-2023 academic year, this study included a total of 18 Vietnamese participants (students n=9, parents n=9). All student participants attended liberal arts colleges in the U.S. and all the parents included in the sample had a son or daughter participate as one of the student interviewees. We sampled Vietnamese participants because the researchers had many connections with this demographic. As a Vietnamese international student, the primary researcher had an in-depth understanding of the culture that enhanced the interpretation of data throughout the research process. Her research project was inspired by her personal experiences with interacting with her back-home parents while studying in the U.S. The secondary researcher, a Caucasian American professor, had experience mentoring many of the international college students while serving on her university's Academic Advising Committee. Throughout the study, both researchers met frequently to discuss the data collection process, interpret the findings, and evaluate the results.

Qualitative Interviews

As a qualitative, exploratory study, interview and survey methods were utilized for capturing our participants' descriptive and interpretive accounts. After gaining approval from the University's institutional review board (IRB), we identified participants using a purposive sampling method. Specifically, we sought students interested in participating in our study whose parents were also willing to participate. In June 2023, we conducted our student interviews via Zoom due to our participants' remote locations. Each semi-structured interview lasted from 8 to 31 minutes, with the average interview lasting 16.5 minutes. The primary researcher conducted the interviews given her pre-existing rapport with the student participants. All participants were encouraged prior to the interviews to reflect on their remote interactions with their back-home parents. General questions about participants' backgrounds were asked at the beginning of the interview. We then asked our interviewees to describe specific instances of how

they interacted with their back-home parents, as well as identify any changes in their relationships while away from home. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: List of Participants

Names	Age	Gender	Class year	Parent
Duong	19	Female	Freshman	Chi (Mother)
Hoang	19	Male	Freshman	Nghia (Father)
Nhat	19	Male	Freshman	Tri (Father)
Bach	20	Male	Sophomore	Han (Mother)
Nhi	20	Female	Sophomore	Nhan (Mother)
Truc	21	Female	Sophomore	Lan (Mother)
Huyen	21	Female	Sophomore	Thanh (Father)
Chau	21	Female	Junior	Mai (Mother)
Linh	22	Female	Senior	Thao (Mother)

Surveys

Vietnamese culture favors an authoritarian hierarchy that might constrain conversations in face-to-face interviews between a student researcher and parent. Therefore, we used open-ended surveys for the back-home parent participants to express their responses in a written form. Our surveys included 9 parents (mothers, n=6 and fathers, n=3) of our student participants. Student participants first asked their parents if they were willing to be part of the study. Upon receiving

their consent, student participants provided their parents' email addresses for the researchers to contact them with the electronic survey. The surveys consisted of similar open-ended questions as the interviews but contained minor wording changes commensurate with the parents' roles. The survey was written in Vietnamese to prevent language barriers and allow parent participants to express their thoughts in their most fluent way (many had limited English-speaking skills). Each participant's answer was recorded in electronic form and later translated into English for both researchers to examine and interpret the results.

Data Analysis

We, the researchers, met regularly throughout our data collection process to discuss our interpretations of the data. Using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), we developed keyword codes for each interview and compared these codes to subsequent interviews conducted throughout the research process. This same procedure guided our interpretations of the surveys. We found that our students and their parents described having more supportive, dialogical interactions than conflicts. Throughout our open-coding phase, we noted key terms such as "support" "well-being" "confidence" "appreciation" "honesty." As we examined the responses further and moved into the axial coding phase, we developed broader themes for organizing our codes: a) when, how, and for what purposes they interact, b) the nature of content discussed in their conversations, and c) the closeness of their relationships over time. These themes enabled us to explore the intentions that underlie participants' long-distance interactions with one another, the content that manifested through such interactions, and the impact they perceived these interactions having on their relationships. Within these themes, we observed both students and parents making many comparisons between their cohabiting and long-distance experiences. In our results, we illustrate through each of our themes how our participants experienced changes in their family interactions. Subsequently, in our discussion, we turn to literature that explains the benefits of distance in family relationships, specifically when distance functions as a generative condition for supporting resilient communication.

RESULTS

In this analysis, we examine how Vietnamese international students and their parents interpret their interactions with one another across distance. We organize our observations by the themes identified in our analysis. Notably, these themes represent the areas where our participants observed the most change when comparing their long-distance interactions with their prior experiences of living in the same household. Pseudonyms are used for all participants throughout the manuscript for confidential purposes.

When, How, and for What Purposes Students and Parents Interact

When beginning college, students seek a sense of belonging and form a new “home”, especially when surrounded by an unfamiliar environment (Pazil et al., 2023). Families provide a source of stability to which many students turn for feeling affirmed when entering new cultural realms. Most of our student participants reported that during their freshman year, they frequently called their parents (4-7 times a week). For instance, Linh shared, “During my freshman year, I called them every time I felt I had free time.” Meanwhile, as time passed, Linh explained, “The more I grew up, I didn’t think I ever called them during my junior or senior years.” Huyen also shared, “Honestly, when I was a freshman, I tended to call my mom and update her every day. But when I was growing up, and as a rising junior, I didn’t really call my mom that often, maybe once or twice a week.” Most participants reported that the frequency of calling their parents gradually decreased as they acclimated to the U.S. culture and formed new relationships with students and faculty on campus.

This observation is consistent with previous findings that explain how as individuals develop new, intimate relationships in their immediate surroundings, they rely less on previous relationships that once satisfied their needs for closeness (Milardo et al., 1983). Furthermore, our student participants shared that they interacted with their parents for more purposeful reasons than when they lived at home where their interactions were more inevitable given their close proximity. Living in the same space with their parents also increased the likelihood of arguing about many aspects of life (i.e. performing in school, showing respect, negotiating autonomy). These arguments led some participants to avoid communicating with their parents when at home. For instance, Hoang shared, “When I was in Vietnam, my parents were very strict to me and I could not see any care and worry from my parents because they scolded me a lot and we had a lot of arguments with each other.” Experiencing continuous arguments and disciplining, Hoang often felt diminished by his interactions with his parents. However, with distance, his interactions with his parents changed as they became more limited and intentional. He explained, “After I went to college, nearly everyday I called my parents and I just saw how much they worried about me. I updated them every day how my life was going on.” With distance, Hoang’s family interactions became less about everyday duties and more about supporting his transition to the U.S.

Parent participants also noted changes in the purposes behind their interactions with their children. Focusing less on the day-to-day matters of ensuring his child’s success, Nhat’s father shared,

Our conversations mainly revolve around his school life to see if he has any difficulties. I share stories about home with him to make closer family connections, and make him feel less sad and lonely ... I try to put myself into my child’s shoes and also learn about the culture where he studies to understand him better.

This sentiment echoes what other parents shared about communicating with their children to provide support, especially as they tried imagining the challenges of living in a foreign country.

It appears that the students and parents in our sample interacted with more intentional purposes when living at a distance. The students sought their parents' advice and support, and parents focused on understanding and encouraging their children's experiences. Since they no longer shared the same environment, they talked more about substantive life updates than day-to-day matters. As such, they seemed to develop a greater understanding one another than when living in the same home where their interactions were more incidental.

Nature of Content Discussed

Both our student and parent participants reported shifts in content discussed during their long-distance interactions. When at home, academics were a common conversation topic that often aroused a sense of pressure. Many of our parent participants shared that they most wanted their children to adapt to a new environment and culture and thus refrained from pressuring them with academic expectations. Hoang's father explained,

I understand that while Hoang is studying abroad, he has to face many new difficulties and pressures when there is no family around. Therefore, every time I call, I always try to keep my son with a very comfortable mentality so that he is not pressured when he goes to school in America.

Likewise, Nhat's father shared, "I limit directly asking questions related to grades and his personal academic achievements, avoiding unwanted pressures on my child." These parents desired understanding of their children's acclimation challenges when living in the U.S.

In turn, our student participants sensed that academics were no longer their parents' top priority and noticed their conversations becoming increasingly supportive of their health and well-being. For instance, Hoang shared, "They don't want me to feel stressed. In Vietnam they really preferred my education and career. But when I go to study in the U.S, I feel like they prefer my health much more." Likewise, Truc shared that, "I guess at the end of the day they want us to be healthy. That's their number one priority. They are always checking on my health and making sure I am being supported both mentally and physically." These sentiments demonstrate how students experienced their parents expressing care in explicit ways, making it the center of their conversations.

The change in parents' focus appeared to be a result of their distant view, which presented them with a different image of their child and role as a parent. Hoang's father shared,

When Hoang was still at home, his mother and I often paid little attention to our son's feelings and mentality. But when Hoang went to America to study, we tried a lot to help him more with his spirituality and mentality,

because I can't be by Hoang's side in the face of difficulties and challenges he encounters in America.

While parents assumed to know more about their child's well-being when living in the same household, distance opened space for more uncertainty. The only way of knowing about their children's feelings was to ask about them directly.

While students appreciated their parents' efforts to understand their experiences, they noted that there were certain topics their parents could not understand fully. Matters related to career aspirations as well as historical and political issues presented students with the greatest difficulties in helping their parents understand. For example, Bach shared that as a rising junior, his concerns changed from making friends in college to career paths, jobs, or what to do after graduation. However, while sharing these concerns with his parents, Bach reported that their reactions were, for example: "It doesn't matter" or "It's fine if you fail some courses." Hence, he believed his parents did not fully understand the pressure he felt from career future expectations.

Parent participants admittedly explained that there were experiences they struggled to understand. Huyen's father shared, "I barely understand but not fully understand her experiences at school, since I can only hear about it via her calls and texts." Likewise, Hoang's father said, "Because of the distance, I believe that I do not fully understand his experiences in America." Thus, the parents sense there is much more to the culture than they will be able to understand through the mere verbal interactions with their children. Therefore, while parents could inquire about their children's lives broadly, they lacked a detailed awareness of the depth and breadth of their children's experiences.

In addition to difficulties in understanding one another, some student participants encountered conflicts when trying to tell their parents about historical or political issues. For instance, while studying in the U.S., Hoang had opportunities to learn more about politics not only in his country but also around the world. His viewpoints became more diverse and open. However, with his parents having a different perspective, conflict often occurred when he mentioned political topics. Likewise, Linh also faced this challenge when talking with her parents about historical issues. Having taken several history courses related to Asian history, she observed differences in how history is taught in the U.S. compared to Vietnam. As a result, Linh and her parents hold different opinions about global events. Linh tended to "silence [her]self" when discussing controversial topics with her father. Because she could not change her father's opinions, she focused on understanding his side by acknowledging how the cultural teachings and experiences informing his perspective differed from what she was learning through her coursework.

While students and parents differed in their perspectives on certain topics like history and politics, the interactions between them is often more of a conversation than an argument. With the distance, the students reported feeling freer to express their ideas, and in turn, observed that their parents seemed more receptive to hearing them than giving criticism. For instance, Duong said that she often shared her experiences in the U.S. with her mother: "My mother is the person with the

American dream. She wants to experience U.S. culture. I share the experiences in the States with my mother. She is excited to hear about it and acknowledges that those things are new to her.” Likewise, Linh shared, “My mom is a very traditional woman but at least she knows that her child is going to a different culture and they will change, so she tried to accept that change and try to understand me.”

These findings suggest that back-home parents focus more on students’ well-being and feelings rather than the concrete details of their daily routines and academic grades. We also observed cultural differences in the values expressed between parents and students when communicating about politics and history. Furthermore, parents did not fully comprehend the students’ experiences of anxiety resulting from academic pressures and concerns about their future careers.

Closeness of the Relationship

The geographical separation between students and their parents presented an opportunity for them to renegotiate their relational roles. The parents in our sample acknowledged putting effort in changing their ways of parenting to support the maturation of their son or daughter. Such changes appeared in how they described themselves as becoming more open and communal, as Nhat’s father said,

When my son stays at home, sometimes our care tends to be supervisory and imposing on him. However, when he enters college in the States, the parent's view is that our child has grown up, he is independent and can make his own decisions. So we also have to change our thinking to suit the reality that we are not the ones who live close to our children when he is in college. So we try to be like his friends who listen, encourage, exchange and give advice when our son needs it. We respect his decisions, and do not guide him to follow what we believe is right.

Likewise, when sharing about the shift in her role as a parent, Chau’s mother said, “I have shifted from a mentor role with a bit of pressure on my child to a role of a listener, who shares and gives my daughter advice.” Through more intentional interactions, our participants developed mutual respect towards each other. Students became more understanding and accepting of their parents’ views and opinions, while parents put effort into adjusting their roles to support the development of their children as decision-making adults.

Parents also observed more openness in their children’s communication while being apart from each other. Hoang’s father noticed his son, who once “sulked and tried to avoid talking” when living at home now speaks with greater interest and intent. He shared, “Since Hoang went to study abroad, although he only called me once a week, Hoang has shared more stories with me, so I think our relationship between me and Hoang is also somewhat closer.” Likewise, Duong’s mother said, “I have learnt to let my child make her own decisions, instead of worrying that she may not be able to do it and always intervening while we were living together. Our communication becomes more positive. We are

closer and it is easier to understand each other.” Although distances apart, students and their parents grew closer through seeing one another in a more relational than transactional and/or hierarchical way.

Furthermore, the difference in time zones and other difficulties of long-distance relationships were counterbalanced by students’ and parents’ appreciation for the limited time they had with each other. For instance, Huyen’s father expressed, “I love her more because when she is away, we can’t call her very often, so I am more appreciative when my daughter calls us.” These words suggest that the calls may enhance parents’ feelings of being “chosen” by their children when they call. When at home, interactions may seem more automated and involuntary, whereas communication from a distance signals initiative and intentional seeking.

In addition, students notice that distance contributes to the improvement of their interactions with their parents in an abstract sense. For instance, Chau shared that she and her parents argued a lot over the tiniest things when she was in Vietnam because they “spent a lot of time together.” However, being far away from each other gives them more “space” that improves their relationship. Also noting the value of space, Truc shared, “Being apart from my family gives me a lot of space to reflect back about how my family impacts on me in general and separate from them a little bit to really think about what I want.” This sense of “being apart” from parents highlights how distance helps the relationship between parents and children when they are far away from each other. When living together, disagreements and arguments may be construed as potentially threatening to the near future parent interactions. But with distance, these concerns seemed less threatening, which allowed students to experience greater freedom when expressing their perspectives and experiences.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how Vietnamese international students and back-home parents perceive the long-distance communication between them. Our findings revealed transformations in their relationships through their sharing of more supportive, open interactions. More specifically, our participants reported shifts in their purposes for interacting, the content their conversations, and the perceived closeness of their relationship. In this discussion, we interweave our observations with Trope & Liberman’s (2003) Construal Level Theory (CLT) to explain how these shifts occurred.

To explain how distance may enhance the family dynamics, our study correlates with CLT, which explores “how we mentally represent the people, objects, events, and ideas we encounter, which is directly shaped by our psychological distance from these entities” (Bowen, 2021, p. 2). Psychological distance refers to the self’s perceived degree of closeness to things, a degree that is realized through two construal levels: high-level and low-level construal. When things seem psychologically distant (which may occur through physical distance and/or perceived unfamiliarity), individuals tend to engage in “higher-level” construals by thinking in broader, more abstract ways. On the other hand, when

things seem psychologically close (such as something that seems immediately present, urgent, or of central significance to the self) individuals tend to engage in “lower-level” construals by thinking in more concrete, detail-oriented ways (Bowen, 2021; Trope & Liberman, 2003).

CLT helps explain the shifts that our participants described happening in their interactions. Specifically, geographical and cultural distances created a perceived space between the students and their parents, which angled them to view one another more holistically than episodically. Rather than getting caught up in the day-to-day details as they might when living together, they engaged in higher-level construals by focusing on bigger-picture perceptions of each other. For instance, their reasons for interacting were motivated by general interests in sustaining their relationship and doing so in supportive ways. Topics concerning one another’s overall well-being and cultural experiences took precedence over details regarding daily health routines and/or study habits. Such topics provided greater ease in the conversations as parents took on a more supportive than authoritative role, and students grew more confident in expressing their experiences. Essentially, by way of abstraction, distance leveled the traditional hierarchy typical of Asian child-parent relationships and promoted our participants to see one another more as equals.

To elaborate further on the transformations we observed across our participants, we deduce from our themes three specific shifts that reportedly enhanced the quality of the student-parent relationships: a) incidental to intentionally-motivated interactions, b) task-oriented to person-centered attention, and c) authoritarian to communal-oriented dispositions. In addition to explaining these shifts from a CLT perspective, we also propose how they align with qualities of resilient relationships. Thus, our practical recommendations, appearing in the latter portion of this discussion, draw upon Zamanzadeh and Afifi’s (2019) work to demonstrate how resilient relationships take shape and serve international students and their back-home parents.

The first transformation that resulted from long-distance relationships between the students and parents in our study was a shift in their interactions becoming more intentional than incidental. Our results evidenced several reasons for this shift. Firstly, they communicated more intentionally because of the limited time that they had to speak with each other. Both students and parents were more aware of the time they had to communicate and sought to make that time meaningful. Moreover, students had more agency for deciding when to contact their parents, unlike at home where interactions with their parents were more inevitable since they lived in proximity with each other. And parents felt chosen and loved when their children initiated contact and shared about their lives in college.

Observing how distance contributed to this shift, we concur with Jiang and Hancock’s (2013) findings about the role long distance plays with forming intimacy. These scholars revealed that long-distance relationships, in romantic contexts, were perceived just as trustworthy and satisfying as their geographically-close counterparts. In fact, long-distance couples developed more idealized relationship perspectives than did geographically-close couples. We

found similar results in family long-distance communication, where our participants perceived more trust and intimacy towards each other while being separated. It was as if our participants engaged in relational savoring (Borelli et al., 2014), whereby they held onto memories of affirming conversations that enabled them to feel supported over time. We discovered that the limited time students and parents had to communicate with each other often increased the perceived quality of their interactions and relationship, as it made them “savor” their time together while spending most of their time apart.

The second transformation that we observed between international students and their back-home parents was a shift in their attention from being task-oriented to person-centered. Our findings suggest that students and their parents shared more with each other about their lives than they previously did when living together. Perhaps certain topics were once taken for granted (emotional and physical well-being) when living in the same household. As a result, When both were living in the same home, they were more likely to focus on the day-to-day tasks for managing the relationship than focusing on the people within the relationship. Relatedly, CLT suggests that distance plays a role here as it moves students and parents to a higher-level construal that invites a degree of abstraction in place of concrete details. They see a bigger picture that frees them both from focusing on details in one another’s daily lives (students’ grades, parents’ disciplinary behaviors, etc). Parents seemed to care more about their children as whole people by paying attention to their overall relationship and allowing details such as academic achievements—once a primary focus when students lived at home—to become secondary to their children’s well-being. Being distant from each other, high-level construal occurred as they noticed that what seemed “closer” in their relationship was the relationship itself and the people in the relationship.

Meanwhile, as the students came to value this perceived closeness with their parents, they desired to maintain and protect their relationship. Therefore, the students often refrained from expressing difficult emotions and experiences that one might expect would be shared in a trusting, supportive relationship. They did this, in part, to preserve the harmony in their immediate interactions, and to protect their parents from worry. While we presume that the parents also held back certain emotions and experiences, they did not explicitly state doing so in their responses. Nonetheless, future research could explore how international students and their parents discern what not to share in their interactions.

The third transformation appears in how student-parent relationships shifted from an authoritarian to communal disposition. The distance loosened their previous interaction patterns in such a way that enabled both the students and their parents to explore different roles. First and foremost, they both appeared to share common ground goals for maintaining the relationship and turning to one another for support to cope with living far apart. To serve these interests, the students took more initiative to contact parents, while the parents grew more receptive and understanding of their children’s new perspectives. Both desired the connection with each other and coordinated their interactions to serve the best interests of their relationship. Rather than hierarchical, as authoritarian dynamics tend to be,

our student and parent participants described a dialogical ethos that led them to experience a more communal dynamic. Therefore, although in Asian cultures an authoritarian parenting style is most popular (Riany et al., 2017), we observed that distance has the potential to re-establish these family dynamics. These findings align with CLT, as in this situation, the abstract provides a holistic view of the relationship in place of micro-management tendencies that sometimes occur in the home setting.

The shifts we observed in the international student-parent interactions of this study demonstrate qualities of resilient relationships while also advancing our understanding of how such relationships function. Introducing the Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (TRRL), Zamanzadeh and Afifi (2019) described resilient relationships as constitutive of four central elements: relational maintenance, communal orientation, security-appraisals/positive communication, and relational load. Our findings demonstrate how distance can enhance family members' experiences their relational load. Once children move to a new environment, they and their parents can become untethered from previous patterns shaping their everyday interactions when living together. Distance, in other words, potentially resets the relationship and provides an opportunity for change that can strengthen how family members feel towards one another, especially as they perceive their loved ones' value through their absence. As such, in cases with international students, we observed both students and parents communicating in supportive ways that edified their sense of security with one another. This security was facilitated through a communal orientation as they grew more invested in person-centered interactions. We believe that distance prompted such verbal interactions to manifest more explicitly since family members in this case had no other communication channels to express their love in ways they might when living together.

These observations lead us to question—were these relationships resilient before they transitioned to becoming long distance? Or, was it because of the distance that family members experienced changes that led them to enact resilient qualities? While we suspect that the families in our study had baseline commitments to maintain their relationships, our participants' accounts suggest that their relationships strengthened once they were tested by distance. Therefore, while resilience is conceived as the ability to adjust constructively under adverse and/or stressful conditions (Luther, 2003), it seems to us that going through such conditions can lead to discovering the best in family members' interactions that could not be realizable under ordinary circumstances. With this insight, we can inform international students and their families about the opportunities afforded to their relationship through distance. Raising awareness of the shifts noted in our study and their connection with experiencing resilient relationships would provide international students and their families encouragement for embracing college transitions, especially since such transitions and maintaining supportive relationships throughout them may, at their onset, appear as stressful.

Implications and Future Research

In lieu of the generative potential our findings, our study's limitations also provide opportunities for future research. One of the most noticeable limitations of this study is the limited diversity and size of the sample. Our sample includes 9 Vietnamese students attending several private liberal arts colleges and 9 mothers or fathers (18 total participants). The size of our sample is limited and not generalizable to speak for a larger population. Future research can explore a broader range of nationalities as well as students at different universities (such as large state schools) across the globe. We also note that most students in our sample were in their first and second years in college. A more balanced distribution among all class years would be helpful for gauging unique differences in how international students and their parents perceive their relationships across the four-year college span. Moreover, future studies might consider gender as a factor that mediates the nature of remote interactions between students and their parents. For instance, as Tsai-Chae and Nagata (2008) found, Asian students may be more hesitant to disclose their academic and/or personal hardships with their fathers than their mothers. We were unable to make father-child and mother-child comparisons due to our limited sample size and our approach to gathering data. That is, while our students were from two-parent households, we only received survey responses from one of their two parents. Most of our student participants often spoke of their parents in general, refraining from speaking specifically about one parent or the other. Future research could focus on how international students experience differences between their interactions with their mothers and fathers when studying abroad.

While our study explored momentary, long-distance student and parent relationships, we know less about how these relationships are experienced over time when students return home (whether during academic breaks and/or after graduation). Scholars might be interested in examining how these relationships are experienced when the distance becomes obsolete. Will the newly established dynamic remain the same when they are in the same household again? Or will their relational transformations made possible by their distance cease?

Lastly, when beginning this study, we suspected that international students and their parents might experience conflicting values during their interactions. Meanwhile, our findings did not reveal such conflicts. We remain curious if our participants, in their reflective accounts, may have downplayed conflicts in favor of speaking to a broader picture view of their family relationships. Future research might consider having international students and their parents journal about their interactions to account for how they experience them day to day. Such an exploration might reveal tensions and/or conflicts families experience in ways that our method did not evidence.

CONCLUSION

For international students to experience their full potential when studying abroad, it is crucial that they acknowledge ways to maintain healthy, supportive

interactions with their back-home parents. We encourage professors, faculties, academic advisors, and practitioners to remain aware of the potential transformative shifts that may occur in long-distance international student-parent relationships. Supporting international students with developing resilient communication practices with their families holds promise for their overall well-being and success.

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