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MAINTAINING ADULT STUDENT-PARENT DISTAL RELATIONSHIPS:
AN EXPLORATION OF MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AMONG
THAI STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Thammaphong Isarabhakdi

August 2009

Advisor: Mary Claire Morr Serewicz

Author: Thammaphong Isarabhakdi
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ABSTRACT

Although a growing amount of research in relational maintenance has begun to focus intensively on long-distance relationships (LDRs), especially marital, dating, and friendship relationships, little attention has focus on the process of maintaining LDRs in non-Western families. The objective of this study was, first, to explore the experience of Thai adult students who maintain LDRs with their parents. Second, this study identified Thai students' specific relational maintenance behaviors and examined the channels of mediated communication used among Thai adult students and their family members.

This study utilized a qualitative method framed by a grounded theory approach to uncover the experience of LDR maintenance of 38 Thai students living in the state of Colorado. Through a constant comparative method of analysis, four underlying categories were identified from the transcriptions of semi-structured interviews: the contact, the medium, the talk, and the motive. This study found that these four categories represented the feelings and behaviors that were interrelated and, when integrated, defined the process of parent-child LDR maintenance. In addition, the process of maintaining a state of distal interaction through main channels (i.e., cell phone) benefited familial relationship maintenance.

This LDR maintenance process involved dynamic activities during a conditional separation period between Thai students and their parents. This study extended the

literature on maintaining long-distance familial relationships and provided a pattern of action and activities of Thai adult students' LDR maintenance behaviors.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

One of the most personal and enduring relationships an individual experiences is the parent-child relationship (Golish, 2000). Unfortunately, “Of all the relation types studied, perhaps the one most neglected, overlooked, or taken for granted by individuals are those of familial origin” (Vogl-Bauer, 2003, p. 31). Research is beginning to emerge on grandparent-grandchild ties (Harwood, 2000), adult children’s relationship with their older parents (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001), and young adult children’s or college-aged children’s relationships with their middle-aged parents (Graber & Dubas, 1996).

Unlike romantic and platonic relationships, which can be terminated at any point, the termination of familial relationships may be problematic because of their biological, legal, and cultural obligations (Hess, 2003). That is, individuals have a choice to engage and disengage in platonic and romantic relationships whereas individuals are more confined in familial relationships. Consequently, maintaining family relationships is challenging for those involved.

Maintaining familial relationships is not only difficult for the participants but also for relational scholars. For example, over the past two decades, a number of communication scholars have investigated the processes and strategies of maintaining relationships (Canary & Dainton, 2003). Early research focused on an individual’s initiation or termination of a relationship. While the initial and final stages of

relationships are of concern, Duck (1988) observed that people spend more time maintaining their relationships. Ideally, all successful relationships require maintenance behaviors or else they deteriorate (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Canary & Dainton, 2003).

Discussion of Problem

Although communication scholars agree that relational maintenance is fundamental in human relationships and interaction, numerous scholars have used different conceptual terminology. This, however, is a result of differing contextual frameworks, theoretical approaches, and cultural assumptions (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Stafford, 2005).

Dainton (2003) claimed that most relational maintenance scholarship centers on three variations. First, there are relational variations (e.g., marriage, friendships, siblings). Second, there are structural constraints, which include such factor as long-distance and workplace environments. Finally, there are intercultural relationships in which one member is from a different culture than the other member. To understand how communication maintains relationships, Dainton (2003) noted:

Identifying and focusing on these variations is important, as one of the problems with the corpus of maintenance literature is that research within each area has been published in isolation, with little effort made to synthesize the insight into maintenance processes that might hold true regardless of relational type, structural constraints or culture. (p. 299)

In response to Dainton's (2003) mandate, this project incorporates these three variations. It examines non-western, familial relationships maintained over long distances.

Long-distance relationships (LDRs) are defined by the comparative inability to interact face-to-face (FtF) as compared to geographically-close relationships (GCRs).

One way of defining a relationship as long distance is the distance itself, for example, relationships of military officers who are stationed in Iraq or engineers who work for a cruise liner. On the other hand, some circumstances such as cross-residential living or incarceration of one relational partner can be perceived as long distance when the chance of FtF interaction is restricted. Given the chance that most individuals may encounter various forms of distal relationships, LDRs are increasingly significant with the advent of advanced technology (Aylor, 2003; Stafford, 2005). In the United States, college students may have experienced different types of long-distance relationships, such as romantic LDRs, familial LDRs, friendship LDRs, and various others. Knox (1992) reported approximately half of first-year college students are in long-distance relationships. For example, 43.2% of college students were in romantic long-distance relationships (Dellman-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1993). Even though scholars have reported significant numbers of LDRs in college student populations, communication scholars have given insufficient attention to the processes college students use to maintain these relationships (Aylor, 2003). In other words, we know they exist; what we do not know is how they are maintained. Moreover, no matter what type of LDR people are maintaining, individuals require alternative channels of communication in the midst of restricted FtF interaction.

As part of extended human communication apparatus, technology plays an important role in our day-to-day activities. From cell phones to the Internet, communication research is concerned with how we use these technological advancements and how those advancements affect us (Flanagin, 2005; Pew Internet & American Life

Project, 2002). New technologies such as the Internet and wireless communication devices are currently at the center of relational maintenance study, especially in LDRs (Stafford, 2005). Also, Stafford, Kline, and Dimmick (1999) found that 61% of home e-mail users report using e-mail explicitly for relationship maintenance.

The reason for this emphasis on new technologies is that geographically dispersed individuals often choose the innovative, low cost of email/instant messaging instead of using traditional, high cost communication technologies such as land line based telephones (Wright, 2004). However, there are other explanations for the increase in mediated communication. For example, the asynchronous feature of e-mail allows individuals to contact their families and friends who reside in a different time zone (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Despite the fact that personal relationships are maintained by both face-to-face and mediated communication (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993), in the past, the majority of the research on relationship maintenance has focused typically on face-to-face interaction strategies (Aylor, 2003; Stafford, 2005). A few studies, as mentioned above, have focused on the effects of mediated communication on relational maintenance (Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999). However, communication scholars must continue to follow this line of research to follow the ever-changing and ever-growing world of communicative technological advancement. Cell phones now allow users to send text messages, which until recently could only be done with e-mail. The Internet now allows users to chat in real time, which previously could only have been achieved with a phone. Moreover, wireless technology has allowed for computer mediated communication to be

as mobile as cell-phones. And with the exponential rate of technological advancement, new forms of communication might be available as early as tomorrow. Thus, scholarship must also progress and follow the extent to which different mediated communication channels affect relational maintenance behaviors in both long-distance and geographically-close relationships.

Although relationship maintenance is conceptually and theoretically not new for the interpersonal communication discipline, maintaining distal relationships is the focus of contemporary scholarship (Stafford, 2005). Much of what communication scholars know about LDRs is not directly from communication studies. Rather, the insights into LDRs are drawn from various disciplines including, but not limited to, relational studies, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, media studies, military science, gerontology, and criminology (Stafford, 2005). Although several theories have successfully predicted and explained maintenance behavior, Stafford (2005) argued, “Most research on LDRs has been atheoretical” (p. 17). Roloff and Cloven (1994) remind us the establishment of valid measures of relational maintenance (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000) does not substitute for the development of theoretical frameworks for explaining and predicting their use and effects. They also state, “Too often, methodological and psychometric zeal diverts attention from the construction of theoretical perspectives and results in disjointed research findings” (Roloff & Cloven, 1994, p.36).

In addition to following technological advancements, this study responds to the absence of LDR maintenance scholarship in young adult-parent relationships. An

exploratory study of maintaining distal Thai adult student-parent relationship may hold the promise of extending previous relational maintenance theory and research in this important context.

The Purpose of the Study

This paper does not directly attempt to compare geographically-separate with geographically-close familial relationships or examine the intersections between relational maintenance and relational characteristics as previous studies have done. As Rohlfsing (1995) argued, long-distance relationships are qualitatively different from geographically-close relationships. Thus, treating LDRs and GCRs as homogeneous relationships based on frequency of FTF interaction, may not contribute to a better understanding of various relationship maintenance behaviors in a diverse environment.

Long-distance relationships are relationships in which people are physically separated for a certain period of time and their chance of face-to-face interaction is restricted. The processes of maintaining distal relationship of non-Western parents and children are worth examining because they have a significant impact on all family members. There are three main reasons why this topic should be thoroughly examined. First, various form of distal relationships (e.g., romantic, friendship) have received increased and adequate attention in interpersonal communication research, but little research in this area has explored the parent-child relationship (Vogl-Bauer, 2003). Second, there are growing numbers of international students who leave their country on a temporary basis to pursue their academic goals. Even though the numbers are growing, communication scholars have limited knowledge of how other non-Western cultures such

as the Thai culture maintain LDRs in the midst of advanced technology. Last, Stafford (2005) contended that the study of LDRs needs theory to directly explain maintenance phenomena, and empirically-based methods such as the grounded theory approach provide a foundation for theory building. This research should be done to help Thai families and Western scholars understand how LDRs can be maintained during the conditional separation period.

The purpose of this study is, first, to explore the experience of Thai adult students in the U.S. who are maintaining long-distance relationships with their parents. Second, this study identifies the specific relational maintenance behaviors these students use with their parents. Third, this study examines the relationship between distal relationship maintenance and the channels of mediated communication use within the Thai adult student-parent dyad. This paper utilizes a qualitative method framed by a grounded theory approach, which is designed to study communication processes and allows researchers to investigate the development, maintenance, and change in individual and interpersonal processes (Charmaz, 2002). This study will extend the literature on maintaining familial relationships and provide insight into adult students' distal relationship maintenance.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Relational Maintenance

Theorizing relationship maintenance is controversial. Dindia and Canary (1993) suggested, “Differentiating the various conceptualizations of relationship maintenance allows for conceptual clarity, which is necessary for theory and research on personal and social relationships” (p.167). According to Stafford (2005), relational maintenance can be viewed as both a state and a process. When relationship maintenance is viewed as a state it has a temporal form and occurs “just after a relationship has finished beginning and just before it has started to end” (Montgomery, 1993, p. 205). For instance, Knapp and Vangelisti (2000) suggested that to maintain a relationship is to maintain the state of the relationship from de-escalating, escalating, or terminating. This view of relational maintenance keeps a relationship in a specific state or condition. This definition implies that people maintain a relationship at a specific level of intimacy (Ayres, 1983). Similarly, Duck (1988) used the phrase “regulation of intimacy” to explain how maintaining the relationship at a given level of intimacy can stop an escalation in closeness.

However, some researchers have examined other relationship characteristics and qualities that people use to maintain a state of the relationship. For example, Stafford and Canary (1991) studied how couples maintain their relationship through mutual control,

commitment, and liking. Such a perspective (i.e., focusing on a specific state or condition) allows researchers also to examine other relational qualities such as intimacy, attraction, self-disclosure, interdependence, and the like.

When relationship maintenance is conceptualized as a process, there are a number of definitions (Dindia & Canary, 1993). The general definition of relationship maintenance is to keep a relationship in existence or continuing without dissolution. As Duck (1988) states, relationship maintenance means sustaining the existence of the relationship. Some scholars are more specific. For example, Ayres (1983) argued that to maintain a relationship is an action to sustain the stability of relationship satisfaction. However, maintaining the relationship and relational satisfaction are not identical. That is, some couples maintain a relationship that is not satisfying (Dindia, 2003). For instance, Hess (2000) found that people use distancing maintenance strategies to manage their non-voluntary relationships with disliked partners. Distancing can be exercised to prevent a personal relationship from escalating or deescalating. This finding supports Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) argument that distance is not always associated with badness and closeness is not always related to goodness. Both distance and closeness qualities are vital components in relational dialectics that govern personal relationships.

Similarly, Canary and Stafford (1994) contended that relational maintenance is a process that involves dynamic activities. Sustaining relational stability does not imply that stable relationships are static. In the same vein, Guerrero and Chavez (2005) posited that relational maintenance is "a dynamic process that involves adapting to the changing needs and goals that characterize a relationship" (p. 341).

Additional research described relational repair and maintenance as a similar process, in which repair strategies restore the relationship to a satisfactory level and later strategies prevent relational turbulence (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Even though relational maintenance and repair are conceptualized similarly in Dindia and Baxter's (1987) study, they report that frequency of certain maintenance and repair behaviors are different. Dindia and Canary (1993) recognized the overlapping nature of repair and maintenance concepts and suggested that these two concepts should be separated. According to Dindia and Canary (1993), relational repair implies restoring the relationship after its decline or depreciation whereas relational maintenance refers to "*keeping* the relationship in its present state" (p. 166). Therefore, relational repair can be viewed as a process of maintaining the relationship.

Canary and Stafford (1994) defined relational maintenance behavior as "actions and activities used to sustain desired relational definitions" (p. 5). This definition allows researchers to understand what strategies and/or routine behaviors people use to maintain relationships with regard to desired relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, liking, commitment, etc). This definition, however, cannot explicate why people still maintain a dissatisfactory relationship or, occasionally, terminate a satisfactory relationship.

Overall, most definitions presented here are not exhaustive and overlap in some aspects. For instance, when maintenance aims at keeping the relationship in a satisfactory condition, the relationship state or condition may escalate or deescalate. Nevertheless, among different conceptualizations of relational maintenance, Stafford (1994) proposed that "the most representative definition that can arise from this conundrum is that

maintenance is the process of maintaining a given state” (p. 300). Stafford’s definition encapsulates the fundamental nature of relational maintenance studies as it allows for investigation of various types of relationships (i.e., voluntary, involuntary), process (i.e., actions and activities) in maintaining the relationship, and quality of the desired/undesired relationship (e.g., control mutuality, trust, liking, satisfaction), at a given state.

Conceptual Framework

As Dainton (2003) argued, most relational maintenance studies center on three variations: relational type (e.g., marriage, friendships, siblings), structural constraints (e.g., long-distance relationships, workplace relationships), and culture (e.g., intercultural relationships, relationships in cultures outside of the U.S.). These three variations are based on two dimensions: first is the people’s *choice* of maintaining the relationship, which ranges from the purely voluntary to the purely involuntary relationship. Second is the *intentionality* of maintenance enactment, which ranges from the wholly intentional to the wholly unintentional behavior. Moreover, Dainton (2003) also argued, “Maintenance is a function of, and is influenced by, varying contextual levels” (p.300). These contextual levels are comprised of: the individual, the relational system, the larger network, and the culture, which all impact maintenance processes. These guidelines proposed by Dainton (2003) were used to organize the review of literature and as a frame of reference in the discussion and conclusion chapter.

Choice in Relational Maintenance

Among the communication scholars who study relational maintenance, only a few focus on the individual's desire to be in the relationship (Dainton, 2003; Hess, 2003; Myers & Weber, 2004). Hess (2003) observed that the majority of research focused on the maintenance of voluntary relationships such as dating, romantic, marriage, and friendship relationships. As Dainton (2003) states, "The notion of choice is rarely discussed in this research; the desire to be in the relationship is assumed" (p. 300). Similar to the parent-child relationship, the sibling relationships is an ascribed, rather than earned relationship (Cicirelli, 1995). Thus, it is possible that siblings and partners in nonvoluntary relationships use relational maintenance behaviors not used by individuals in romantic or platonic relationships (Myer & Weber, 2004).

Another interesting aspect of people's choice in relational maintenance is that some individuals do maintain healthy and close relationships with partners they dislike (Hess, 2000). Nonvoluntary relationships (NRs), according to Hess (2000), are an inevitable byproduct of our everyday interaction. Hess (2000) describes NRs as "relationship[s] that people feel they must maintain whether or not they prefer to do so" (p. 459).

Hess (2003) identifies three external barriers that influence nonvoluntary relationships: social ties (e.g., family relationship); work ties; and proxemic ties (e.g., being neighbors). For example, negative feelings and fights, which often terminate friendships and romantic relationships, rarely end parent-child relationships (Blieszner & Adams, 1995). This could be due, in part, to the nature of the voluntary relationship

where people have options to maintain or terminate the relationship: conversely, involuntary relationships such as parent-child, siblings, and coworkers are constrained by biological, legal, social, and cultural factors.

Dainton (2003) suggested that not all relationships are purely voluntary or purely involuntary but exist on a continuum of choice. For instance, Vogl-Bauer (2003) claimed that familial relationship can be perceived as both voluntary and involuntary depending upon each individual's decision to maintain family relationships. Additionally, relationships such as those in the workplace are often considered to be purely involuntary when one cannot pick his or her coworkers. However, "Many work relationships are personal-professional hybrids, complicating the relationship maintenance picture even further" (Waldron, 2003, p. 165).

At some points in time the relationship might be more voluntary than at other points in time (Dainton, 2003). This can be seen in another example. For instance, when siblings are sharing the same residence, their relationships are conceivably involuntary. On the other hand, when moving away from their family's home, many siblings view this same relationship as voluntary. Evidently, the extent to which relationship is voluntary or involuntary will affect the valence of maintenance behavior (e.g., constructive, destructive).

Constructive versus destructive maintenance behavior. Although various relational maintenance typologies exist (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000), the most frequently used typology was developed and validated by Stafford and Canary (1991; Canary & Stafford,

1992). Their typology consists of five relational maintenance behaviors used by romantic partners: *positivity* (being cheerful and supportive), *openness* (directly discussing the nature of the relationship), *assurances* (stressing one's love and commitment), *social networks* (involving friends and family), and *sharing tasks* (doing one's share of the responsibilities). More recently, Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000) expanded upon these measures to include routine and strategic maintenance behaviors. They also found support for two additional relational maintenance behaviors, *conflict management* (e.g., understanding, patience, and forgiveness) and *advice* (providing social support), used by marital partners. These validated typologies embrace proactive and constructive maintenance behaviors (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993) rather than negative or destructive behaviors because these typologies tend to focus on voluntary relationships.

Past research found that destructive behaviors such as anti-social conduct and distancing tactics have been used in maintaining voluntary relationships (Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Canary et al., 1993; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Studying married couples, Dindia and Baxter (1987) discovered three underlying dimensions of maintenance strategies: constructive vs. destructive, ambivalence use vs. satiated use, and proactive vs. passivity. Based on inductive analysis, Canary et al. (1993) found that 10 maintenance strategies were used among lovers, relatives, friends, and other relationships. From this study, 5 out of 10 maintenance behaviors are consistent with Stafford and Canary (1991) and Canary and Stafford (1992). These five additional maintenance enactments included: joint activities, mediated communication, avoidance, anti-social, and humor. This confirms that anti-

social behaviors are also part of individuals' maintenance behaviors when romantic partners are not the only unit of analysis.

Other destructive maintenance behaviors such as antagonism have been reported in nonvoluntary relationships as well, especially with disliked partner (Hess, 2000; 2003). Nonvoluntary relationships are defined as relationships which individuals believe they have no choice but to maintain (Hess, 2000). Based on open-ended and closed-ended questions, the results from Hess's (2000) studies showed that people in nonvoluntary relationships employ various forms of destructive behavior such as expressing detachment, avoiding involvement, and showing antagonism with the disliked partner.

Hess (2003) suggests that individuals in nonvoluntary relationships may exercise more destructive action or activities than people in voluntary relationships in order to manage their relationship. However, it is not uncommon that destructive and anti-social acts can contribute to relational maintenance in voluntary relationships. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) posited, the negative co-exists with the positive in most all relationships. Therefore, concentrating on the rewarding characteristics of maintenance behaviors may limit understanding of the magnitude of relational maintenance.

Another aspect of relationship maintenance, identified by Dainton (2003), is the extent to which people's consciousness and intention is involved. This is, in part, dictated by the type of relationship (e.g., voluntary or nonvoluntary). The question here is whether people value nonvoluntary relationships less than voluntary relationships. The next section, thus, discusses the intent of individuals in maintaining the relationship.

Intentionality of Maintenance

Prior to the term “behavior” becoming widely used, studies in relationship maintenance focused chiefly on “strategies” people used to sustain the relationship (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Duck, 1994). Dainton and Stafford (1993) argued, “By using the term ‘behavior’ consideration of both strategic and routine interaction is facilitated” (p. 256). Dindia (1994) defined strategies as “plans, methods, or a series of maneuvers or stratagems for obtaining a specific goal or result” (p. 93). Maintenance strategies, thus, are conscious and intentional behaviors enacted by partners to maintain the relationship (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Duck, 1988).

Routine behaviors, on the other hand, usually take place at a lower level of consciousness (Greene, 1984) than strategic behaviors and are not intentionally used for maintenance reasons (Dainton & Stafford, 1993). For instance, a mother may intentionally and consciously clean the house and prepare breakfast, but her goal may not be maintaining the familial relationship. Rather, the performance of such an act is simply to fulfill needs of hygiene and hunger. Unintentionally but consciously, “the performance of these behaviors may indeed serve maintenance functions” (Dainton & Stafford, 1993, p. 256).

Distinguishing between purely strategic and purely routine behavior, as with the previous dimension of in/voluntary, is challenging for maintenance scholars. Dainton (2003) believed the “conscious-intentionality of maintenance enactment also is likely to exist on a continuum” (p. 302). Echoing Dainton, Dindia (2003) claimed, “The distinction between strategic and routine relational maintenance behaviors may not be

dichotomous,” (p. 17) and the relationship between strategic and routine maintenance is not static.

Even though communication researchers have not empirically located the distinction between strategic and routine maintenance; “the absence of such routine behaviors can be problematic for the relationship” (Aylor & Dainton, 2004, p. 689). Some scholars argued that the extent to which a behavior is routine or strategic depends on many factors including, but not limited to, the situation, the status of the relationship and the gender of the perceiver (Acitelli, 2001; Dindia, 2000). Also, some maintenance behaviors might often be used more routinely than strategically and vice versa (Dindia, 2000, Stafford et al., 2000).

There is considerable support for these contentions. In a strategic maintenance study, Dindia and Baxter (1987) and Ragsdale (1996) found a negative correlation between the use of maintenance strategies and relational length. According to Dindia and Baxter’s findings, some behaviors might be identified as strategic maintenance during the first phase of a close relationship but over time these behaviors may become routine because of the familiarity of the situation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Similarly, Dainton and Aylor (2002) found relational length was negatively correlated with the strategic use of openness. This study also identified a positive relationship between relational length and three routine maintenance enactments, network, sharing tasks, and conflict management, with romantic partners. In other words, researchers found some tentative support for Dindia’s (2000) contention that maintenance enactments might start off strategic and then become routinized over time.

Thus far, several scholars agree that relational maintenance encompasses both strategic and routine behaviors (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Duck, 1994; Stafford et al., 2000). Only a few studies have attempted to empirically assess differences in intentionality of routine and strategic enactments (e.g., Aylor & Dainton, 2004; Dainton & Aylor, 2002).

To measure the distinction between the uses of behavior regarding routine and strategic purposes, Dainton and Aylor (2002) have asked individuals in romantic relationships to respond to each item in the Stafford et al. (2000) scale two times. The first time respondents indicated the extent to which they perform behavior strategically, and the second time they indicated the extent to which they performed the behavior routinely or without maintenance intentions. The significant result from this study was that sharing tasks and positivity were more often used routinely than strategically. Results from Dainton and Aylor (2002) also confirmed Stafford et al.'s (2000) seven-factor model of relational maintenance. The importance of this finding is that this study provides empirical support for differentiation between strategic and routine maintenance behavior, and both types of behaviors contribute to the prediction of relational characteristics. Previous scholarship has only examined strategic behaviors.

Aylor and Dainton's (2004) research found additional support for gender role, but not sex, differences in relation to maintenance behaviors. This study suggested that feminine individuals were more likely to use routine advice, conflict management, and openness maintenance, and masculine individuals were more likely to use strategic openness and task maintenance. Moreover, the findings supported Acitelli's (2001) and

Dindia's (2000) observations regarding gender as a predictor for strategic and routine maintenance.

The results from Aylor and Dainton (2004) and Dainton and Aylor (2002) provide additional support for the distinction between routine and strategic maintenance behavior. However, something beyond gender, relational length, and relational characteristics may influence individuals' behavior, for example, distance between partners, frequency of FtF interaction, and means of communication.

Structural Constraints

Long-distance versus geographically-close relationships. To maintain a relationship, individuals do communicate with one another through either face-to-face interactions or mediated communications (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Canary & Staffords, 1994; Stafford, 2005). Most relationship maintenance studies focus on geographically-close relationships, GCRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2001, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Rohlfsing, 1995; Sahlstein, 2004). Therefore, investigating long-distance relationships (LDRs) highlights the need for a greater focus on structural constraints (e.g., distance, job descriptions) that impact choice and intentionality in relationship maintenance (Dainton, 2003).

In general, GCRs are relationships in which partners meet each other face-to-face on a daily or regular basis (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). On the other hand, the operationalization of long distance relationships has varied greatly (Rohlfsing, 1995). In general, communication scholars who study LDRs have relied on one of the three approaches to measure LDRs. First is the number of miles separated to differentiate distal relationships from geographically-close relationships. For instance, Holt and Stone

(1988) arbitrarily categorized romantic partners into 3 groups: 0 to 1 mile apart, 2 to 249 miles apart, and more than 250 miles apart. Guldner and Swensen (1995) used the statement “my partner lives far enough away from me that it would be very difficult or impossible for me to see him or her every day” (p. 316) to define LDRs. GCR participants, according to Guldner and Swensen (1995), are those who responded affirmatively to the statement “my partner lives close enough to me that I could see him or her everyday if I choose” (p.316).

A second approach is based on city or state borders. Stephen (1986), in a study of symbolic interdependence among premarital LDRs, defines LDRs in college students as: “one partner was a university student living on campus while the other was attending another university or college in a different part of the state” (p. 199).

A third approach allows respondents to individually define whether the relationship is long distance, regardless of the number of miles or geographic boundaries that separate partners. Stafford (2005) suggests what should be a criterion in defining LDRs:

Relationships are considered to be long distance when communication opportunities are restricted (in the views of the individuals involved) because of geographic parameters and individuals within the relationship have expectation of a continued close connection. (p. 7)

Stafford's (2005) definition provides a practical answer to the question concerning how to conceptualize the distance relationship. Although there are various conceptual definitions of LDRs based on different theoretical assumptions and methodologies, Dellman-Jenkins et al. (1993) suggest that a definition allowing respondents to define their own relationship as geographically-close or geographically-separate is more valid

than other criteria such as miles or state border lines. For instance, Holt and Stone's (1988) second category which uses 2 to 249 miles to define LDRs certainly will include those in GCRs by most researchers' definitions. Moreover, previous research in LDRs found that not all respondents can accurately report the number of miles separating them from their partners (Aylor, 2003). Furthermore, criteria other than these used by Stafford (2005) may ignore some other factors defining long-distance relationship such as imprisonment, divorce, and military service. Despite the fact that distance was used to differentiate GCR from LDR, reasons for separation such as those between military personnel and their family members, might be considered a form of an LDR, even if the individuals were geographically close.

Rindfuss and Stephen (1990) found that the two most common reasons for marital noncohabitation are military service and incarceration. In 2008, the United States had approximately 2.3 million individuals in federal, state, and local jails (Bureau of Justice Statistic, 2008). Rindfuss and Stephen's study concluded that within the first three years after separation, these LDRs, which were drawn largely from military personnel and incarcerated individuals, have higher divorce rates than the general population. Similarly, Angrist and Johnson (2000) found that deployment of female soldiers, but not male soldiers, led to a large and statistically significant increase in divorce rates, suggesting deployment of women placed a marked strain on marriages. Families with an incarcerated member reported anxiety and stress including frustration (Hairston, 1991). Further, Hairston's (1991) study found that burden of stigmatization and lack of support was experienced by individuals involved in imprisonment and military service.

Another type of marital noncohabitation, the LDR of commuter partners who seek careers during economic instability, is becoming prevalent. Recently, Bergen, Kirby, and McBride (2007) found gender role expectations (e.g., of the roles of wives and mothers) influenced commuter wives' distal maintenance behaviors. The results of this study showed that commuter wives employed various maintenance behaviors (e.g., unpaid family labor) to compensate for family caregiving roles. In other words, commuter wives perceived that their traditional roles of wives and mothers as caregivers could not be fully met over a long distance. In summary, some long distance relationships, especially marital noncohabitation in military service, incarceration, and commuter wives might yield different maintenance behaviors from other distal relationships. Given the mobility of society and unforeseen reasons for family members to live apart, differences between GCRs and LDRs maintenance can be explored through various relational qualities such as satisfaction and commitment.

Relational characteristics in GCRs and LDRs. There have been two general conclusions in GCR maintenance literature. First, relational maintenance behaviors may be used separately or in combination with one another (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Although research on GCR maintenance has reported a strong correlation between maintenance behavior and relational characteristics such as satisfaction, commitment, and relational stability (Canary and Stafford, 1992; Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991), not all partners report using the same maintenance behaviors with the same frequency (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999).

Second, Canary & Stafford (1994) stated, “Maintenance activities vary according to the development and type of the relationship” (p. 8). For instance, Ayres (1983) reported that college students’ use of maintenance strategies (i.e., avoidance, balance, directness) varies according to their relational intent: development, deterioration, or stability.

Similarly, Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999) found that married couples used relationship maintenance more frequently in the early years of marriage, decreased use during the middle years, and rebounded in more long term marriages. Maintenance strategies also vary among different types of relationships. An inductive analysis of 579 college students revealed use of positivity, openness, assurances, sharing tasks, and cards/letters/calls differed among lovers, relatives, friends and others, in term of frequency use to maintain the relationship (Canary et al., 1993). Canary et al. found positivity, openness, and assurances were used more in romantic relationships, but less than expected in friendship. Similarly, assurances, sharing tasks, and cards/letter/calls were used less frequently by friends, and were used more by relatives.

Within personal relationship scholarship, research has sought to differentiate between GCRs and LDRs in terms of frequency of contact, maintenance strategies, media usage, and relational satisfaction (Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Holt & Stone, 1988; Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, & Reske, 1990). Some studies have suggested that individuals in LDRs have experienced more difficulty and consideration than those in GCRs. For example, Westefeld and Liddell (1982) conducted a workshop at Iowa State University to explore students’ maintenance strategies commonly used in romantic LDRs. In their

study, students reported LDRs cost money to maintain (i.e., telephone bill, travel expense). Students recognized that the long-distance relationship is stressful, especially when numbers of visits do not match partners' expectation. In addition, they found that romantic partners in LDRs experience a more extreme range of emotions such as extreme happiness and anxiety about their LDRs within a 24-hour period than GCRs.

Similarly, Holt and Stone's (1988) study suggested that when geographical distance between partners and the lack of visits increases, relationship satisfaction decreases. These studies suggested that college students' long-distance relationships are more challenging and more demanding than GCRs in terms of satisfaction and intimacy level.

Guldner and Swensen (1995) conducted a study to assess the relationship between time spent together and relational satisfaction in premarital GCRs and LDRs. This study found no difference between those in LDRs and GCRs on satisfaction or commitment. Guldner and Swensen (1995) concluded, "It is not the amount of time per se that supports the relationship, but rather some other factor associated with even small amounts of time spent together" (p. 319).

Prior research on GCRs' maintenance appears to be based on the assumption that more maintenance activities lead to better relationships (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993). In Johnson's (2001) examination of friendship maintenance, partners in GCRs employed more types and greater quantity of maintenance behavior than LDRs. However, this difference in the amount of maintenance behaviors was not correlated with closeness or satisfaction.

Though some studies found negative effects of LDRs or no differences in relationship qualities between LDRs and GCRs, potential positive outcomes in LDRs were reported as well. Stafford and Reske (1990) reported that individuals in LDRs were more satisfied with their relationship than partners in GCRs. Respondents in LDRs also reported that they were more in love or committed to the relationship than proximal couples. Based on a longitudinal study, Stephen (1986) found, “When communication is restricted to the verbal/vocal channel as a result of geographic separation the relationship between frequency of talking and degree of symbolic interdependence is much stronger than when communication is not constrained” (p. 205). However, it is unclear if the individuals in long-distance dating relationships may work harder to maintain their relationship as opposed to their counterparts in GCRs. Or, as Stafford and Reske (1990) claimed, LDRs are more idealized and more satisfying than GCRs due to the limited contact.

However, the findings that individuals in LDRs experience the same or even greater levels of commitment and satisfaction in relation to the GCRs group (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Stafford, 2005) are not conclusive. More studies are needed to explore the relationship between channels of mediated communication and maintenance behaviors in LDRs in greater detail (Aylor, 2003).

Cultural Variations

As Dainton (2003) suggested, cultural factors play an important role in relational maintenance. Many scholars have devoted considerable effort to the identification of individuals’ values, perceptions, and behaviors associated with cultural factors

(Shearman & Dumlao, 2008). Unfortunately, there is no study directly examining the relationship between Thai culture and relational maintenance behavior. The following section reviews cultural concepts that have been thoroughly examined by Hall (1976), Hofstede (1980), and other cultural scholars.

As a means of understanding cultural orientation, Hall (1976) introduced a bipolar construct of high and low context. In a low-context culture, messages are held to be explicit and much of the information conveyed in communication is carried in words. Communication and language are explicit and direct. In contrast, high-context cultures rely on the context of the message as opposed to the verbal part of the message. Therefore, less information was exchanged through words in the high-context cultures. Hall's approach is also related to Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism dimension. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) put it, "All cultures Hall labels as low-context are individualistic, and all of the cultures Hall labels as high-context are collectivistic in Hofstede's scheme" (p. 44). Individualism-collectivism was defined as the relative emphasis placed on the self versus the group or society. In terms of self concept and communication style of cultural differences, individualistic cultures have an independent view of self and use an indirect style of communication, whereas those from collectivistic cultures hold an independent view of self and prefer an indirect style of communication (Shearman & Dumlao, 2008). Deng (1992) commented further on the identical nature of high-low context and individualism-collectivism dimension:

For example, individualistic, or low-context cultures indicate a preference of direct and overt communication style, confrontational and aggressive behaviors, a clear self identification, and a priority of self interest and achievement. Collectivistic, or high-context, cultures manifest a preference of indirect and

covert communication style, an obedient and conforming behavior, a clear group identification, and a priority of group interest and harmony. (p. 38)

The high-context, collective cultures are mostly Asian and South American. The low-context, individualistic cultures tend to be European and North American.

Specifically, the Thai value of social harmony differs notably from American culture, which can be illustrated through the Thai language (Stewart & Bennet, 1991). For example, an idea known as *kreng jai*, one of the most difficult of Thai concepts for Westerners to grasp, is infused in Thai traditions. Komin (1991) defined *kreng jai* as, “To be considerate, to feel reluctant to impose upon another person, to take another person’s feeling (and ego) into account, or to take every measure not to cause discomfort or inconvenience for another person” (p. 164). Another Thai term that embodies the high-context and collective nature of the culture is *katanyu* which is fundamental in the Thai family. Klausner (1993) noted:

To be *katanyu*, or constantly aware and conscious of the benefit or favor another person has bestowed, is a highly valued character trait in Thai society. To the contrary, one of the most reprehensible sins in the Thai social context is to be *akatanyu*, or ungrateful (p. 275).

In sum, there is good reason to consider that cultural dimensions (i.e., high-low context, individualism-collectivism) might influence how Thai students maintain LDR with their parents. For example, Thai students are likely to avoid arguments with parents and attempt to smooth out the telephone conversations, because they *kreng jai* their parents. In addition, it is possible that Thai students will employ more constructive rather than destructive maintenance behavior to avoid *akatanyu* and embrace the concept of *katanyu*. This study is a first step to empirically understand LDR maintenance in a non-

Western culture, and other factors such as mediated channels of communication, might also affect Thai students' maintenance behavior.

Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated Communication and Traditional Mediated Communication

Most studies, if not all, recognize that all LDRs are restricted by geographic separation and channels of communication (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Stafford, 2005; Stephen, 1986). With limited face-to-face interaction, LDR partners relied more on mediated communication, for instance, letters, postcards, cell phones, e-mails, text messages, chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, video chats, just to name a few.

Stafford and Reske (1990) found that couples' exchange of letters is more positively associated with satisfaction, love, and satisfaction with communication in the relationship than FtF or telephone interactions. Interestingly, the traditional mediated communication channels such as letters or the telephone provide significant benefits to the long-distance relationship when compared to face-to-face channels of communication.

By comparing telephone and personal e-mail, Dimmick, Kline, and Stafford (2000) found that these two channels of communication yield different advantages. The telephone was superior for the "sociability gratifications that are highly affective uses in personal relationships including expressing emotions and affection, giving advice, exchanging information and providing companionship" (p. 240). From the same findings, personal e-mail communication is beneficial in two ways: "keeping in contact with people who live far away" and "keeping in contact with people you don't have time to see

in person" (Dimmick et al., 2000, p. 240). Walther and Parks (2002) concluded, "For those who wish to maintain long-distance contacts with friends and family, however, computer-mediated communication (CMC) may be a more satisfying choice than more traditional channels such as letters or the telephone" (p. 545). Other research found that telephone time and Internet use among dating partners were positively associated with relational success such as increased satisfaction, trust, commitment, and lower jealousy (Dainton & Aylor, 2002).

A majority of Americans surveyed perceived that communication over the Internet has improved their connections to close family and friends (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2000). A longitudinal study also suggested that an increase in phone communication was strongly associated with an increase in feelings of closeness, regardless of whether family and friends were geographically-close or geographically-separate (Cumming, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2001). In the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001), of teens and their parents in online homes, parents indicated that they did not think the Internet affected interfamily relations much. However, some parents did report using the Internet for different aspects of family life. For example, some parents reported that the Internet has improved the way they spend time with their children such as helping them plan weekend family outings (34%) and helping them shop for birthday and holiday gifts for family members (27%). In addition, parents reported that e-mail has been useful for communicating with their children's teachers (28%) and for staying in touch with parents of their children's friends (20%). However, factors such as age of child (i.e., younger children), how long parents have been online (i.e., more than 1 year),

parents' income (i.e., high), and level of education (i.e., high) were related to whether or not parents use e-mail for these purposes (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001). Similarly, Trice (2002) found an average of 6.03 e-mail contacts between college students and parents within 5-day period with parents. E-mail interaction increased during stressful periods, and female students were somewhat more likely to use e-mail than male college freshmen. This study concluded that "The development of email has increased communication between students and parents enormously" (Trice, 2002, p. 332). These findings should not be surprising, because the Internet became another mode of family communication, and often these channels are more convenient than phones or conventional mail.

Aoki and Downes (2003) examined the usage and attitudes of young people toward cell phones. The study suggested that young people use the devices for a variety of purposes, such as to help them feel safe, for financial benefits, to manage time efficiently, and to keep in touch with friends and family members.

Other advances in mediated communication that have recently gained popularity are instant messaging (IM), text-messaging (TM), and short messaging service (SMS). According to a survey released by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001), college students are among the heaviest users of instant messaging in the United States. This study shows that almost three-quarters of online teens (74%) or approximately 13 million youths use instant messaging, in comparison to 44% of online adults who have used IM. Moreover, 90% of instant messaging users reported that they use this online

activity to stay in touch with friends and relatives who live outside their communities (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001).

The use of instant messaging in long-distance relationships is beginning to receive attention from communication scholars, especially for relational maintenance (Stafford, 2005). However, IM has some disadvantages such as the limited use of characters per message. Nevertheless, IM's advantages may surpass its shortcomings. For example, IM can provide a quick, ubiquitous, inexpensive, and unobtrusive way of communicating for long-distance partners.

Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004) investigated the relationship between the amount of instant messaging use and the level of perceived intimacy between friends. Their analysis suggested that the amount of IM use is positively associated with verbal, affective and social intimacy. In other words, the findings support the notion that IM facilitates social integration in friend relationship. In addition, the amount of IM use also encourages the desire to meet face-to-face (Hu et al., 2004). This study confirms that long-distance personal relationships of friends and families can and do benefit from text based interactions such as instant messaging (Hu et al., 2004; Kindred & Roper, 2004).

However, whether mediated communication helps in maintaining the LDRs or leads to relationship termination is up for debate. The majority of mediated communication research has suggested that these channels of communication promote social integration rather than social isolation (Dimmick et al., 2000; Stafford et al., 1999; Stafford and Reske, 1990). Since individuals in LDRs use a variety of mediated means and some FtF interaction, more research focusing on relationship maintenance behaviors

and mediated communication is needed. It is imperative to note that the association between relationship maintenance and channels of mediated communication varies in LDRs and GCRs. As Rohlfsing (1995) noted, LDRs and GCRs are qualitatively different. Examining LDRs and GCRs as homogeneous relationships may yield different conclusions.

Recently, research has indentified the relationship between communication channel use and maintenance behavior among three types of LDRs: LDRs with periodic FtF, LDRs with non-periodic FtF, and LDRs without FtF (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). The findings from Dainton and Aylor (2002) suggested that individuals with periodic FtF contact used three of the five-factor maintenance behaviors more frequently than geographically close individuals. Those used were sharing tasks, positivity, and assurances.

The respondents without periodic FtF interaction were more likely to use the Internet to contact their partners. The use of CMC in LDRs was a significant predictor of trust for non-periodic FtF partners but not for those with periodic FtF communication. Those in LDRs with periodic FtF contact reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction, trust, and commitment than those without periodic FtF contact. This study suggests that the presence of periodic FtF interaction plays an important role in distinguishing type of LDRs. Rohlfsing (1995) and Sahlstein (2004) argued that the reasons for separation (e.g., attending school, divorce, military, imprisonment, new job) make certain types of LDRs qualitatively different from one another. Moreover, the

expectation of future interaction from individuals in LDRs has an impact on the process of maintaining those given type of relationships (Aylor, 2003).

Within the framework of GCRs maintenance studies, the majority of research has supported Canary and Stafford's (1994) finding that relational maintenance behaviors may be used separately or in combination with one another. Moreover, various research studies in GCRs have found that maintenance behaviors vary according to relationship type and stage of the relationship (Myers & Weber, 2004; Weigel, & Ballard-Reisch, 1999).

Research in LDR maintenance suggests mixed results. Some studies found that restricted communication and geographic separation leads to relational dissatisfaction (Holt & Stone, 1988). Other studies suggest a few differences between GCRs and LDRs. Those include the finding that individuals in LDRs experience greater levels of satisfaction and commitment (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Stafford, 2005).

This inconsistency of findings from LDR studies implies that (a) people's choice in maintaining the relationship (i.e., voluntary, nonvoluntary), (b) intentionality of maintenance (i.e., strategic behavior, routine behavior), (c) constructive and destructive enactment, (d) frequency of FtF interaction, (e) anticipation of future interaction, and (f) roles of CMC influence the process of maintaining at any given state of relationship.

Since this study is seen as a first step toward constructing an empirical basis for hypothesis construction, this study will use a grounded theory approach. Thus, no hypotheses will be advanced about the actual relationship between people's choice and intentions in relationship maintenance and any contextual variation. This study is

structured to allow such patterns to emerge if they exist. Given prior research in relationship maintenance and channels of mediated communication, it is uncertain how Thai students maintain their LDRs with their parents. To explore this, the following research questions are proposed:

- RQ1: What are the feelings and experiences of Thai students in the U.S. towards relationship maintenance with their parents in Thailand?
- RQ2: What does long-distance relationship maintenance mean to Thai students in the U.S.?
- RQ3: What behaviors do Thai students in LDRs use to maintain their relationship with their parents?
- RQ4: What are the functions of various mediated communication in maintaining LDRs in the family?

CHAPTER 3: Methods and Procedures

Grounded Theory

Compared to other areas of studies in interpersonal communication such as relationship development, the program of theory development in LDR maintenance is considered to be in its infancy. There are only a few theoretical perspectives on personal relationships that directly explain relationship maintenance (see Canary & Zelley, 2000). For instance, social exchange theory, including interdependence theory and equity theory, have received the most attention from relationship maintenance scholars (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Dindia & Canary, 1993). Other theoretical perspectives that have received attention are attachment theory and dialectical perspectives. For a review and discussion of current theoretical perspectives on relational maintenance, see Baxter and Montgomery (1996), Canary and Dainton (2003), Canary and Stafford (1994), and Canary and Zelley (2000). Because the method applied here is a grounded theory approach, which is a theory building method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), existing theory will not be defined or discussed in connection with the research question.

One of the choices to make when choosing a research method is the choice between a theoretically-based and an empirically-based method. In a theoretically-based method, the researcher has to choose a theory (or theories) as a basis for advancing the hypothesis. On the other hand, in the case of empirically-based method (i.e., grounded

theory), the researcher does not enter the field guided by predefined theoretical frameworks but allows the theory to emerge from the empirical data itself (Charmaz, 2002). Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined grounded theory as:

One that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (p. 23)

Different versions of grounded theory are applied to study various aspects of personal relationship (Dey, 1999). This study is primarily based upon Charmaz's (2002, 2006) version, which draws heavily on approaches developed by Glaser (1978). Because the purpose of this study is to examine how Thai students in the U.S. make sense of their long-distance experience with parents through various channels of mediated communication and any periodic FtF interaction, using a grounded theory approach is appropriate. Charmaz (2002) confirmed that the grounded theory approach is suitable for every kind of research question, particularly studying "individual processes, interpersonal relations, and the reciprocal effects between individuals and larger social processes" (p. 28).

Rationale

Because grounded theory methods are designed to study processes, they allow researchers to investigate the development, maintenance, and change in individual and interpersonal processes (Charmaz, 2002). Unlike other qualitative methods, a grounded theory approach treats data collection and analysis simultaneously. In other words, as Charmaz (2002) stated, "It provides researchers with guidelines for analyzing data at

several points in the research process, not simply at the analysis stage” (p. 683). Both processes and products of research are shaped from the data rather than a preconceived, logically-deduced theoretical framework (Charmaz, 1983). Through theoretical sampling procedures, grounded theorists verify their developing ideas with further specific observation and/or data collection and make systematic comparisons between data to refine emerging analytic categories (Charmaz, 1983). In addition, the verification process in this study also included expert review. Since it is difficult for a researcher to detect every mistake or flaw in a complicated research study, review by someone with special expertise who understands the procedure and the subject matters strengthens the verification process in grounded theory approach. Therefore, discussing the study with the advisor, a second committee member, and another doctoral student increased the probability that weaknesses would be identified and improved.

Although there is no absolute procedure for conducting research on a basis of grounded theory, this study employed Charmaz’s (2002, 2006) general guidelines for structuring the project. This study is divided into two phases. The first phase of the study included: interviewing 20 respondents, then transcribing, coding, and analyzing the data. The emerging categories from the first interview were used as ground work for theoretical sampling procedure in the second phrase. For theoretical sampling purposes, the second phase aims at obtaining more pertinent data to help explicate and refine the tentative categories. The second phase attempted to recruit more participants until the categories were saturated. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 17th interview of the second phase. The additional 18 respondents were asked similar types of questions as the

first group of respondents, except the questions were more direct and in-depth. Finally, the data from the first and second phase of the study were analyzed through comparative methods until no new properties of the pattern emerge (Charmaz, 2006). The guidelines from Charmaz are discussed further in detail in coding procedure, data analysis, and theoretical sampling section.

Designing the Interview

Participant Selection

Sampling participants from different groups of the Thai Student Association (TSA) posed a challenge and proved to be a demanding experience in this study. The process of gaining access to a dispersed Thai student population through e-mail was the original concern. To obtain these individuals, a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling is a process of selecting a participant on the basis of researcher's knowledge of a population, the population's elements, and the purpose of the study (Babbie, 2004). Snowball sampling is a technique used to contact people through referrals who share or know of others who have experienced the same phenomenon a researcher is investigating (Babbie, 2004). This technique helped locate Thai students who had never opened an unknown e-mail but could be reached through a friend's referral.

The subjects of this study were drawn from the population of Thai students from the universities around Denver area that have a Thai Student Association. These universities included University of Denver, University of Colorado at Denver, University of Colorado at Boulder, and Colorado School of Mines in Golden. Participation was

limited to Thai students who are currently in LDRs with both of their parents. Although there are numerous conceptual definitions of the long-distance relationship that were described in detail in the Chapter 2, Dellman-Jenkins et al. (1993) suggest that a definition allowing respondents to define their own relationship as geographically-close or geographically-separate is more valid than other criteria such as miles or state border lines. Therefore, this study allowed participants to decide if they were involved in LDRs with both parents. The participants were asked, “Do you consider your relationships with father and mother to be long-distance?”

Recruiting Procedure

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data collection occurred over three quarter during 2008. The researcher recruited participants by e-mailing the president of the Thai Student Association (TSA) from each University. The e-mail informed the president of the purpose of this project (see Appendix A) and then asked each TSA president to forward the soliciting e-mail to the TSA members. This approach helped increase the number of responses because most members were familiar with communication from their president. The researcher asked each TSA president to forward the recruiting letter to all members without selecting particular individuals. This allowed recipients to select themselves for participation rather than being pressured to participate in the study by the TSA presidents or the researcher. The soliciting e-mail was aimed at explaining the procedures, such as the purpose, duration of the interview, and instructions for how to participate in the study (see Appendix B).

Data Collection

Once the potential participants were found, they were contacted via phone and/or e-mail to set up a time and place to be interviewed. Interview sessions were conducted in a place that was convenient for the participant to reduce participants' nervousness and to gain participants' familiarity to the setting. All participants chose the location of their interviews. Eighteen were held in the participants' apartments; nine were held in a private room at a Thai restaurant; six were held in participants' offices; three were held in the public library, and two were held in the quiet corner of a Starbucks coffee shop.

Before the interview began, participants were given the consent form to read and sign that gave consent to the researcher to interview and audio record them. Participants were informed that all of the data they provided would remain completely confidential and their involvement was voluntary. If they chose not to complete the interview, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants did not receive an incentive for their participation in this study but were informed of the importance of this research. The participants were told that the interview would last between half an hour to 2 hours depending on how much they had to say. They also were told that all names and identifying information would be changed to protect their privacy.

Interview Protocol

The research design used for the purposes of data collection was exploratory in nature. The source of data collection was a semi-structured interview with audio-taping that was then transcribed. Charmaz (1995) suggested that the semi-structured interview provides the researcher and respondent more flexibility than the more conventional

structure of interviews, questionnaires or surveys. In addition, this type of interview structure allowed the researcher to probe particularly salient topics that emerged during the interview. Compared to a rigidly structured interview, this method gave room for respondents to express an opinion without being influenced by the researcher (Foddy, 1993). Moreover, all interview sessions in this project were conducted in the Thai language, the primary language of both interviewee and interviewer, and this approach also allowed the interviewee to convey his or her feelings and experiences freely without language barriers.

Prior to the first phase interviews, the original set of questions was translated into Thai (Banks & Banks, 1993) and pilot tested with three Thai students to check whether respondents understood the questions correctly, to evaluate the question format, to determine the length of time for the interview, and also to practice the semi-structured interview process. The data from the pilot test were not included into this final project.

The course of a semi-structured interview in the first phase was divided into four sections (see Appendix C). This schedule was not intended to be strict instructions for the interviewer. Rather, the interviewer used the schedule to indicate the general area of interest and to provide cues when participants had difficulties staying on topic before they move too far away from the topic of interest (Charmaz, 2002). Charmaz (2006) suggested, "Having an interview guide with well-planned open-ended questions and ready probes can increase your confidence and permit you to concentrate on what the person is saying" (p. 29). Again, grounded theory encouraged the researcher to explore areas that might be pertinent to the overall study but not part of the interview schedule.

These unprompted novel data and considerable insight of researcher thus provide an empirical foundation for the theory building process (Charmaz, 2006).

The first part of the schedule starts with closed-end questions regarding demographic information such as age, academic background, length of time in the U.S, marital status, and year in college. In most studies, demographic information is completed in the last section. In this study, these topics were addressed in opening questions to help in breaking the ice between interviewer and the interviewee. Most studies assume that this type of personal information is private and people are less willing to share it. On the contrary, preliminary findings from the pilot tests confirmed that Thai students have little or no problem with sharing these types of demographic questions.

In the second section of the schedule, the interviewer asked respondents about what happened before they left their home country, Thailand. For example, “Tell me about what happened before you decided to come to the U.S.,” “What is your primary purpose of coming to the U.S.?” and “Why did you choose to come to the U.S.? Was this your decision?” This section attempted to tap into Thai students’ experiences of maintaining GCRs with their parents.

The third part of the interview explored each Thai student’s actions, activities, and process of maintaining long-distance relationship with their parents. These questions included, but were not limited to, topics of discussion, who initiates the contact, message valence (i.e., positive or negative message), channels of mediated communication, and frequency of the contact. Examples include “Please tell me how you normally

communicate with your mother/father?” and “Do you use any other channels of communication which are atypical to you? Why do you use it?”

The last part of the interview or the ending question was designed to bring the pace of the interview back to conversation level before ending the session. As Charmaz (2006) suggests, “No interview should end abruptly after the interviewer has asked the most searching questions or when the participant is distressed” (p. 30). The questions in the end of the interview schedule included: “What do you think are the most important aspects of maintaining long-distance relationships?” and “What kind of advice would you give to a Thai student coming to the U.S. to study about communicating with their parents?”

In the second phase or the theoretical sampling procedure, the course of a semi-structured interview was divided into three sections. The first part of the schedule started with closed-end questions regarding demographic information such as age, academic background, length of time in the U.S, marital status, and year in college (see Appendix C, part I). The second and third sections were similar to the questions from the first study, except that not all questions were asked to the respondents. Those questions were more precise and in-depth than the first interview in order to fill in the incomplete categories from the first study.

Participants

All interviews were done individually and there were a total of 38 participants, 20 participants from the first phase and 18 from second phase (see Table 1). The sample consisted of 20 males and 18 females, ranging in age from 19 to 37 years, with a mean

age of 26 years old. Twenty-five students were in Master's degree, 6 had recently finished Master's degree, 2 were in Bachelor's degree, 2 were in Doctoral degree programs, and 3 were studying the English language. The length of time participants had lived in the U.S. ranged from 3 months to 9 years, with a mean length of 2 years. Of the 38 participants, 5 participants reported their father passed away before coming to the U.S. Although 33 participants had at least one sibling, 5 were the only child in the household. The number of contacts between Thai students and parent ranged from less than once per month to more than seven times per week. Sixteen percent of the Thai students reported that interact with their parents less than once a week. Thirty-one percent conversed with their parents once a week. The majority of participants, 53%, stated that they talked to their parents at least twice a week. Although all participants' tuition was sponsored by their parents, 65% percent reported that they worked in a part-time job in a Thai restaurant or on campus for extra income. When asked who influenced their decision to come to the U.S., 16% revealed that it was their parents' decisions. Forty-seven percent of Thai students made their own decision to come to the U.S. with parental support, and 37% reported that they mutually agreed with parents to study in the U.S.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Pseudonyms	Sex	Age	Current Education	Time in The U.S.	No. of Sibling(s)	Contact per Week
Ple	F	30	Language	1.5 Yr	None	7 times
Pae	M	25	Grad M.A.	2 Yr	1	2 times
Jack	M	37	Master	3 Yr	1	1/month
Ton	M	25	Master	3.5 Yr	None	1 time
Ja	F	25	Master	1 Yr	1	4-5 times
Can	M	26	Bachelor	3 Yr	2	1 time
Cake	F	24	Master	1 Yr	2	1 time
Tai	F	30	Language	10 m	3	2 times
Yot	M	24	Master	1.5 Yr	2	1 time
Nick	M	34	Ph.D.	9 Yr	3	< 1/month
Nuch	F	28	Master	3 Yr	1	2 times
Smith	M	24	Master	1.5 Yr	2	1 time
Fai	M	25	Master	1 Yr	1	> 1 time
Jun	M	27	Master	2 Yr	1	< 1 time
Bum	F	26	Master	1.8 Yr	1	1/month
Boy	M	27	Grad M.A.	4 Yr	2	> 2 time
Fee	F	35	Grad M.A.	5 Yr	2	< 1time
Tee	M	24	Grad M.A.	2 Yr	2	1 time
Ping	F	19	Bachelor	10 m	2	1 time
Kai	M	26	Master	2 Yr	2	1 time
Beam	M	26	Master	5 m	1	2 times
Warm	M	27	Ph.D.	4.5 Yr	3	2 times
Por	F	24	Master	3 m	None	> 3times
Tae	M	27	Master	1.5 Yr	2	1 time
Yui	F	27	Master	1.5 Yr	3	1-2 times
Ing	F	25	Master	15 m	None	7 times
Jub	F	26	Master	2 Yr	1	1 time
Pok	M	24	Grad M.A.	2 Yr	2	1 time
Oil	F	28	Master	1.5 Yr	3	2 times
Pong	M	28	Master	4 m	None	2-3 times
Bell	F	25	Master	6 Yr	2	1 time
Nunn	F	25	Master	3 m	1	> 7 times
Pui	F	27	Grad M.A.	3 Yr	4	1/month
Bank	M	24	Master	1.5 Yr	3	2 times
Ning	F	24	Master	1 Yr	2	> 1 time
Ploy	F	24	Language	4 m	1	2 times
Art	M	23	Master	4 m	1	7 times
Hug	M	26	Master	10 m	2	4-5 times

Note. M = male; F = female; Yr = year(s); m = month(s); < = less than; > = more than; 1/month = once per month.

Coding Procedures and Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a sole researcher of this study. In all, there were 606 single-spaced pages of Thai transcriptions. The name of the participant was changed to a pseudonym at the time of transcription. Each transcript also had a reference number (i.e., C5, D13) and line number for future reference in the analysis process. Since the interview sessions were conducted in the Thai language, the interview tapes were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed in Thai. The excerpts from the raw data that were used for illustration of categories were then translated into English during the writing process of the dissertation. This approach will reduce interpretation inaccuracy that would result from translating the entire transcripts from Thai to English (Banks & Banks, 1991). In addition, every quotation in Chapter 4 was accompanied by reference number and line number (e.g., C9: 8-10, D5: 12-15) to identify the source.

Charmaz (2002) suggested that, “coding is the pivotal first analytic step that moves the researcher from description toward conceptualization of that description” (p. 683). According to Charmaz (2002), open coding is the first step in the process of breaking down the data and defining what is in the data. For the initial 20 interviews, the coding process started with the researcher repeatedly reading transcripts line by line in order to identify patterns and put a conceptual label on the emerging categories. Open coding involved comparing and contrasting the initial codes and categories in order to develop preliminary categories. The label applied both an original Thai word from respondents, which were called “in vivo codes,” and an abstract term constructed by the

researcher. This line-by-line coding process thus allowed the researcher to be immersed in the data, creating the codes, and at the same time studying the transcripts.

This step also integrated memo-writing practices. Charmaz (2006) recommended that memo-writing will help describe what the category concerns (i.e., definitions, properties, characteristic of the category). It bridges the gap between the conceptual categories with the thick descriptions from the respondents' story. This technique was used throughout the analysis process in order to make comparison among different categories and then among different concepts. Analytic memos function as an intermediate step between coding and the initial analysis.

The following step was focused coding which refers to “taking earlier codes that continually reappear in your initial coding and using those codes to sift through large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 1995, p. 40). In other words, during this step, the researcher gained insight regarding similarities and connections among categories and subcategories. Through this process, the categories were developed further by sorting, synthesizing, and specifying the conditions in which phenomenon occurred.

Whereas the initial analysis of the first several interviews focused on detecting new concepts and thus relied more on open coding than focused coding, the latter was used more heavily during the middle stage of this project. Open coding, however, was still conducted during the middle stage of this study to detect new concepts and categories. Thus, during this stage the researcher was able to focus on developing and enriching existing categories and their properties, dimensions, and relationships while at the same time continuing to be sensitive to emerging concepts and categories.

Theoretical Sampling

In keeping with the grounded theory approach, results of this initial stage analysis were also used to improve the interview guide for the remaining interviews in the theoretical sampling stage. Some topics that did not appear to be salient were dropped (e.g., reconnection) and new, emerging salient categories added (e.g., patterns of channels used, soliciting conversation/listening). In this way, the researcher was able to detect, examine, and focus on emerging and important concepts and categories, which were further examined and tested in the final stage of the analysis.

The results from the open coding, focused coding, and memo writing used throughout the comparative method of the first phase of this study revealed the “tentative categories and emerging, but incomplete ideas” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). To help elaborate and refine categories, the researcher theoretically sampled until no new categories emerged. This process involved collecting additional empirical data, which, in this study, was the second phase of interviews. This second phase allowed the researcher to “check, qualify, and elaborate the boundaries” of the category and to “specify the relations among categories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 107).

Similar to the coding and analysis procedures used in the first phase, the analyzed data from the second phase illuminated the variation within categories and defined gaps among them (Charmaz, 2006). This process stops when the categories are saturated, or, as Charmaz (2006) described this point in the research, “When gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new property of your core theoretical categories” (p. 113). The remaining stage of data analysis relied primarily on selective

coding to integrate and refine categories to form the major findings. Again, this step as well embraces memo-writing in order to link the emerging categories from the line-by-line coding to focused-coding. This helped the researcher to bring along the data in the initial level to a more abstract level of analysis. This way, the researcher can explicitly compare data with data, category with category and concept with concept without going through a pile of verbatim data.

At this stage, commonalities and differences in categories were further sought, core or central categories were identified, and then explanations were formulated. This procedure allowed the researcher to cut down the original list of categories and to focus on categories that could better explain the underlying phenomena.

After deriving theoretical categories along with ordering, sorting, and synthesizing through memos, the researcher then went back to the literature review and compared how and where the conceptual categories could be located or fit within the scholarly paradigm before writing the dissertation. Finally, after developing these explanations and refining the categories, the tentative explanation that could best interpret the data was written.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

The grounded theory approach resulted in the identification of four underlying categories experienced by the Thai students interviewed in this study. Those categories include the contact, the medium, the talk, and the motive. These four categories represent the feelings, experiences, and behaviors that are interrelated and, when integrated, define the process of parent-child long-distance relationship maintenance. The categories provide an integrative function by weaving together the key concepts in a way that tells the central story of all participants, addressing the first two research questions regarding the feelings and experiences of Thai students in the U.S. towards relationship maintenance with their parents in Thailand (RQ1) and the meaning of long-distance relationships among Thai students (RQ2). In addition to these two overarching questions, the final two research questions asked specifically about particular aspects of relational maintenance: the relationship maintenance behaviors of Thai students in LDR (RQ3), and the functions of various mediated communication channels in maintaining long distance relationship (RQ4). These additional questions were addressed within the grounded theory analysis, and following the explication of the four central categories, this chapter will highlight the answers to these questions. Under the four core categories are 13 subcategories that encapsulated the research findings. The categories are listed below in Table 2. The chapter concludes with an analysis of my perceptions as the researcher.

Table 2
Thai Student's Long-distance Relational Maintenance

1. The Contact
 - a. Initiator
 - b. Frequency
 - c. Duration
 - d. Calling schedule

 2. The Medium
 - a. Main channel
 - b. Alternative channels
 - i. Traditional channels
 - ii. CMC
 - c. Visits
 - d. Patterns of channel used
 - i. Networking
 - ii. Channel order

 3. The Talk
 - a. Topic selection
 - b. Disclosure
 - i. Selective disclosure
 - ii. Voice sensitivity
 - c. Supportiveness
 - i. Soliciting specific topic/Active listening
 - ii. Soliciting mundane topic/Passive listening

 4. The Motive
 - a. The emotion
 - i. Participants' emotions
 - ii. Participants' perception of parental emotions
 - b. The ritual
-

The Contact

The first category that emerged from interviewing Thai students who maintain long-distance relationships with parents is called “the contact.” This category includes four subcategories: initiator, frequency, duration, and calling schedule. The *contact* signifies the mediated communication between Thai students and their parent. To understand how Thai students maintain the LDR with parents, the researcher first looked at how the communication took place, how many times, how long the conversation is, and the pattern of day as well as time of the contact.

Initiator

The initiator is the person who played a vital role in maintaining the LDR. Without an initiator, there would have been no contact or interaction between Thai students and parents. The initiator is the party who started the contact either in a synchronous form (e.g., cell phone, Web cam) or asynchronous form (e.g., e-mail, postcard, card). The majority of Thai students reported that they had to initiate the contact with their parents due to an order from parents. The reasons for their role as initiator are that it is their responsibility as a child, and the cost of the phone cards in the United States is cheaper than in Thailand. In the following example, a Thai student, Por (all participant names have been changed to protect confidentiality), explained who routinely initiated the contact and how the initiator role was changed due to her mother’s demand.

Interviewer: So normally who initiated the contact?

Por: You know, now it is like my responsibility to call her [mother] but at first she called me more often, almost every day. But now she does not call that often.

Interviewer: Can you tell me why?

Por: Yeah, now I call her more, I called her before she called me, at least once a week. She told me I should call her because it is cheaper here. (D10: 7-13)

Por discussed how the party who normally initiated the contact changed over time due to the cost of telephone calls and her feeling that it was her responsibility as a daughter to call her parents on a regular basis. Unlike Por whose parents were initiators at first, some Thai students have negotiated with their parents about who will initiate the contact. As

Warm explained:

Warm: Normally I will contact them [parents] every time... when I'm not busy.

Because sometimes I'm not home; sometimes I'm in my office...you know.

Interviewer: Did you tell them [that you will initiate the contact]?

Warm: Yeah I told them...because sometimes I'm busy and then they called me and I'm not available to talk. You know... it's not convenient for me. So I prefer to contact them. And by the way, it is cheaper too. (D9: 18-20)

Warm had set the rule with his parents that he will initiate contact because it was inconvenient for him to answer calls while he was busy. Another Thai student named Pum described that it was her mother who usually initiated the call and this process had been negotiated since she first came to Denver.

Interviewer: so did you call your parent once in every two weeks?

Pum: Actually, I talked to them [parents] once in every two week but I never called them. They usually called me.

Interviewer: How about when you just came here?

Pum: It was the same. They called me anyway. I rarely called them.

Interviewer: why?

Pum: I barely call them because the phone card is such a hassle. It was hard to use. You need a pin number then you got disconnected. I don't want to make a call. So it almost seem like it is my mom's responsibility to call me. (D2: 1-2)

As Warm and Pum described how they negotiated with parents, the party that initiates the contact can be unidirectional. For Warm, it was the child who normally initiated the interaction whereas Pum's parents were the initiator.

The last group of Thai students reported that there was no definitive rule of who would initiate contact. Typically, it was Thai students who would make a contact especially those who were newly arrived in Denver. Thai students explained that they were lonely and needed someone to talk to during their adjustment period, and they had more free time to make contact with their parents. On the other hand, parents usually initiated the contact more often when their child broke the calling schedule. Tae explained, “Normally we [my mother and I] both initiate the contact, but lately I have to study hard so I did not call them every week” (D11: 20-21). Tae described that there were no family rules or agreements regarding who should initiate the call; mostly, initiation depended on which party was available to make contact.

For Thai students, the initiative process may be explicitly negotiated or implicitly agreed upon between parent-child dyad. Practically, this bidirectional or two-way initiation approach was deemed feasible to maintain LDRs in the early period of separation. The early period of separation was an adjustment period for both parent and child regarding the method of contact and the schedule for contact. In addition, parents initiated the contact when Thai students changed the frequency of contact. The next subcategory addressed how “frequency” has an impact on long-distance familial relationship management.

Frequency

Frequency signified the number of times a Thai student had a verbal conversation with parents via mediated communication. The researcher asked participants how many times they interacted with their parents over the phone within a two-week period. Fifteen

percent of the Thai students reported that they have interaction with parents more than 10 times within two-week period. Thirty four percent conversed with parents four to six times. Another group of participant, 34%, stated that they talked to parents once a week. Participants who interacted with parents the least, or approximately one or two times a month, represented 16% of the sample. Two particular groups reported a high frequency of contact: Thai Master's students who had recently moved to Denver and those who studied English language courses. Usually, these participants contacted their parents at least once a week. However, the frequency of contact could increase to two to three times per week when they had significant issues such as academic concerns, financial problems, relocating, shopping, or future visits.

Typically, the frequency of contact was high during the adjustment period, (approximately the first six months), then declined and escalated again during the last few months before returning to Thailand. For example, many Thai students who had recently finished their Master's degree and prepared to go back to Thailand described changes in the frequency of contact in maintaining the LDR. A participant named Tee described, "When I first came here [Denver], I called my parents quite often. But after a while there was an intermission. I didn't call [that often]. Then before I graduated, I have more things to talk [about]" (D5: 163-165). The high frequency of interaction during the adjustment period was due to the fact that both participants and parents mutually initiated the contact. For example, Thai students called their parents more often when they were excited to share an experience in the foreign land. Parents, at the same time, were concerned about their child's adaptation to the new environment; therefore the frequency

was high during the adjustment period. Some participants also reported that during the first quarter or semester, they had more free time to contact their parent because their classes were introductory and not advanced classes. Moreover, their circle of friends was still small and participants consequently reached out to their parents for companionship.

On the other hand, a number of factors limited the frequency of contact between parents and the participants. Those limitations included an increase of activities for Thai students such as a heavy class load, part-time job, and newly-made friends. Ing, who usually called her mom around 9:00 to 10:00 p.m., explained what factor constrained interaction frequency with her mom. “Normally I will call my mom. But sometimes, I’m tired from work, you know. For example, on Friday and Saturday I got out from work around ten to eleven at night. I was so exhausted. So I did not call [mom]” (D13: 96-97). Similarly, Bank described the reason why the frequency of contact and the initiation of contact changed over time.

Bank: The first couple months, I will call them very often and that is why they didn’t call me. But lately I haven’t called them that much so they called me more.

Interviewer: What happen during the first two months?

Bank: At first, I didn’t know anybody so I didn’t know who to talk to, so I called home. Plus, I was [living] by myself at first. (D21: 25-31)

During an adjustment period, Bank called his parents more often because he had not yet settled into a routine in his new environment and had limited new friends to interact with. But soon, as his life began to settle in the United State, due to the increase in a circle of new friends and part-time job, contact with his family began to lessen.

Some participants also added that the frequency of contact diminished when there were no updates of information to report or discuss and also when Thai students’ lives

become settled in their new home. The following excerpt illustrated this phenomenon. Jun explained, “I call them [parents] less because I have no problem. If I have any issue, I call them more often. They kinda know that I’m quite settled down here. I was doing my stuff” (D1: 72-74). Although there are some factors that lessened the amount of contact as Jun has illustrated, there were issues that revitalized the amount of contact. After the recession of contact, Thai students stated that financial issues heightened the frequency of contact and also affected the initiating party. These financial issues included moving to a new apartment, buying/ selling a car, applying for a part-time job, changing academic program, and buying gifts for family members.

In summary, Thai students who had high frequency of contact in the distal relationship were Master’s students who had recently moved to Denver and those who studied English language courses. Almost all participants reported that their frequency of contact was high during the adjustment period, then declined, and then escalated again during the last few months before returning to Thailand. Factors that influenced the number of contacts were length of time participants lived in the U.S., the initiating parties, topics of conversation, parents’ and child’s schedules, and the number of friends participants had.

Duration

Duration refers to the length of time Thai students interacted with parents via phone conversation and other synchronous means such as Web cam (e.g., Skype, MSN voice chat). The length of time Thai students conversed with parents was influenced by the topic of conversation, frequency of contact, reason for contact, availability of partner

in conversation, and who is engaging in the conversation (e.g., mother, father, siblings). The length of time participants interacted with parents lasted from 5-10 minutes to 1-2 hours.

The majority of participants spent more time conversing with their mother than their father due to the fact that discussions with their fathers tended to be more serious than those with their mothers. For example, Nuch described why she did not engage in a long conversation with her father: “I did not talk much with my father. He would talk about heavy stuff, serious stuff. He is very determined, calm, and composed. I’m not close to him. So the conversation is like business-oriented” (C11: 310-312). Kai explained that his duration of conversation was influenced by the topic of conversation.

As Kai stated:

Interviewer: How long do you usually talk to your parents?

Kai: It depends on the case, average around 15 minutes, sometimes only 5 minutes, sometimes it is very long [duration]. It all depends.

Interviewer: Depends on what?

Kai: Depends on the topic. If there is nothing to say then it [conversation] is short, or if they are not available to talk. (D6: 55-60)

Kai explained that the topic of conversation and the availability of his parents affected the duration of conversation with his parents. Similarly, a Thai student named Oil described the length of time she talked to her mother over the phone.

Interviewer: Normally, how long do you talk to your mom?

Oil: It depends. If my mom is not available to talk then I call her later. But if she is not busy then it took quite long.

Interviewer: How long?

Oil: Actually, I never time it how long I was on the phone with mom but if we have a lot of stuff to talk then it’s going to be more than half an hour but not every time only when we are both available. Usually, I talked to her 10 to 15 minutes. I prefer to contact her more frequently. (D16: 463-470)

Oil discussed how her schedule and her mother's schedule often did not coincide with one another, which hindered the duration of their conversations. To solve this, Thai students have specific date and time to contact parents.

Calling Schedule

Since United States is 13 hours behind Thailand, the opportunity for Thai students and their parents to engage in conversation was bound by the large time difference. For example, if Thai students wanted to contact their parents, they started calling from 7:00 p.m. onward because it was 8:00 a.m. or later the next day in Thailand. Another time slot for Thai students to call their parent is the morning in United States, because, for example, 7:00 a.m. is equivalent to 8:00 p.m. in Thailand.

Some Thai students had a specific date and/or time to call their parents or they had a fixed calling schedule. Eighteen percent of the participants had a definite day and time to make contact. Five percent of the participants called their parents every Friday and Saturday after 8:00 p.m., because it was a weekend morning in Thailand. The largest group of Thai students, 39.5% did not have a definite day to call parents but they usually called them between 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Other participants, thirty six percent reported that their calling schedule was impulsive, which means they have no particular day or time to contact parents.

Thai students who had a fixed calling schedule claimed that this method helped reduce parents' anxiety. The calling schedule was based on negotiations between student and parent. The fixed calling schedule was actually based on mutual availability of both

parties. Ton described why he contacted his parents every Saturday morning (U.S. time).

The following excerpt illustrated Ton's calling schedule:

Interviewer: So you said that it is your responsibility to call them?

Ton: Yeah, like once a week I have to call...like on Saturday morning (U.S. time). You know, they are busy during the day time. At first, I used to call (during a day time). We only talked for 5-10 minutes. If it was an office hour, I have to hang up. During their night time I can talk like 10 minutes...or like two hours per week. (C5: 77-82)

According to Ton's experience, he had learned that a certain date and time enabled him to converse with parents unreservedly.

A fixed calling schedule also helped participants to reach both parents simultaneously. As Ning described, "Yeah I kinda know the time (to call) so they can receive my call while both of them are together and I can talk to both of them" (D22: 22-23). On the other hand, a fixed calling schedule can cause anxiety to both parties. This happened when participants ran out of calling card minutes, the calling card system was down, students forgot to contact their parents, or parents did not pick up the phone, just to name a few. Jack stated, "Sometimes my cell phone has no battery so I have to borrow my friend's cell phone because I told my parents that I will call" (C4: 146-147).

It was interesting to note that most Thai students who had no specific day and time to call their parents were those who were in the adjustment period. These groups of students had more free time to call parents while attempting to adjust to their new environment, as well as adapting to time zone differences and parents' schedules. Some participants described that they did not have a fixed calling schedule because one of their parents is not working (e.g., housewife, retired) and can be reached any time of the day. For example, Ja explained that she always called her parents, especially her mother, when

she was depressed. Ja said, “Most of the time I will call my mom because she is a housewife. She had more time to talk to me. I knew that if I called her she will always available to talk for sure” (C6: 76-79).

In summary, the contact category illustrated the communicative behaviors of partners in LDR maintenance in terms of initiator, calling schedule, calling duration, and frequency. This category discussed factors that affect the process and the action of maintaining LDRs. For instance, the length of time Thai students lived in the U.S. had an impact on the initiator, frequency, duration, and calling schedule. However, the length of time Thai students lived in the U.S. also influenced the negotiated communication rules among Thai student-parent dyads through their routine distal interaction. The next section will discuss another key factor that plays a vital role in LDR maintenance, the mediated channel of communication.

The Medium

Despite the fact that personal relationships are maintained by both face-to-face and mediated communication (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993), particularly in LDRs, an increase in distance decreased the opportunity for face-to-face contact between Thai students and their parents. In other words, LDRs were defined by the comparative inability to interact face-to-face as compared to GCRs. To remain in touch within the family, traditional and advanced mediated channels played an important role in maintaining Thai student-parent relationships. The traditional mediated channels included letters, postcards, greeting cards, and diaries. The advanced mediated channels incorporated cell phones, video chats, e-mails, and chat rooms. This study found that

Thai students chose cell phones as a main channel whereas other means such as e-mail, postcards, and MSN messenger were used infrequently.

Main Channel

It is interesting to note the 92% of the respondents used cell phones to contact their parents, and 84% of respondents' parents used cell phones to contact the respondents. To contact parents through cell phones, Thai students have to call a network access number, enter their personal identification number (PIN), and then enter their parents' cell phone or home phone number. Most calling cards were purchased via an online website and the rates were around 1 to 5 cents per minute. Compared to the telephone rates in Thailand, which cost around 15 to 20 cents per minute, calling card rates in the United States were considerably cheaper.

Most participants preferred to contact their parents with a cell phone rather than other channels of communication due to the fact that this means was affordable, convenient, instantaneous, and can convey emotion via the aural mode. Ton, who had just graduated with his Master's degree stated, "I think cell phones help a lot in keeping connection. Probably, it was part of our life now" (C5: 253-254). The majority of the participants and their parents would rather employ synchronous forms of communication than asynchronous channels such as cards, postcards, letters, and e-mail to maintain their long-distance relationship. The synchronous channels available for parents were either cell phone/telephone conversation or other CMC such as web cameras, voice chats, and chat rooms. However, 42% of the parents were computer illiterate therefore; the cell

phone was widely accepted compared to other channels. For example, Ple described why she and her parents chose the cell phone as a main channel of communication.

Interviewer: Do you know why they always used cell phone to contact you?

Ple: I think cell phone was the most convenient way to contact. I had already saved my number in their cell phone. If they want to contact me, they just press a button, no need to dial zero, zero, or something. It was too [much of a] hassle for them. (C1: 6-9)

Interviewer: Why do you use cell phone to contact them?

Ple: It was the easiest way to contact them and you can hear their voice as well. You know, when you hear their voice. You knew right away whether they are O.K. or not. And you can make a contact anytime you want. (C1: 44-48)

Even though cell phones were the quickest and easiest way to maintain LDRs compared to other CMC channels, Ple believed that programming her cell phone number into her parents' cell phones increased opportunities to stay in touch and at the same time reduced the "hassle for them."

Alternative Channels

In addition to cell phones, other alternative channels of long-distance communication between parents and participants included traditional channels such as occasional cards or holiday greeting cards (e.g., Father's/Mother's Day, birthdays, Valentine's Day, etc.), postcards, diaries, and letters. Other CMC channels involved e-mail, electronic cards, MSN/Yahoo messenger, and picture hosting websites to post pictures (e.g., www.hi5.com, www.Facebook.com, www.multiply.com). Some Thai students and their parents maintained their LDR through sending and receiving items such as vitamins, textbooks, and gifts. Other participants stayed in touch with parents through family networks by talking with siblings, other relatives, and family friends.

Traditional channels. Within traditional mean of communication, diaries and letters are the least employed by Thai students to maintain the LDR. Only two respondents (5%) reported sending diaries to family to share their daily activities when they had more free time during their adjustment period. For example, Cake described that when she first came to Denver she sent diaries to her parents.

Interviewer: Have you ever written a letter to your parents?

Cake: It was not really a letter, but a diary. It was a diary, explaining my daily activities, my feelings. It was similar to a traditional personal diary, but I shared it with parents. You see?

Interviewer: For what occasion?

Cake: No special occasion, I just wanted to share with them. I wrote it every day for a month, and then I sent it [through postal service] to them.

Interviewer: What were their reactions?

Cake: Usually, my mom read it first then she told my dad. They never asked me to write it. I just wanted to surprise them. They cried when they received my diary. (C7: 62-71)

Instead of writing a traditional letter, Cake shared her routine activities through a personal diary with her parents. This method of communication provided an insight into child's life in Denver. Through her diaries parents can sympathize with their daughter's feelings. Unfortunately, Cake reported that she could not maintain this mediated communication channel because of her class load and other daily activities.

One respondent stated she received four to five letters from her mother when she first came to Denver. Unlike other alternative channels of communication, which were used sporadically during the course of the LDR, this channel was used only a few times, usually during the early separation. Perhaps this written channel was aimed at supporting family members' emotional well-being, particularly during the first phase of separation.

Postcards were another medium used by Thai students. Cards/holiday greeting cards and postcards are similar media that differ in function. Occasional cards and electronic cards were used in order to maintain family rituals or ceremonies during a special occasion, for instance Father's/Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and New Years. This channel was discussed in more details in the ritual section under "the motive" category. Conversely, participants sent postcards when they traveled to other cities or states as a sentimental reminder and a collectible item.

Por explained, "It is a postcard with a picture of nice scenery...I only sent it when I travel.

Interviewer: Why do you sent it?

Por: My family collected postcards. Both my mom and I love to collect postcards" (D10: 173-175).

In fact, whenever participants sent any occasional cards or postcards, this process was always accompanied with phone contact to ensure the success of delivery. It is interesting to note that only few participants received an occasional card but not holiday greeting card from parents. On the other hand, some parents who were familiar with advanced technology might use non-traditional channels (i.e., CMC) to contact their child during a special occasion.

Aside from sending and receiving cards, postcards, and letters between parents and Thai students, sending other items such as vitamins, medicine, books, dry food and gifts can be identified as a means for parent-child LDR maintenance. Not all items were treated equally since the cost of sending items through the postal service was expensive, so items that were weighty, bulky, and not urgent would be tactfully sent through

relatives and friends. Others items that needed to be received immediately (e.g., birthday present, antibiotic medicine) were inevitably delivered directly to the student.

Not many participants requested items from parents because such requests could be misinterpreted as a sign of immaturity and incapability of adapting to the new environment. Conversely, to show concern and affection, Thai students asked parents and siblings regarding items from the U.S. to be bought and sent to family members. Hug explained the process of sending, receiving, requesting, and soliciting item:

Hug: Regularly, I always sent something to my mom, some kind of vitamin.

Interviewer: Did she say which vitamin?

Hug: Not really. At first I wanted her to try this vitamin. The results impressed her. Now she requested me to send it more.

Interviewer: How about father?

Hug: Recently, I just sent a wristwatch and some vitamins for my dad through my girlfriend during her visit to Thailand.

Interviewer: Have they ever sent any items to you?

Hug: Yes. They sent me medicine, a Chinese medicine. This one they don't sell in America. My mom sent it to me...this one...a white bottle. Sometimes, I forgot to tell her that medicine was running low. She will always ask me do I need more medicine. (D25: 99-110)

Hug showed the white bottle of his Chinese medicine or Chinese supplement to the researcher as if it was full of love and care which cannot be purchased anywhere in the United States. Similarly, Tai elucidated how she was pleased when her parents sent her a good luck charm made of a piece of cloth imprinted with the ancient Chinese pictographs. Tai stated, "During a Chinese New Year my parents would go to a Chinese temple to worship Chinese God. They sent me a lucky charm as a protection and for my safety" (C8: 148-149). As with other items, material items like Tai's Chinese lucky charms can and do serve as an emotional support for long-distance relationship maintenance.

CMC. Computer-mediated communication channels included: e-mail, MSN/yahoo messenger, Web camera, and websites to post pictures. Forty two percent of the participants described both their mother and father as “low-tech” or computer illiterate. Therefore, with computer illiterate parents, CMC channels were typically used via networking with others (e.g., siblings, relative) who were familiar with the Internet technology. For example, the computer illiterate parents might ask their other children or relatives to contact the distal child via CMC. The following excerpt illustrated how Kai used CMC to maintain the LDR through networking.

Interviewer: Have your parents ever used Internet?

Kai: No...never. They were born in a different generation. I MSN my older sister or e-mail her. Usually, I called my home phone [to contact my parents] if no one answered, I would call my dad’s cell phone.

Interviewer: So you never used Internet to contact your parents?

Kai: Hmm...but I do have Multiply [a picture hosting website]. I posted my picture on the Multiply web site to let them know what my apartment looked like and something like that. Sometimes I up [load] my video clips. My [older] sister was the one who showed my pictures and video clips to my parents and other family members. (D6:193-202)

From the above quote, home phone and cell phone were the most direct channels to reach computer illiterate parents while other advanced CMC channels were indirectly used to maintain LDR with parents through networking. Fifty-eight percent reported at least one parent knows how to use a computer and the Internet. Despite the fact that more than half of participants’ parents knew how to use computer, only a few parents used this advanced technology as a key channel to maintain long-distance familial relationships comparing to cell phones.

Thai students stated that e-mail was employed to exchange detailed information or documents, such as the address of a new apartment, a new cell phone number,

computer model number, transcripts from University in Thailand, and letters of recommendation from a previous job. Sometimes, e-mails were used to share pictures with all family members. As an asynchronous and non-invasive form of communication, computer-literate parents strategically used this channel to solicit contact when participants broke the calling schedule. Nuch described how her mother wrote a lengthy e-mail resembling a traditional letter to convey emotional feelings about motherhood. As Nuch stated, “It was very formal and serious...those emotional messages. She wrote it very long like a series of lectures. Especially at night when she cannot sleep, she would write me an e-mail, something...very touching” (C11: 647-653).

Even though Thai students used MSN/yahoo messenger, Web camera, and websites to post pictures as alternative channels to maintain their LDR with their parents, these means of communication were often used through networking as opposed to directly with parents. When these channels were used with parents, they tended to be used to convey formal information or to establish contact if the child had broken the call schedule.

Visits

It was not unusual for separated families to discuss and plan for a future visit when the chance to interact face-to-face with significant other family members was restricted by remoteness. There are two types of visits: participants visited parents in Thailand and parents visited participants in Denver. Many parents attempted to arrange the visit during the participant’s vacation or graduation, but various factors sometimes hindered this decision. Due to parents’ professional responsibilities, health, and financial

concerns, not all parents could guarantee that they could come to Denver. A Thai student named Pum explained a disagreement between her parents regarding the visit.

Pum: Yeah we have been talking about it. Whether I should go back to visit them or they will come to see me.

Interviewer: So what was the verdict?

Pum: My mom wanted to visit me during my graduation but my dad didn't want to come. He said he dislikes to sit on a long flight. He said he was too old and too tired. He has been around and he didn't like it. My mom wants to come to Denver. Mom...she was more sensitive. She wanted to see it herself. Probably, I don't think both of them will come. (D2: 527-534)

Although the cost of visiting participants in Denver might exceed the benefits, participants shared that they wanted parents to experience their life in a foreign land so parents would not be overly worried about their well-being. Fee, whose father had passed away, shared with the researcher some difficulties regarding her mother visiting her in Denver.

Fee: My mom and my brother were here for a month. It was good because we took a trip to many places. It was a little tough. I have to manage class schedule and part-time job while they are here. I have to go to class and then travel with them... I have to study for the class as well. But I do enjoy traveling anyway.

Interviewer: What was the reason to visit you?

Fee: I asked them many times to take a vacation here [in Denver]. Finally, she decided to come. Plus we have relatives in Denver. So whenever, I have class or go to work they will stay with my relatives. That helped a lot, Otherwise I couldn't even breathe. (D4: 425-433)

According to participants' responses, visiting parents in Thailand during summer vacation was considered beneficial to both parties. Visiting parents in Thailand allowed students to visit other family members and friends. Some participants mentioned Thai food as an added benefit for this infrequent vacation. Jub described how she felt when she visited her parents last year.

Jub: They wanted me to go back [to Thailand]. They were requesting because they missed me.

Interviewer: How was it?

Jub: During May, I was there for a month and a half. I was happy and gluttonous. (D14: 127-130)

Perhaps a visitation helped Thai students strengthen the family bond, which enabled them to maintain long-distance familial relationship during the separation period.

Patterns of Channel Use

In addition to the specific channels participants used to contact their parents, they used these channels in particular ways. Specifically, participants sometimes used networking with other family members in order to indirectly contact their parents, and they established the order of channels most likely to meet with success in reaching their parents.

Networking. To maintain LDRs, Thai students not only used cell phones, other CMC, and traditional channels (e.g., letters, post cards, cards) to stay in touch with parents, but they also kept the connection through siblings and relatives. Networking is the process of maintaining the parent-child relationship through parties involved in the familial circle. In the following excerpt, Fai claimed that he used networking to maintain his LDR with his parents due to the discordance of the parent-child schedule.

Fai: Normally, I will contact my aunt. She lived in the same household with my parents. Actually, she is not married and already retired, so she will always be at home. Besides, my parents usually were at work when I called anyway.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about your aunt?

Fai: Yeah. My aunt will share [my information/updates] with my mom. Sometimes, I will talk with mom. For dad, he went to bed early and woke up early. So I cannot catch up with him. It was a big difference in our [my dad's and my] schedule. And when my aunt and mom shared my story with him, he will keep on nagging. But he knew. They [aunt and mom] always shared with him. (C13: 109-117)

As shown in Fai's excerpt, participants can maintain the LDR with their parents without directly engaging in long-distance interaction with parents, but they can keep their parents updated on their daily activities through third parties in the family circle such as an aunt, uncle, or sibling.

A Ph.D. candidate named Nick who has been in Denver for 9 years explained how he relied on his networking to maintain his long-distance relationship with his parents.

Nick: I always talked to my sister in Texas. She always called my parents every week. If something happened, like...my parents were sick. I'll learn it from my sister. Or sometimes, we shared about what is going on in our family.
(C10: 452-454)

Similar to Fai, Nick shared information with his network to maintain the LDR with his parents in Thailand. Participants not only use networking solely to maintain LDR but they also use "channel order" to contact parents when their ability to reach a specific parent was restricted by an unforeseen circumstance.

Channel order. Unlike networking, which was the process of keeping contact through third parties such as siblings and relatives without directly contacting parents, channel order referred to the method of using different means of communication, including networking, to establish a connection with a target parent. Participants used a general plan that dictated the sequence of channels they would attempt to use in contacting their parents. Usually, participants used channel order when they could not reach a specific parent. For example, Jub stated, "Mainly, I'll call dad's cell phone. If there is no signal, I will call home phone. If nobody answers the phone then I called my mom's cell phone. You know, it was like a chain" (D14: 49-51).

Participants claimed that they used channel order when they had some urgent issue to share with a specific parent, for instance, on a ceremonial day (e.g., Father's/Mother's Day, birthday), but could not reach the target parent. Some participants used channel order when they were anxious about their parents' well-being and wanted to contact them directly. Other Thai students who had a fixed calling schedule reported that channel order helped reduce parents' anxiety. Based on a rough idea of her parents' daily schedule, Ing described, on a weekend she would dial her home phone, and if no one answered the phone, then she called her mother's cell phone. The following excerpt illustrated how participants incorporated networking into the channel order:

Interviewer: What if she [mother] did not answer your call?

Ing: If I cannot contact her, I call my aunt instead. My aunt's house was not too far from mine. Yeah, I called my aunt and told her to check out my mom. Why didn't she answer my call?

Interviewer: Then can you reach your mom?

Ing: Of course, my aunt walked to my house and yell, "Your daughter called, why don't you answer the phone." She told my aunt, "Sorry...I didn't hear it."

(D13: 140-145)

Even though the majority of the participants used the cell phone as a main channel of communication, opportunities to reach a specific parent were not guaranteed. Channel order increased their chances of communicating with one or both parents. For example, the process of sending a birthday's card or e-mail was accompanied by a follow up call. Therefore, participants used channel order with multiple mediated channels including networking to ensure successful long-distance interaction with parents.

In summary, 92% of participants used cell phones to contact their parents because few participants had both a home phone and a cell phone, whereas 84% of parents who

had both cell phone and home phone preferred cell phones as a main channel of communication to contact participants. This was due to the fact that the availability and familiarity of mediated channels played an important role in the LDR between Thai students and their parents. Still the percentage of cell phone usage was higher than other mediated communication channels such as other traditional channels and CMC channels. For example, 33% of the participants used e-mail, 25% used MSN/Yahoo messenger, 18% used occasional cards, 10% used post cards, 6% used picture hosting websites, 5% used web cam, and 1.6% used diaries and letters as alternative channels to maintain LDR. Participants not only employed single mediated communication channels to contact parents but also used multiple channels to maintain the LDR. Apart from cell phone contact, the LDR can be maintained through other mediated channels such as postal mail used to send letters, cards, books, vitamins, and gifts. Participants also used these channels to network with other family members in order to communicate indirectly with their parents, and they established sequences of channels to be used to attempt direct contact with their parents. In addition, participants also received emotional support through verbal and nonverbal interaction with parents during visits. The next section discusses the process of maintaining the LDR through the talk.

The Talk

Since the majority of Thai students interacted with parents through a synchronous form of communication (e.g. cell phone, MSN messenger, Skype's web cam), this section focuses on the synchronous verbal and nonverbal exchange between Thai students and

their parents. This category is comprised of three subcategories: topic selection, disclosure, and supportiveness.

Topic Selection

When participants conversed with parents, not all topics were strategically planned and customized to accomplish the interactional or familial relational goal, if there is any goal. In general, the topic of conversation was distinctively different between mother-child and father-child dyads. Thai students automatically adapted the topic of conversation according to the target parent. Topic selection entailed the subject matter of the conversation between parents and child. For example, Pui explained the differences between topics of conversation with her mother and father.

Pui: I shared different topics with mom and dad. I talked about personal stuff and general topics with mom. But with dad, he talked about more serious topics. He has been around, you know? And he is a business man. My mom is just an ordinary housewife. We only talked about family well-being, the routines. Dad was like, buying a car, extending the contract, yes or no type of guy. I consulted him about decision-making topics, and more light topics with mom.
(D20: 209-215)

As Pui explained, many Thai students discussed “general topics” such as daily activities, family well-being, and relational topics with mother. “Serious topics” such as decision-making, politics, and other instrumental topics were usually shared with father. Kai described how he had different conversations with his mother and with his father. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

Interviewer: Is there any differences in the topics of conversation between mom and dad?
Kai: Not really. But if I already told mom about one thing, I will share another with dad. Eventually, they’ll talk about my things anyway.
Interviewer: So which topic you usually talk to mom?

Kai: As I remember cooking...and...Yeah! Money... transferring of money. She was the one who manage the finance. For dad, we talked about our family well-being and such. (D6: 114-121)

Unlike other participants, Kai's topic of conversation with his mother included transferring of money, which is a "serious" or instrumental topic. Conversely, he shared a relational topic with his father, the well-being of the family. In general, participants reported a higher frequency and longer duration of conversation with the mother than the father, due to the mother's role as a relationship mediator and emotional supporter. Therefore, participants shared more topical variation with mother than father. Various topics shared in the participant-mother dyad focused on the present time: daily activities, food, weather, friends, shopping, and family members'/relatives' well-being. Conversely, instrumental topic, such as academic status, part-time job, politics, health, and some problem-solving topics were the most discussed in the participant-father dyad. In conclusion, participants habitually shared topics related to personal and familial relationships with mother while selecting to discuss instrumental topics of conversation with father.

Participants also described the factors that had an impact on the number of topics they disclosed to parents. First, participants tended to withhold topics that intensified parents' anxiety or agitated their emotions. This factor will be discussed in the next category called "disclosure." Second, some topics that had never been discussed before or topics that have never been updated were soon forgotten, and then vanished. Third, participants were willing to share their experience with parents who have a background in the topic being discussed, for example, talking about a food recipe with mother who

knew how to cook or discussing the school system with father who graduated from a university in the U.S. The following excerpt illustrated factors that influenced the topic of conversation:

Pong: I think we should know what's going on [with parents]. Keep updating. That can improve the relationship.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Pong: I mean, you should know how they are doing and stuff. Some serious... topics like relatives. So you have something to talk about. Otherwise, you have nothing to say.

Interviewer: Why, nothing to say?

Pong: For example, if your parents have never been here, no background about what's like to be here, then you try to share with them. They don't understand. They just don't get it. I think it is a gap here. I think.

(D17: 329-340)

This participant expressed his concern regarding the significance of sharing daily activities with parent or to “keep updating” information about family well-being, otherwise the number of possible topics of conversation will be reduced. Moreover, this participant felt that the disclosure topic and the details should accommodate parental background. The next category discussed is the process of disclosing and how it related to topic selection category.

Disclosure

Basically, disclosure refers to “the talk,” the verbal exchange between Thai students and parents to strengthen their rapport. Self-disclosure was one of many fundamental behaviors in maintaining LDRs. This process involved sharing mutual experiences from the past, talking about day-to-day activities, and planning for future interaction. Generally, students shared topics relating to the past, present and the future in familial relationships, Thai students described that often they disclosed their day-to-day

activities with parents as a way to update them on their well-being. Due to the convenience of cell phone usage, the majority of the parent-child dyads used this particular channel to disclose information to one another. As a result, usage of the written channel (e.g., postcard, greeting card, MSN messenger, letter, and diary) was used less often, as was discussed earlier in “the medium” section. In general, the main goal of using the written channel among family members was to transfer detailed information (e.g., bank account number, documents, address in Denver) and as a reminder to prompt cell phone interactions.

The disclosing behavior of Thai students not only was perceived as helping to relieve parents’ anxiety, but also alleviated participants’ stress and loneliness. Por explained that she called her mom to find a sympathetic ear. As she explained, “Sometimes I spent a long time talking to my mom about places, friends, school, and part-time job. Typically, I called her to whine about my job. It was tough. I told her about how exhausted I am” (D10: 82-83). In the following quote, Por described how she felt after disclosing her stress from work with mom:

Por: Actually, I didn’t really consult my mom. It was more like to inform her. A whining and a complaining call. I told her that I don’t know how to prepare for the next exam...those kind of things.

Interviewer: How did she react?

Por: She gave me a big emotional support, listening to my whining. I’m happy after whining. At least, someone was always there and listens to me.

(D10: 297-301)

Por stated that the reason she disclosed to her mother was meant to reducing her stress, to inform mother but not to consult her. As shown in Por’s example, this study found that there is a fine line between the “informing” and “consulting,” depending on purpose of

disclosing and who the target audience was. For example, even though participants may share the same topic such as buying a new car with both mother and father, participants described that the same piece of information was aimed at informing mother in order to keep her updated, but consulting father to solicit his knowledge. Therefore, the informing behavior involves sharing the information with the parent who might not have knowledge regarding the topic being discussed. Conversely, consulting was the process of soliciting opinions, suggestions, and advice from the parent who had knowledge about the specific issue.

Selective disclosure. The data from the interviews revealed that no participant described an unconditional openness absent of selection of what was to be disclosed. Unlike topic selection, which focused on the type of topic and the target parents, selective disclosure dealt with the degree of revelation of certain topics. Selective disclosure was participants' method of controlling the discussion of topics that would amplify parents' anxiety and distress. In addition, this method helped participants maintain their boundary of privacy. Fee told the researcher that she normally shared almost all issues with her mother except topics that cause her mother anxiety. As she stated, "I never shared a topic that will upset my mom. It was better that way if she never knew it" (D4: 124-125).

Even though the technique of filtering the topic of conversation may seem to benefit both parties, some participants reported a drawback from selective disclosure. In the following excerpt, Yot explained how selective disclosure affected his feeling of closeness with parents.

Yot: I think something is changing a little bit, because you didn't see your parent every day. It was a weird feeling. I don't know how to explain it.

Interviewer: You mean closeness?

Yot: I felt a little detached. Sometimes I'm afraid to talk to them about anything. Like...before I talk, I have to think carefully because they already worry about me. I felt bad when I said something that worries them. They don't know what was going on here. So I have to be more careful about the topic I shared. This is tiring because I used to tell them almost everything. (C9: 358-366)

The statement "this is tiring" from Yot had an impact on other categories as well, for example, it reduced frequency, calling duration, and topic variation. The frequency of contact from participants decreased when topics of conversation could cause parental anxiety or would be limited to mundane information. Jack told the researcher that he always had to "think about what to say" before engaging in distal parent-child interaction. Jack added, "I don't want them to worry about me, like...because of the distance. They would say 'if it is troublesome, just come home son.' But it wasn't that bad, you know. They thought that I was still a little child" (C4: 190-193).

Similarly, other participants explained that they did not call their parents as often as before and that talking time (i.e., calling duration) shrank because they ran out of new topics of conversation after they settled down in the new environment. However, another form of selective disclosure involved disclosure of only the most important part of the issue, because parents have no information and background about the disclosed topic. Nuch told the researcher that there was no point to tell per parents the whole story starting from the beginning because "it was going to be a long story" (C11: 465-466).

Voice sensitivity. Voice sensitivity is a nonverbal aspect of LDR maintenance that conveys feeling through aural expression (i.e., encoding) and the ability to detect another party's emotional states (i.e., decoding). Even though not all participant-parent dyads said, "I love you," "I'm worrying about you," or "I miss you," most Thai students stated

that these hidden messages could be detected in the tone of voice from parents. One Thai student, Can, explained, “After we’ve been talking for a while, and then mom will try to end the conversation. It seems like they know that I’m fine, nothing to worry about” (C7: 305-306). Interestingly, the process of encoding and decoding of verbal expression between parents and participant was capable of uncovering an untouched topic, that is, topics that parent-child dyads had never discussed while they were geographically close. The following example illustrated how voice sensitivity operated in long-distance relationship:

Ja: I always shared with parents all topics, every time. They always know whenever I’m happy. Like when I can do well in my exam. They know because my voice sounds happy.

Interviewer: Any more examples?

Ja: I think parents are good at sensing my tone of voice because they’ve been around, you know. Plus I am their daughter. No matter what I lie about to them, they can detect it, every time. (C6: 156-160)

This participant believed that her parents were good at decoding her emotional state but overlooked the fact that she was unintentionally encoding her ecstatic feelings through her aural expression. To maintain the LDR, Thai students not only select the right topic to disclose while sensitized to the verbal and nonverbal exchange, but they also used supportiveness to aid the mediated interaction.

Supportiveness

This behavior consists of such actions as soliciting conversation and active/passive listening. Soliciting conversation involved asking parents about their specific problems or asking them about mundane topics such as the weather, food, and relatives to smooth out the flow of conversation. Passive listening occurred when the

receiver of the message had little motivation and did not listen carefully, such as when Thai students were being courteous to parental complaints. Active listening involved receiving aural messages carefully with the purpose of gaining information, solving problems, showing support, or understanding the other's feelings. Soliciting a specific, serious topic and active listening attempted to solve problems and to relieve stress. Conversely, asking about topics like the weather and passive listening aimed at smoothing out the flow of conversation and avoiding argument. This subcategory was similar to "disclosure," except that disclosure was the action and supportiveness was the response to the disclosure process. Thai students employed supportiveness when they learned that their parents had something to share or their voice lacked any emotion (e.g., voice sensitivity).

Soliciting specific topic/active listening. In practice, parents soliciting conversation with an unhappy child while actively listening to the problem can be interpreted as showing affection. In the following excerpt, Pui described how her mother provided such supportiveness.

Pui: Sometimes, I will let it out. And she will let me talk because she understands how I feel. She will let me talk and she will listen. From time to time, she interrupts me, and we both talk at the same time, she will let me finish it. She wants to hear my problem. I think because most of my brothers and sisters graduated from abroad, so she understands what it is like to be here.
(D20: 467-452)

Soliciting mundane topic/passive listening. Soliciting and engaging in a mundane conversation with passive listening represented attempts to smooth out the flow of communication and avoid an argument. This was the version of soliciting conversation most reported by Thai students. Asking about day-to-day activities was common practice

for long-distance relationship maintenance. On a regular basis when there is no urgency, Thai students called their parents “just to say hi” and “to update” the conversation from the last interaction. Jun explained to the researcher that he “Doesn’t like to share much details of his story.” He normally asked his parents “How was everything in Thailand?” because he was doing fine (D1: 50-52). Similarly, Ning described her routine conversation with parents.

Ning: My dad will ask me how I am doing and how about school. With mom we talk about miscellaneous things like my siblings and cousins, because I am kind of close to my cousins.

Interviewer: What do you mean by miscellaneous?

Ning: Like gossip, who is dating whom. We are just talking, you know. Let’s say... today she has something to tell, she will share it with me. And the next day I shared my story with her. It depends on who has the story to tell. (D22: 106-109)

In this example, chitchat between Thai students and parents can serve as long-distance relationship maintenance.

It was not uncommon that a mundane conversation between parents and Thai students altered passive listening to active listening. As one of the child’s responsibilities, Ple described that her parents used to call her in the middle of the night when she was already in bed, but she had to talk to them because “They are parents, you have to talk to them” (C1: 25). Ple added that voice sensitivity and parent’s disclosure can change passive listening to active listening.

Ple: When I talked to my dad... he was very sensitive guy. Especially, when he missed me, I can tell it from his trembling voice. And I’ll keep talking to him, sometime I cry with him.

Interviewer: How about mom?

Ple: For mom, she will tell me about her disturbance first, and then I will try to soothe her. Keep listening and talking to her. Back in Thai, I was not this close to her but when I’m here, we talk more and I love her more. (C1: 92-99)

From the above excerpt, Thai students and their parents were very perceptive to the other party's tone of voice when other nonverbal cues, such as gesture, body posture, and eye-contact were limited by the distal relationship.

Another form of passive listening occurred when participants were not "In the mood" to engage in conversation due to the lack of fresh stories to share, exhaustion from work, the untactful time of the contact (e.g., mom called on Sunday at 3:35 a.m.), and especially when parents were giving lengthy advice. In the following example, Fee explained why she avoided arguing with her mom.

Fee: My mom always had a long talk about how I managed my money but we are not really quarrelling like when I was in Thailand. Now I do really understand her. I just listen to her complaining without arguing. But face-to-face, I'll rebuke right away. Sometimes, I say sorry to her. Lately, I try not to disagree with her because we are so far apart. She was so worried about me. I just don't want to cause her more anxiety. So I try to listen... and listen submissively, although I was disturbed inside. (D4: 238-247)

As Fee explained, for face-to-face communication in a geographically-close relationship, engaging in a serious conversation with active listening may not be common for Thai students who are not "in the mood" to communicate. In a long-distance relationship, soliciting a mundane topic and passive listening can be interpreted as routine familial relationship maintenance.

This category of the talk illustrated how Thai students and their parents engaged in verbal and nonverbal interaction to maintain LDRs. By means of topic selection, disclosure, and supportiveness, these maintenance actions incorporated both strategic and routine behavior. For instance, participants strategically withheld topics that caused parents' anxiety and might routinely solicit mundane topics to smooth out the flow of

distal communication. The next section discusses the motive of the first three categories: the contact, the medium and the talk.

The Motive

There are quite a number of reasons why participants and their parents were engaging in mediated communication to maintain their LDR. Not all Thai students felt that they were obligated to contact their parents because there were no specific communication rules or family norms to uphold. Some participants believed that their long-distance familial relationship needed to be maintained by any means of mediated communication and/or occasionally face-to-face interaction. This category also includes Thai students' interpretation of parental emotion to illustrate the dynamic interplay of the Thai student-parent dyad's feeling towards LDR maintenance. In addition to the explicitly stated or implicitly felt responsibility described earlier in the section on the contact, the other major motives for maintaining the parent-child LDR were emotion and ritual.

The Emotion

Participants' emotions. Thai students contacted their parents when they felt lonely and needed someone who is available to talk. This lonesome feeling was mostly reported by Thai students who recently came to the U.S. because their emotional state was agitated by the new environment, including factors such as school-related matters, friends, and the language barrier, just to name a few. In addition, participants mentioned how distance caused them to miss their parents due to the absence of face-to-face interaction. Tai, who studied the English language, stated that she called her parents

when, “I have some issue to share but mostly because I missed them, asking how they are doing” (C8: 62). Similarly, in the following quote, Nunn, who has been in Golden, Colorado, for 3 months expressed how she felt when she first came here.

Nunn: Mostly I will call my mom. I felt like...different feeling... I felt lonely. And I need someone...like...who wants to listen because I just came here. So I really don't know much about new friends. I still felt uncertain whether I should share with them or not. I didn't know whom I should talk to. Then it has to be my family. Unlike when I was in Thailand, I had a lot of friends whom I am familiar with.

Interviewer: So you call your mom?

Nunn: She's the one who will not complain or feel annoyed, and she will always listen to me. (D19: 198-205)

Although the above example was illustrated by someone just entering the adjustment phase, the feeling of missing one's parent was extended to Thai students who were adjusting well to the new environment. For example, Jub, a Thai student who lived in Denver for 18 months, explained, “The reason I contacted my parents because I wanted to check whether they were O.K., I was worried about them [well-being]. Sometimes, I missed them, but it was not like a homesick type of feeling” (D14: 227-229).

As mentioned earlier in discussion of topic selection and disclosure, the process of disclosing even mundane topics or sentimental feelings was an affectionate behavior. Thai students also stated that they were obliged to share some topics concerning academic, financial, and security matters, including those topics that disturbed their emotional well-being. When participants consulted parents, they were soliciting some type of emotional support or practical solution to the particular matter. For example, Ning described her conversation with father regarding her stress from school and difficulty learning English. Ning stated:

Ning: Normally, I talked to dad about school because he used to study in America. I called him and complained that I was stressful. Sometimes, I cry.

Interviewer: Really?

Ning: Yeah. He sympathized with me. He was crying with me. You know, I'm his youngest child, out of the three [children], I felt that my dad love me the most. (D22: 231-235)

According to Ning's account, "He was crying with me" was another way that parents showed emotional support and understanding to their children. Moreover, many participants revealed their minor accomplishments and happy stories to parents. In all, the feelings that prompted Thai students to interact with parents were loneliness, affection, and concern about family members' well-being.

Participants' interpretation of parental emotion. Several of the participants reported an interpretation of their parent's feeling when they engaged in long-distance interaction via mediated communication. Thai students' perception of parental emotion referred to the effect of the participants' decoding process of parental action and utterance. The most reported perceptions of parental feeling were missing the child, concern, and understanding. A female participant named Nuch described her parents' feelings when they initiate a call. Nuch stated: "They called me when they missed me or sometimes they think of me. They will call and ask me how I'm doing, about the job. Did I get a job I was looking for" (C11: 145-146). Participants interpreted the reason that parent initiated a call as concern and missing them. Thai students explained that their parents were more understanding when compared to the familial relationship before separation. The experience of Ja captures this concept:

Ja: I felt that since I was here, whenever I called my dad and he wasn't available to talk, he had never scold me or complaining like when I was in Thailand. Now if

I call him when he is busy, he will ask me what was going on, anything wrong with me. (C6: 117-119)

Another Thai student who recently graduated with a Master degree illustrated why his parents worry about him:

Pae: Sometimes I didn't pick up the phone at night when my parents call. They called me again the next morning because they are worried.

Interviewer: What did they say?

Pae: They weren't angry or anything. They just explained it to me how concerned they are. (C3: 22-25)

Like several other parents, Pae's parents directly expressed to their son how they felt when they could not make contact. Similarly, some parents were concerned about their child's health. Hug described how mother conveyed her affection; "Normally, she will ask me about what type of food I ate or have I ever worked out. She was trying to push me to work out regularly. She was afraid that I will not work out. She was concerned about my health" (D25: 409-411).

In sum, participants felt that not all love, worry, and understanding were conveyed through verbal messages. The length of advice given, the tone of voice, and other nonverbal behaviors played an important role in transmitting the thoughtful emotion. For example, the majority of participants reported that they avoided arguments during long-distance interaction. For instance, participants used nonverbal communication (i.e., withholding judgment, passive listening) to guard against disagreement and contention. This avoidance behavior in LDR demonstrated care and understanding between parent and child.

The Ritual

Ritual means a special occasion as prescribed by family ritual or custom that prompted family members to engage in interaction. Each family has their own set of expectations and interactions to commemorate a family ritual. These unique occasions included family members' birthdays, parents' anniversary, and other public celebrations (e.g., Chinese Ancestor Day, Christmas, Valentines' Day). Unlike geographically-close families who go out to dinner together on New Year's Day, participants were obliged to contact their parents and/or other family members on these special occasions. In general, only a phone call or use of CMC was satisfactory to mark the family ritual. A male Thai student who called his parents at least once a week explained to the researcher what ritual means to his family:

Tae: I called my parents as well on their birthday or Mother's Day. But my family didn't customarily go out and get together with gifts and presents. We are not like that. It was just another ordinary day. I do call mom on Mothers' Day but there is nothing special about the conversation. (D11: 368-371)

Unlike Tae, whose family has a loose set of expectations to mark the special occasion, Fee described how her family celebrated the ritual; "My mom always sent me a birthday cards and for my boyfriend's birthday. For me, I sent cards for all occasions, mom's birthday, my sister's birthday, Mothers' Day, for most special occasions, I will send cards" (D4: 373-375).

Instead of using a single channel to contact parents on a special occasion, sending a sentimental artifact such as card, cake, or flowers was another means of communication to maintain long-distance relationship. Moreover, these sentimental artifacts were always

followed by a telephone conversation to complete this special date. The following excerpt from a Thai student named Nuch revealed what is included in a ceremonial occasion.

Nuch: On a special occasion, I surprised them with cards, flowers, and cake.

Interviewer: How do you do it?

Nuch: I order those through an online website and then paid by credit card.

Like... my dad's, mom's, grandma's, aunts', and brother's birthday. They all got the cake but different flavors. Sometimes, I sent flowers...depend on my feeling, like Valentines' Day. But cards...yeah, I always sent cards, every special occasion.

Interviewer: What is the feedback?

Nuch: They were happy, especially with the cake. Actually, in Thailand we don't have many websites [to order gifts]. It was either cake or flower. Those teddy bears are useless so I sent those gifts for them. (C11: 23-244)

Similar to Thanksgiving in the U.S. is Chinese Ancestor Day, which is a special occasion in Thailand that often entails a gathering of close friends and relatives. A Thai student whose mother was Thai-Chinese explained why she called her mother on Chinese Ancestor Day.

Oil: The reason I call my mom on that day because I can talk to other relatives as well. You know, they're all there. When I call...I have a chance to talk to my uncle, my aunt, and so on...most of them. I want to talk to them and they all want to talk to me.

Interviewer: Any other special occasion?

Oil: I also call them on their birthday but I didn't send any cards just an e-cards. But if it was my birthday, they have to call me. I won't call them because it's my ego. (D16: 406-41)

For Oil, calling her mother on a special occasion was similar to a virtual reunion, which serves to uphold the family ritual and at the same time maintain distal familial relationship.

The motive category comprised participants' feelings and their interpretation of parental emotion towards the long-distance interactions with their parents. Although participants contacted their parents whenever they felt lonely, and parents' initiation of

contact could be interpreted as showing affection, family rituals were, as well, considered to be a motive that prompted family members to engage in long-distance communication.

Research Questions 3 and 4

In accordance with the proposed research questions, this study, first, explored two broad research questions concerning the feelings and experiences of Thai students in LDRs with their parents (RQ1) and what LDR maintenance meant to these students (RQ2). Second, this study also explored two more specific questions about the LDR maintenance behaviors used by Thai students (RQ3) and functions of various mediated communication channels in maintaining distal familial relationship (RQ4). The preceding description of the research findings addressed RQ1 and RQ2, but the answers to RQ3 and RQ4 were also embedded within the broader research findings. This section will explicitly identify the findings that address RQ3 and RQ4.

With regard to research question 3, the LDR maintenance behaviors of Thai students were infused into the major categories: the contact, the medium, the talk, and the motive. In all there were eight maintenance behaviors that Thai students enacted during the separation period with their parents. These LDR maintenance behaviors included: initiation, calling schedule, sending items, visits, networking, topic selection, disclosure, and supportiveness. The *initiation* referred to the act of starting the interaction either in synchronous form (e.g., dialing a cell phone) or asynchronous form (e.g., sending an e-mail). *Calling schedule* involved planned and unplanned courses of action to engage in mediated communication. Apart from exchanging information via mediated channels, *sending items* such as cards, postcards, gift, books, and vitamins can be identified as a

means for parent-child LDR maintenance. *Visits* referred to an intermittent face-to-face interaction between Thai students and parents. *Networking* involved staying in touch with parents indirectly through siblings and relatives. *Topic selection* was defined as an effort to choose the topic of conversation to accommodate the target parent. *Disclosure* involved sharing mundane activities and/or specific issues with parents. *Supportiveness* consisted of such behaviors as soliciting conversation, seeking advice, and active/passive listening.

In response to Research Question 4, this study found the pattern of LDR maintenance behavior of Thai students in relation to the function of various mediated communication channels to maintain distal familial relationship. The majority of Thai students and their parents employed cell phones as a primary means of communication in the long-distance familial relationship while other channels (e.g., traditional channels, CMC channels) were used sporadically with regard to channels' functionality and accessibility to the target party. This was due to the fact that Thai students preferred a synchronous channel of communication as opposed to delayed or asynchronous media. Moreover, participants reported that this channel was the least demanding mode of communication for their parents when compared to other mediated communication channels.

This study found that some written traditional forms of communication such as greeting cards, postcards, letters, and diaries were mainly used to maintain family rituals and can convey affection, which, in turn, benefited LDR maintenance. Moreover, this study found that participants also sent and received items such as gifts, books, and

vitamins through traditional channels (i.e., postal service) and also through relatives and friends who were visiting Thailand or Denver. Other CMC channels such as e-mail, Yahoo/MSN messenger, and picture hosting websites were used to transmit specific information and to prompt cell phone interaction. Since many parents were computer illiterate, CMC involved networking (e.g., siblings, relatives) with others who were familiar with Internet communication.

With regards to the cell phone, which functioned as a life line between Thai students and their parents, LDR maintenance behavior was illustrated in the emergent categories. This study found that Thai students were responsible to initiate contact with their parents unless a different rule was negotiated among family members. Infrequently, parents initiated contact when Thai students broke the calling schedule. Therefore, the initiation of contact was influenced by how the Thai student-parent dyad negotiated communicative behavior and by the length of time the Thai student had lived in the U.S. Since there was a time zone difference between Thailand and United States, many Thai students also managed frequency and duration of contact by having a fixed calling schedule.

Overall, participants' LDR maintenance illustrated the communicative actions and activities that can be interpreted as strategic and routine behavior during a separation period. For example, participants might routinely contact their parents directly though cell phone, but they strategically used channel order through networking to reach the target parent. This suggested that a recurring and familiar behavior can be interpreted as a

routine maintenance, whereas demanding and unfamiliar patterns of communication required strategic actions in long-distance familial relationships.

Although the properties of each emergent category appeared independent from one another, in the account of Thai students' experiences, they interacted and integrated with one another to delineate a process of LDR maintenance between Thai students and their parents, especially as uncovered from a grounded theory approach. The emergent categories (i.e., the contact, the medium, the talk, the motive) of LDR maintenance behaviors defined the feelings and experiences of Thai students' LDRs which in turn represented the meaning of LDR maintenance among Thai students. The medium category also clearly interrelated and had a dominating effect on other categories due to the distal, parental, and emotional factor.

My Perceptions

Since this project was based on Charmaz's constructivist framework in conducting grounded theory, this section illustrates how I envisioned and situated myself in relation to the process of conducting the study. This section was typically the vital element in the memo writing which was incorporated throughout the process of this study.

For the most part, I enjoyed each and every interview session that I facilitated. The participants were very generous with their time and quite patient with my inquiries. For example, some participants who went to class during the day time and worked at night shift volunteered to be interviewed at my apartment after they finished their part-time job. Other participants allowed me to set up the date and time that would fit my

schedule. I held that their generosity and friendliness spawned from the fact that I was older than them in term of age, academic status, and length of time in the U.S. In general, most Thais value seniority and this attitude is even more evident outside Thailand. This belief also had a negative affect during some interview sessions. I must admit that my patience during some of the interview with certain participant were quite thin due to their responses to my naïve question. At first, I thought that their ignorant reply such as “you know...just general topic” or “you know... there is nothing much,” was a sign of disrespect or boredom. Later, I realized that participants assumed that I must share a common experience with them as a Thai student who also maintained distal familial relationship. Moreover, most interview sessions started off monotonously and unenergetic, but surprisingly they usually ended with pleased and relieved reactions as if I helped them release their inner thoughts and affection toward their parents.

Although I attempted to detach my emotional feelings from the participants whenever they shared sentimental topics such as how they detect their parents’ mood through their voices, those experiences were always flashing in the back of my head during the interviews. I was amazed by how their feelings and experiences still echoed as though I was playing the interview’s audio tracks while I was analyzing the data.

During the theoretical phase, I also felt that this project had changed the way I communicate with my parents. There were moments when I unintentionally employed participants’ LDR maintenance behaviors such as active listening or soliciting parental mundane topics. I remembered one female participant told me that her parents wanted to listen to her story, even though the same old story had been told again and again. I felt

justified to share with my mother an extensive complaint about the Thai economy, particularly the decreasing value of Thai currency. When I was analyzing my participants' maintenance behavior, I envisioned the consequences of my communicative behaviors and their benefits toward my distal family relationship.

Maintaining long distance familial relationship is not simple, particularly from scholars' perspectives. Long distance familial relationships certainly are complicated and difficult as numerous parties (e.g., friends, relatives, social networks) and various advanced channels are involved in the maintenance process. Initially, I was surprised that participants could not respond promptly to the question "How do you contact your parent?" or "How do you maintain relationship with parents?" Perhaps assessing participants' communicative behaviors with their new American friends would yield instantaneous reply. It was possible that communicative actions and behaviors between Thai students and their parents were instinctive and automated. Metaphorically, probing participants about how they maintain their LDR with their parents was similar to asking someone how they brush their teeth. I believed most people have a hard time trying to explain the frequency of their brush strokes, the length of brushing time, or the color of the toothbrush. Eventually, I found that showing participants my list of interview questions improved the flow of the conversation and increased the length of their responses.

In summary, I realized that there was no doubt that my roles as an interviewer and insider had an impact on participants' responses and how I interpreted their comments. My presence before and during the interaction with Thai students influenced their

perceptions and in the end it shaped my analysis. In some case, I was probably more generous with my analysis than I should have been, especially in the initial phase of open coding. And in other cases I was probably harsher than I should have been, especially later in theoretical sampling phase. I believe this is the inherent complication in any qualitative research, typically grounded theory. Overall, I am confident and satisfied with the findings of this report. LDR maintenance is increasingly important as more and more people no longer reside in same place as their relational partner. Although new innovations and advancements of mediated channels facilitate LDRs, they might not replace the significance of face-to-face interactions.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

This research was undertaken in order to further our understanding of long-distance familial relationship maintenance between Thai students in the U.S. and their parents who resided in Thailand. In other words, this study explored both the overall experience of LDR maintenance for Thai adult student-parent dyads as well as the participants' specific relational maintenance behaviors and the effect of mediated communication channels used by family members. Four specific questions provided the foundation for the study. First, what are the feelings and experiences of Thai students in the U.S. towards relationship maintenance with their parents in Thailand? Second, what does long-distance relationship maintenance mean to Thai students in the U.S.? Third, what behaviors do Thai students in LDRs use to maintain their relationship with their parents? Fourth, what are the functions of various mediated communication channels in maintaining LDRs in the family? Chapter 4 addressed the results and presented four underlying categories integrating the interplay among concepts and processes in maintaining the parent-adult child LDR. This chapter summarizes and discusses the results, implications, and limitations of the study reported in this study. In addition, several suggestions for future research are discussed.

Interdependence and Interrelationship among Categories

Although in their definitions in Chapter 4, these categories appeared independent from one another, the categories and subcategories interacted with one another to delineate a complex process of long distance communication between Thai students and their parents that defined familial maintenance behavior, at least as experienced by Thai students. This process is graphically presented in the model depicted in Figure 1.

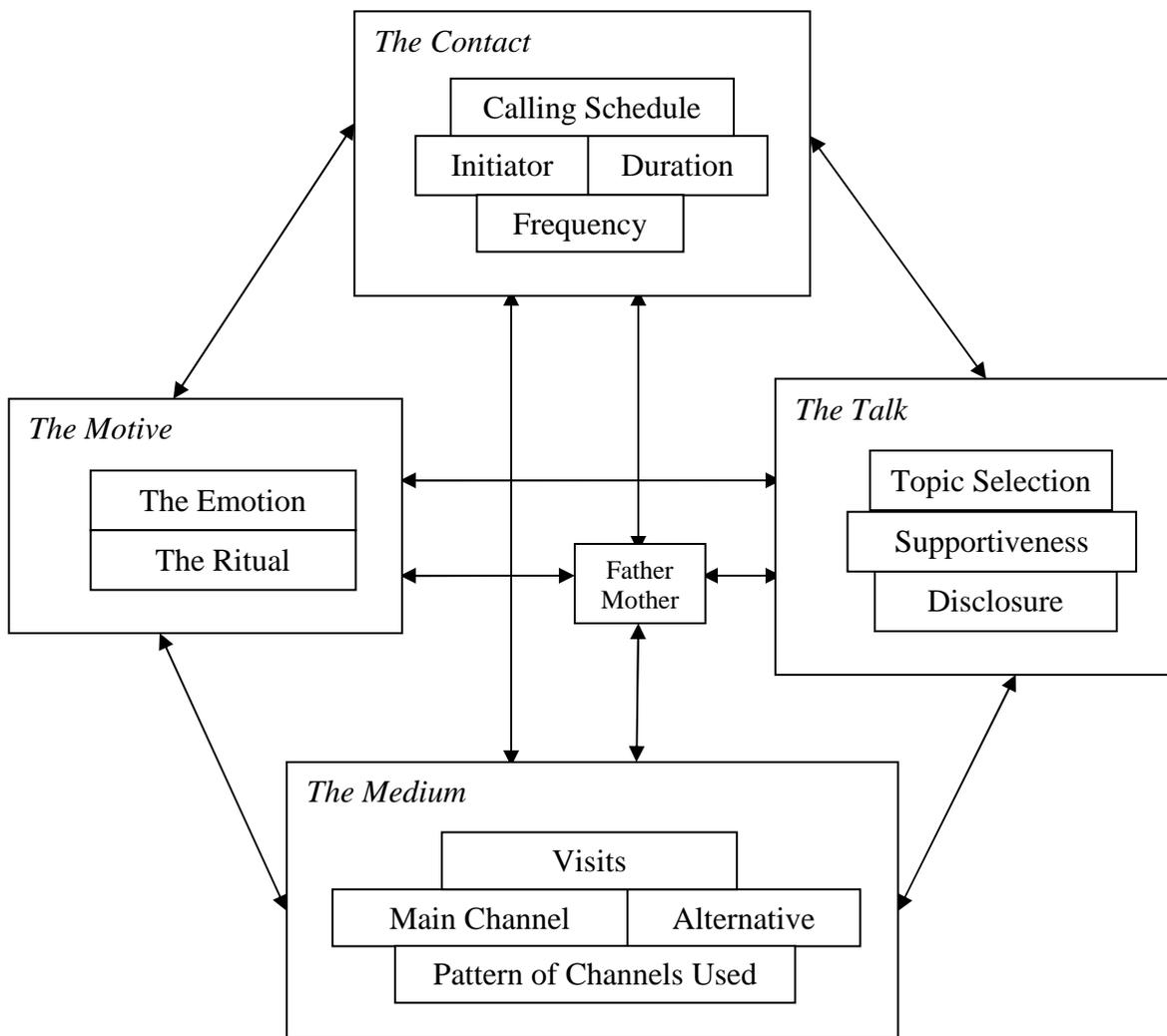


Figure1. Relationships among Categories

As exemplified in details in Chapter 4, Figure 1 is an attempt to picture the complexity of long-distance parent-child communicative behavior through Thai students' experiences during their separation. The two-way arrows between each of the four main categories including father/mother in the center represented how various categories influenced and were influenced by other categories (i.e., the contact, the medium, the talk, the motive). According to the diagram, the medium category was related to the contact category because different mediated channels influenced the frequency, duration, schedule, and initiation of contact. For example, the cell phone was used more frequently than other mediated channels because this means was convenient and instantaneous. The medium category also influenced and was influenced by the motive category. Participants reported that the cell phone can be used to convey emotion via the aural mode whereas family rituals were maintained through sending cards and postcards. The medium category was related to the talk category when participants used e-mail rather than other means to exchange detailed information and document such as transcripts from Thai University and address in the U.S. On the other hand, the talk category directly illustrated the process of parent-child interaction via the main channel of the cell phone. The interrelationship between the talk category and the contact category also had an impact on other categories. For example, participants reported that the frequency and the duration of contact decreased when they ran out of topics of conversation due to the fact that not all topics can be shared (i.e., selective disclosure). This incident affected the medium category in that participants sometimes maintain distal relationship with parents through networking (see Nick's excerpt on page 65). The motive category was related to

the contact category because participants' emotion (e.g., loneliness, joyful) can affect the frequency, duration, and the initiating party. For example, participants' number of contacts tended to increase when they felt lonely and needed someone who was available to talk. In a similar vein, parents initiated the contact on participants' birthdays to commemorate a family ritual.

From the diagram, the adjacent subcategory boxes symbolized the interrelationships among subcategories within the same major category. For example, within the contact category, the frequency of contact was high when both parents and child initiated contact, especially during Thai students' adjustment period. Conversely, the frequency of contact declined when parents discontinued the initiation process. In addition, participants reported that the duration of conversation decreased when the frequency of contact increased. Some participants who had a fixed calling schedule reported that they usually initiated the contact rather than their parents. Other participants stated that when their parents initiated the call, the duration of conversation was brief compared to when the participant initiated contact. Moreover, this diagram also incorporates the target parent in the center of the diagram to clarify the effect of parental gender.

For example, this study found parent gender has an impact on the initiator, frequency of contact, duration of contact, topic selection, disclosure, and supportiveness. In general, mother rather than father will initiate the contact, especially during the adjustment period. The bidirectional initiation process between the mother and child during the adjustment period increased the frequency of contact. On the other hand, the

non-reciprocal nature of the initiation process between father and child reduced the number of contacts. Further, due to the different topics discussed in the father-child and mother-child dyads, the duration of interaction was affected by parent gender. Participants reported that they disclosed more to mother than to father and they also received more emotional support from mother than father because mother usually initiates the call, and there is a high frequency of contact and long duration of conversation between mother and child. Other aspects, such as parental background (e.g., father graduated from American university), occupation (e.g., mom as a housewife), and computer literacy, influenced channel selection, topic selection, frequency, duration, calling schedule, disclosure, and the emotion. As illustrated in Figure 1, the process of LDR maintenance for Thai students and their parents was not as simple as demonstrated in Table 2. To understand this convoluted and intricate process, the following section discussed Thai students' LDR maintenance in relation to the precede communication literatures.

Thai Students' LDR Maintenance

Various LDRs are qualitatively different from one another based on relationship type, reasons for separation, chances for future FtF interaction, availability of mediated channels, and cultural constraints, just to name a few. The unique emergent categories in this study (i.e., the contact, the medium, the talk, the motive) illustrated the process of long-distance maintenance behavior of non-Western parent-child dyads. Each category will be discussed in relation to the other categories.

The contact. Thus far, communication scholars who investigated LDRs focused explicitly on the process and strategies enacted during this maintenance stage (Stafford, 2005). However, research that examines relational maintenance had exclusively treated initiation process as a fundamental stage in relationship development (i.e., the beginning of the relationship). This study found that initiating an interaction in the relationship maintenance stage can be used to convey care, understanding, and affectionate feelings. Therefore, the action of initiating contact in LDR maintenance was used to strengthen an existing relationship, in contrast to the way that initiation has been considered as a stage in relationship development intended to build a new relationship. Occasionally, the role of initiating party was verbally negotiated between Thai students and their parents, and, usually, the student was expected to play the role of initiator, thus assuming the responsibility for acting to strengthen the parent-child relationship.

Frequency of contact in LDRs is dissimilar to the frequency of maintenance behavior in the GCR maintenance literature (Sahlstein, 2004). Within relational maintenance scholarship, research has sought to differentiate between GCRs and LDRs in terms of frequency of contact, maintenance strategies, media usage, and relational satisfaction (Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Holt & Stone, 1988; Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford, & Reske, 1990). Past research on GCR maintenance assumed that more maintenance activities lead to better relationships (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993). However, one of the most relevant findings from Guldner and Swensen (1995) was that individuals in both LDRs and GCRs reported average to high relational satisfaction despite the significant differences in contact frequencies and quantity. The present study found a relationship

between frequency of contact and duration of contact that supports Guldner and Swensen's (1995) contention. These scholars concluded, "It is not the amount of time per se that supports the relationship, but rather some other factors associated with even small amounts of time spent together" (p. 319). However, Thai students and parents may contact each other more frequently during the adjustment period, decrease during the middle years, and rebound again before leaving the U.S. Most participants believed it was the consistency and the quality of conversation that was vital to relationship maintenance, not frequency or duration of conversation.

Some participants had no specific date and time to call parents, whereas other Thai students had a fixed calling schedule. This maintenance process can be explained by the intentionality of contact. With regard to the intentionality of maintenance, Thai adult students' communicative behaviors with their parents were not intentionally used to maintain the long-distance relationship but nonetheless served a maintenance function. As Dainton and Stafford (1993) stated, "Rather, these behaviors may be performed very intentionally and consciously (e.g. preparing dinner) but the actor is *not* performing these behaviors with the express goal of maintaining the relationship" (p. 256). In other words, Thai students may strategically or routinely call their parent without considering the familial maintenance goal consciously. Even though this study cannot empirically locate the distinction between strategic and routine maintenance behavior, changes in frequency of contact or calling schedule does affect the feelings and behavior of both parties. Aylor and Dainton (2004) claimed that "the absence of such routine behaviors can be problematic for the relationship" (p. 689). Due to Thai students' and parents' availability

and time zone differences, a fixed calling schedule allowed Thai student to focus on other aspects of LDR maintenance.

The medium. With limited face-to-face interaction, LDR partners rely more on mediated communication. In this study, the cell phone was the most reported channel of communication in the Thai student-parent dyad, consistent with Aoki and Downes's (2003) study. Their research suggested that young people use the devices for a variety of purposes, such as to help them feel safe, for financial benefit, to manage time efficiently, and to keep in touch with friends and family members. Similarly, this study partly supported Dimmick, Kline, and Stafford's (2000) research on the advantages of the telephone. These researchers found that the telephone was a superior medium for the "sociability gratifications that are highly affective uses in personal relationships including expressing emotions and affection, giving advice, exchanging information and providing companionship" (p. 240). This study found that Thai students used cell phones to contact their parents because this channel was used to express emotions and affection, solicit advice, exchange daily activities, and provide companionship. Moreover, most parents used the cell phone to contact their children because they are part of the cell phone generation that has little or no experience with computer-mediated communication. However, some Thai families perceived other advanced technology channels (e.g., CMC) as a supporting means for long-distance communication.

Participants also employed other alternative channels of communication. These included traditional means such as cards, post cards, gifts and CMC channels such as e-cards, e-mail, MSN/Yahoo messenger, Web cam, and the like. This study found the same

conclusion as Dindia et al. (2004) that participants did not perceive occasional cards and holiday greeting cards as functioning to maintain the relationship. Dindia et al. (2004) argued that holiday greeting cards are hygienic factors; “The absence, not the presence, of these routines affects relational maintenance” (p. 589). Some participants in this study regarded these channels as a routine behavior to commemorate ceremonial occasions and to maintain family rituals. Particularly, post cards were perceived by participants as collectible and memorable items which related to vacation and traveling.

According to this study, computer-mediated communication played a minor role in long-distance relationship maintenance as compared to the cell phone. Research on CMC has maintained that this advanced channel of communication “may be a more satisfying choice than more traditional channels such as letters or telephone” (Walther & Parks, 2002, p. 545). Perhaps, Thai parents are entangled in a “cell phone generation” where writing and typing is for office clerks and logging on to the Internet, then signing in to a web site, is for computer geeks. Therefore, these parents have fewer means of maintaining a long-distance relationship due to the lack of computer skills. Moreover, the cell phone provides user-friendly functions and immediate response when compared to other mediated means.

In addition, participants and their parents rely on “networking” (with, e.g., siblings, relatives) to bridge the accessibility gap of long-distance interaction. Networking as a maintenance behavior in LDR maintenance was slightly different from this behavior’s definition in GCR maintenance. Network maintenance behavior in GCRs refers to the dyad spending time with other friends and family to maintain relationship

(Canary & Stafford, 1994). In this study, “networking” involved using, siblings, relatives, and/or in-laws in the family circle to establish connection or update the parents on information regarding familial matters.

On a special occasion or during a visit, gifts, books, vitamins and other sentimental items were used as tokens of affection and to commemorate family rituals. Not many Thai students sent items via postal service due to the cost of the postage. The most preferred mean of transferring gifts, books, vitamins, and other items was through friends who were going to visit Thailand or relatives who traveled to America. In addition, Thai students also carried these items for their family members and friends on their visits to Thailand. Interestingly, there is no research in relationship maintenance investigating the significant role of these tokens of affection, and how sending and receiving gifts and other items (e.g., vitamin, book) functioned in relationship maintenance studies.

Canary and Stafford (1994) claimed that relational maintenance behaviors may be used separately or in combination with one another. Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999) added that not all participants in their study report using the same maintenance behaviors with the same frequency. This study supported Canary and Stafford (1994) and Weigel and Ballard-Reisch’s (1999) studies. Participant and their parents in this study employed single and multiple channels of communication, including networking, in order to reach specific target parents. Moreover, “channel order” established a sequence of behaviors that channels that allowed participant to keep in touch with their parents and family members whenever in need.

The talk. Empirically, this category allowed comparison with Canary and Stafford's (1994) relational maintenance typology. Canary and Stafford's (1993, 1994) typology attempted to include different type of relationships including GCRs and LDRs. As proposed by Canary and Stafford (1994), the extended typology of relational maintenance falls into 10 categories including: *positivity* (i.e., attempts to make interaction pleasant), *openness* (i.e., offering and listening to one another), *assurances* (i.e., covertly and overtly assuring each other), *social networks* (i.e., relying on friends and family), *sharing tasks* (i.e., performing routine tasks and chores in a relationship), *joint activities* (i.e., how interactants choose to spend time with one another to maintain their relationship), *cards/letters/calls* (i.e., use of various channels to keep contact in relationships), *avoidance* (i.e., evasion of partner or issues), *antisocial* (i.e., behaviors which seem unfriendly), and *humor* (i.e., jokes and sarcasm).

Considering the typology of maintenance activities formed by Canary and his colleagues (e.g., Canary et al., 1993; Canary & Stafford, 1994), some of the maintenance behaviors listed appeared to be ones that individuals could not utilized in LDR. For instance, sharing *tasks* appears to be one such behavior, due to the absence of physical presence of the family members. In addition, other maintenance behaviors such as *antisocial*, and *humor* might be utilized more often by other type of relationship, for instance romantic, platonic, friendship, and siblings rather than parent-child relationships. According to Knutson et al.'s (1995) study, their cross-cultural study found that young Thai people are quiet in the presence of older people, Thai young people seldom disagree with older people, Thai students rarely express their opinion in class, and quietness is

considered a virtue in Thai culture. Therefore, antisocial and humor might not be appropriate behaviors for maintaining parent-child relationships, particularly in Thai culture.

Positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, joint activities, and avoidance maintenance behaviors were similar to maintenance behavior found in this study. Eight maintenance behaviors emerged from this study included: initiation, calling schedule, sending items, visits, networking, topic selection, disclosure, and supportiveness. Although Canary and Stafford's (1994) maintenance typologies and this study's maintenance behavior cannot be directly compared, their similarity outweighed the differences. For example, positivity, openness, and assurances were similar to initiation, disclosure, and supportiveness in terms of how individuals engaged in interaction to maintain relationship. Social networks were parallel to networking in the involvement of a third party in the maintenance equation. Joint activities were similar to calling schedule and visits which signified how interactants managed time to spend with one another to maintain relationship. Avoidance can be comparable to topic selection which attempted to reduce relational conflict.

Canary and Stafford (1994) included the category of *cards, letters, and call* in their expanded typology of maintenance behavior, attempting to include the prevalence of mediated communication as part of their discussion. However, Canary et al. (1993) treated media use as an isolated strategy rather than acknowledging it as an integral component of any maintenance behavior. This study acknowledged that various mediated

channel including sending items had an impact on how people maintain distal relationship.

The subcategories in “the talk” category, including topic selection, disclosure, and supportiveness, illustrated Duck’s (1994) argument about mundane interaction:

That talk, I shall argue, is the essence of relational maintenance for three important reasons. First, talk provides a ‘rhetorical vision’ or persuasive image of what the relationship is and will be. Second, talk provides relational partners with the method for sharing one another’s worlds of experience. Third, to follow Berger and Kellner (1964), talk serves to sustain the reality of the world by continually hardening or stabilizing the ‘commonly objectivated reality’ that a relationship represents to the partners. (p.48)

This routine exchange of mundane information was fundamental to LDR maintenance.

For example, Thai students described that often they disclosed their day-to-day activities with parents as a way to update them on their well-being. This behavior not only relieved parents’ anxiety and alleviated participants’ stress and loneliness, but also showed affection. Echoing Duck’s (1994) contention, this process of sharing mundane activities between parent and child was the “essence of relational maintenance” (p.52) and could provide significant support for the whole process of familial LDR maintenance, including other interrelated categories: the contact, the medium, and the motive.

The motive. The data from this study should not be interpreted as showing that the majority of Thai students felt unconditionally obliged to contact their parents. Various factors influence participants’ feelings toward long-distance relationship maintenance, for example, academic goals, financial responsibility, family well-being, and family rituals, just to name a few. Past research on parent-child communication behaviors has shown that people have specific reasons for communicating with each other (Fitzpatrick &

Badzinski, 1984; Martin & Anderson, 1995; Punyanunt-Carter, 2005). Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1984) reported that parents communicate with their children for two primary reasons: to control their behaviors or actions and to express support. Unfortunately, this project did not assess parental experiences regarding their distal communication with their children. On the other hand, this study uncovered reasons that prompted Thai students to contact their parents and their perception of their parents' emotions. Thai students reported that they contacted their parents when they felt lonely and solicited emotional support. Similar to Fitzpatrick and Badzinski's (1984) finding, the most reported perceptions of parental feeling were missing the child, concern, and understanding, which tended to express support.

The results of this study extended Rubin, Perse, and Barbato's (1988) work on communication motives. Rubin and her colleagues found six distinct factors of communication motives: control, relaxation, escape, inclusion, affection, and pleasure. *Control* motives are means to gain compliance. *Relaxation* motives are ways to rest or relax. *Escape* motives are reasons for diversion or avoidance of other activities. *Inclusion* motives are ways to express attachment and to feel a connection to the other person. *Affection* motives are ways to express one's love and caring for another person. *Pleasure* motives are ways to communicate for enjoyment and excitement.

This study found that Thai student maintained their LDR with their parents was motivated by relaxation, pleasure, affection, and inclusion, as opposed to, escape and control. For example, a lonely and depressed Thai student might chose to contact parents in order to reduce those pressures (i.e., relaxation). Often, Thai students were motivated

to contact parents when they did well on an examination (i.e., pleasure). The majority of Thai students showed affection by engaging in conversation with parents. Moreover, results from this study extended Rubin, Perse, and Barbato's (1988) findings that family rituals can be conceptualized as communication motives (i.e., inclusion). Based on family beliefs about how family members should behave in a given circumstance, family rituals have different meaning in different cultures and mean different things to different people. Cheal (1988) posited that rituals "affirm the reality of abstract meanings for daily living and define the continuity of experience between past, present, and future" (p. 638). This study centered on the set of interaction guidelines family members used to maintain long-distance relationships within their family. In other words, each family has their own set of unwritten rules which regulate communicative behavior. Family rituals can be enacted through repeated interaction before the Thai students separated from their parents and negotiated among family members during the separation. These guidelines can be perceived as a motive that dictated the process of long-distance relationship maintenance. As Graham, Barbato, and Perse (1993) stated, these communication motives affect what, how, and who individuals talk to and are possible reasons why people communicate with each other. This category (i.e., the motive) thus, affected other categories of Thai students LDR maintenance (i.e., the contact, the medium, the talk).

Implications of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to investigate Thai students' experience of maintaining a long-distance relationship with their parents, with emphasis on long-distance maintenance behaviors of Thai students who were currently living in the U.S.

and how various channels of mediated communication influenced their maintenance behaviors. The study employed a grounded theory approach to analyze the distal maintenance behaviors and how they related to various channels of communication reported by Thai students. Grounded theory was a framework for the mode of inquiry, data collection, and data analysis to uncover the synthesized concepts and insightful categories that emerged from the data itself.

Little research has been devoted to how adult students maintain long distance relationships with parents, especially in non-Western families. The categories that emerged in this study have proven useful in creating an explanation of the process of how Thai students maintain LDRs with their parents. Moreover, findings in this study extended existing research on relational maintenance scholarship and produced new insight into the channels of mediated communication. Many communication scholars believe that all successful relationships require maintenance behaviors or else they deteriorate (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Canary & Dainton, 2003). Unlike geographically-close relationships, LDRs are defined by the comparative inability to interact face-to-face on a regular basis. Even within the concentration of LDR maintenance, relationship type, reasons for separation, chances for future FtF interaction, availability of mediated channels, and cultural constraints make certain types of LDRs qualitatively different from one another (Aylor, 2003; Dainton, 2003; Rohlfing, 1995; Sahlstein, 2004).

The results from analyzing the transcribed interviews extended Dainton's (2003) observations regarding people's degree of choice in maintaining the relationship. The continuum of choice ranges from purely voluntary to purely involuntary relationships.

People in voluntary relationships are those who have the option to maintain the relationship or terminate it, such as in dating, romantic, and friendship relationships.

People in involuntary relationships are constrained by biological, legal, social, and cultural factors, including relationships such as coworkers, parent-child, and siblings. It must be noted that the Thai adult student-parent relationship can be labeled as an involuntary relationship as some Thai students reported that their interaction with parents was obligatory. The relationship is involuntary in the sense that Thai adult students cannot pick their parents, but their communicative behavior fell into the voluntary/nonvoluntary continuum. This means that the frequency of contact and other maintenance activities for some Thai students might exceed their parental expectation to sustain the LDR. The results of this study suggested that nonvoluntary relationships can be healthy relationships. As Hess (2000) stated, "People do maintain relationships, often healthy and close relationships, with partners they dislike, and they do so on a daily basis" (p. 459).

Therefore, the Thai student/parent LDR differed from undesired close relationships with dislike partner (Hess, 2000) in terms of maintenance behavior type (i.e., constructive versus destructive behavior). Unlike an individual in an undesired nonvoluntary relationship whose maintenance behavior typically includes destructive behaviors, this study discovered that factors such as the reason for contact, frequency of contact, pattern of contact, and motive for contact signified constructive behaviors. Moreover, the constructive maintenance behaviors of Thai students were aimed at promoting parent-child integration rather than familial isolation.

Contacting parents was not aimed solely at maintaining familial relationships in this study. Participants reported contacting parents when they felt lonely, missed their parents, and needed someone who is available to talk. On other occasions, such as family members' birthday, parents' anniversary, and other public celebrations prompted family members to engage in distal interaction. Regardless of motive, the communicative action between Thai students and their parents, reported in the emergent category, benefited long-distance maintenance purposes. In other words, because for many participants, the Thai cultural expectation of communication between parent and child obliged them to contact their parents regularly, engaging in distal interaction might not be a relational maintenance behavior that was enacted with the strategic intent of maintaining a familial relationship. Instead, communication between parent-child dyad might be a routine maintenance behavior that was performed because of the cultural and relational expectation. As a result, routine communicative behaviors of family members that fulfill expectations might not yield a positive effect on relationship maintenance; however, changes in pattern and channels of mediated communication that fail to fulfill expectations, such as breaking a calling schedule, might affect the relationship negatively. For example, in Dindia et al.'s (2004) study, their results did not provide support for the hypothesis that holiday greeting cards function to maintain relationships. Their study found that the most frequent reason listed for sending and receiving holiday greeting was "because we have a relationship" (p. 589).

The results showed that participants strategically and routinely selected topics that suited the target parent, called parents when they are available, chose to talk to the

available parent, decided to disclose topics that did not upset parents, and opted for the communication channels that would optimize the interaction. Similar to Stafford's (1994) conceptual definition of relationship maintenance, LDR maintenance for the Thai adult student-parent dyad was the process of maintaining a state of familial relationship through dynamic activities during the conditional separation period. These dynamic activities "[involve] adapting to the changing needs and goals that characterize a relationship" (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005, p. 341). The emergent categories exemplified the dynamic actions and activities of the Thai adult student-parent dyad's communicative process and the LDR maintenance behaviors. These actions and activities enacted by the Thai student-parent dyad might start off strategically and then become routine over time (Dindia, 2000).

Although several theories have successfully predicted and explained maintenance behavior, especially in geographically-close non-familial relationship, this study contended that long-distance familial relationship were uniquely different from other LDRs. Therefore, to better understand various aspects of relational maintenance in familial LDR, including people's degree of choice in maintaining the relationship, intentionality of maintenance, roles of mediated communication, and participants' anticipation of future interaction, must be thoroughly explored in future research.

Conclusions. Discovering the process of how Thai students maintain LDRs with parents represents an important step in family communication research. Even though this study did not discover a significant cultural variable which clearly explained LDR maintenance process, emergent categories have proven useful in conceptualizing the

feelings, experiences, meanings, and behaviors of Thai students in LDRs with their parents. The results indicated that nonvoluntary relationships, which are typical in the Thai family, can be healthy when children's constructive maintenance behaviors exceed parental expectations. By focusing on the specific relational maintenance behaviors Thai students used with their parents, this study indentified eight maintenance behaviors (i.e., initiation, calling schedule, sending items, visits, networking, topic selection, disclosure, supportiveness). These eight specific maintenance behaviors were similar to Canary and Stafford's (1994) maintenance typology, except that sharing task, antisocial, and humor did not appear in this study.

The results underscore that the action and activities of Thai students during this conditional separation were not exclusively aimed at maintaining distal familial relationships. Other motives such as Thai students' emotions, perception of parental emotion, and family rituals prompted family members to engage in distal interaction. These motives characterized strategic and/or routine behavior during the separation. It was evident that communicative action between parent and child benefited the purpose of long-distance maintenance, which in turn strengthened the Thai family bonds. Lastly, it is worth commenting that Thai students and their parents chose the cell phone as a main channel because it can convey emotions through the aural mode and it is both affordable and instantaneous. In addition, the degree to which parents' familiarity with mediated channel (e.g., computer illiterate parents) and the availability of mediated channels (i.e., particularly in a developing country) shaped the process of Thai students LDR maintenance was striking.

Limitations of the Study

Several factors necessarily limited this study. First, perhaps the most crucial limitation of the study is the nature of the language that data collection and analysis involves. Since the data collection, in this case semi-structured interviews, and data analysis, were conducted in Thai before excerpts were translated into English, extra caution should be exercised in coding and interpreting the finding of the study (Banks & Banks, 1993). Linguistically, the term familial relational maintenance, when directly translated into Thai, caused some confusion to the participants. Five out of thirty-eight participants did not comprehend this scholarly term. However, this term can be understood in Thai language as “familial connection” or “the contact.” In this study, the researcher had to ask participants how they contact their parent as opposed to how they maintain their relationship.

Second, another major concern is the unit of analysis. The data from this study were derived from only one aspect of the Thai student-parent dyad, without information about the parent’s perspective on maintenance behavior. A different approach in selecting the units of analysis (e.g., adult children only, parents only, child-parent dyads) would likely yield a different picture of Thai student-parent distal relationship. The findings from this project emerged from interviewing Thai students, excluding parental views of LDR maintenance. Therefore, incorporating Thai parents’ and other family members’ perceptions toward LDR maintenance would serve to provide a more holistic view of the family dynamic.

Third, this project does not offer any other source of data such as diaries, logs, or e-mail records to support or enhance the emergent categories. Including multiple sources of data may have strengthened the findings. However, the grounded theory approach does offer some general insights and tentative theoretical categories that can be used as a baseline for future quantitative and qualitative studies in the area of long-distance relationship maintenance within the family communication discipline.

Finally, it would be fruitful to include different adult children whose purpose of separation was not related to academic goals (i.e., working young adults) and who have a long-distance relationship with their parents. Since most participants in this project were students who were temporarily residing in the U.S. for a limited amount of time, their time of separation from parents was determined by the degree they were pursuing, for instance, two years for a Master's degree and six years for a Doctoral degree. It is possible that the reason for separation and degree of certainty about the length of separation play an important role in LDR maintenance.

Future Directions

Future research examining the process of parent-adult child LDR maintenance is warranted. Future research applying a multi-method approach to study maintenance of similar relationships could provide insight into this phenomenon. For example, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches with a more systematic sampling method to study the LDR maintenance process will provide greater understanding.

Since this study examined only one facet of multi-dimensional family communication, further research attempting to investigate both parents' and college

students' relational maintenance behaviors in relation to different channels of mediated communication is encouraged, especially including a younger generation of parents who might not rely on the cell phone as a main channel. Further study should expand the unit of analysis from only one aspect of the child's long-distance relationship maintenance, due to the fact that the parent-child relationship is an interdependent relationship. More specifically, researchers should interview parents and children separately, and then compare their maintenance behaviors. Interviewing both parents and child simultaneously could affect the responses from the child because of the differences in family members' relative power. This approach, therefore, will warrant a holistic view of parent-child relational maintenance. In practice, the researcher could collect the data during intermittent face-to-face interaction such as when the parents come to visit their child in America. The researcher could also interview students who have recently reunited with parents after graduation from abroad and at the same time assess their feelings toward and experiences with their parents during their time of separation. In addition, the researcher could make use of Web camera service from a free website (e.g., Skype, Yahoo messenger) or website providing telephone conferencing to examine multiple aspects and various dimensions of LDRs familial maintenance.

Moreover, some researchers have examined other relationship characteristics and qualities that can be used to differentiate the state of the relationship. For example, Stafford and Canary (1991) studied how mutual control, commitment, and liking in married couples were associated with maintenance behaviors. Future research may attempt to refine and validate the emergent maintenance categories of this study in

relation to other relational qualities such as intimacy, attraction, self-disclosure, interdependence, and the like.

Lastly, as Dainton (2003) argued, “maintenance is a function of, and is influenced by, varying contextual levels” (p. 300), including cultural constraints. This project only scratches the surface of familial LDR maintenance, especially in the Thai culture. Subsequent studies need to explore other non-Western cultures in order to provide a broader view. In sum, little research on LDRs has fully explored young adult-parent relationship maintenance. This study provides a foundation for further scholarship in familial LDR maintenance and the impact of advanced mediated communication technology.

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Appendix A.

Dear Presidents of Thai Students Association,

Hello. My name is Thammaphong Isarabhakdi and I am doing a study on long-distance parent-child relationships to fulfill my Ph.D. requirements at the University of Denver. I received your name and e-mail address through your University's Thai Student Association websites.

I am looking for respondents (around 10-15) for my study. Could you please send the following e-mail to the Thai student list-serve or to ALL MEMBERS in your organization? They will contact me directly if they choose to participate. Also, if you are interested in participating in my study, please reply this e-mail with "YES, I do" in the subject area and I will contact you with further instructions. The detail of this project is in the attachment.

You can reach me either by phone: 303-745-9499 or email: tisarabh@du.edu. This survey project is supervised by Dr. Mary Claire Morr Serewicz, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Communication Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, 303-871-4332, mserewic@du.edu.

Thank you for your time.
Thammaphong Isarabhakdi

Appendix B.

Dear my fellow Thai student,

Hello. My name is Thammaphong Isarabhakdi and I am doing a study on long-distance parent-child relationships to fulfill my Ph.D. requirements at the University of Denver. I received your name and e-mail address through your University's Thai Student Association websites.

I am e-mailing you because I understand your situation as a Thai student who is away from home and your relationship with family is significant, not to mention your relationship with a new environment and friends.

Exclusively! You are invited to participate in a study.

The results of this study will be used to learn more about how Thai students use various mediated communication channels to maintain long-distance relationships with their parents. In addition you might also enjoy the opportunity to share information about your own experiences.

To participate in this study, you must ask yourself and answer yes to the following question: Do you consider your relationships with father and mother to be long-distance? If the answer is yes, you are qualified to participate in this study. Your respond of the e-mail will serve as your consent to participate in this study.

The interview session will be conducted at your own convenience (time and location). The study will last anywhere from approximately 30 minutes to up to 2 hours depending on how much you have to say. Since the interview session will be conducted in Thai, the questions are ordinary and uncomplicated. In addition, this interview session will be tape recorded as well. However, if you feel uneasy about answering any of the questions during the interview, you can simply stop answering at any time and have no obligation to finish the discussion.

Participation in this project is strictly voluntary.

I am especially concerned about your privacy. Our recorded conversation is strictly confidential and only I (interviewer) have the access to the recorded material. I will not ask you your name or keep records of who participated in this study. The potential risk of participating is the possibility that answering questions about the relationships may be upsetting. Thinking about family relationships might cause you to recall conflicts or problems. If answering these questions is upsetting you, and you would like to talk with a counselor, there are many options for finding help. If you are in Denver area, the University of Denver Professional Psychology Center (303-871-3626) offer counseling to

community members. If you are outside of the Denver area, the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) Resource Center (1800-969-6642, www.nmha.org) can provide information and help finding community-based mental health services and individual therapists. The 1-800-Therapist Network (1-800-843-7274, www.1-800-therapist.com) provides referrals to therapists through its international network. Additional information and referral options are listed on the NMHA website (www.nmha.org/infoctr/FAQs/treatment.cfm).

You can reach me either by phone: 303-745-9499 or email: tisarabh@du.edu. This survey project is supervised by Dr. Mary Claire Morr Serewicz, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Communication Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, 303-871-4332, mserewic@du.edu.

If you would like to participate in this study, please sent an e-mail to tisarabh@du.edu with “YES, I do” in the subject area and I will contact you with further instructions.

Thank you for your time.
Thammaphong Isarabhakdi

Appendix C.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Maintaining Adult Student-parent Distal Relationships: An exploration of mediated communication among Thai students in the U.S.

You are invited to participate in a study on long-distance parent-child relationships. In addition, this study is being conducted to fulfill the Ph.D. requirements at the University of Denver. The study is conducted by Thammaphong Isarabhakdi. Results will be used to learn more about how Thai students use various mediated communication channels to maintain long-distance relationships with their parents. Thammaphong Isarabhakdi can be reached at Tel. 818-438-3983, tisarabh@du.edu. This project is supervised by the dissertation advisor, Dr. Mary Claire Morr Serewicz, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Communication Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, 303-871-4332, mserewic@du.edu.

Participation in this study should take about 45 to 120 minutes of your time. The interview sessions will involve responding to questions about family relationship maintenance and will be audiotape recorded. If you wish, you may choose not to have the interview recorded. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use only group averages and paraphrased wording. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Dr. Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Maintaining Adult Student-parent Distal Relationships. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature _____ Date _____

I agree to be audiotaped.

I do not agree to be audiotaped.

Signature _____ Date _____

_____ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:

Appendix D.

Part I.

Respondent background:

1. Sex: ___ Male ___ Female
2. Age: _____
3. Marital status: _____
4. Parent ethnicity: Father _____ Mother _____
5. Which part of the Thailand are you from? _____
6. Religious affiliation: _____
7. How many siblings do you have? _____
8. Academic background: _____
9. Year(s) in college: _____
10. Degree pursuing: _____
11. How long you have been in the U.S.? _____
12. Source of income: _____
13. How many times in the past two weeks have you communicated with your parents using:
E-mail _____ times, IM _____ times, Cell phone _____ times,
Home phone _____ times, Mail _____ times, Personal website _____ times
Chat _____ times, Web Blog _____ times, FtF _____ times
Other (Please describe) _____

Part II

- Tell me about how you come to study in the U.S.
- What is your primary purpose for coming to the U.S.?
- Why did you choose to come to the U.S.? [Probe: Do you have any other reasons?]
- What was it like? What did you think then? How did you happen to pursue your academic career in the U.S.?
- Who, if anyone, influenced your decisions and actions?
- Was this your decision? [Probe if “no”: Tell me how he/she or they influence your decision?]
- Could you describe the events that led you to pursue this goal?
- Tell me about the process before you came to the U.S.

Part III

- Please tell me how you normally communicate with your father.
 - Please tell me how you normally communicate with your mother.
 - Between your mother and father, who do you normally communicate with?
 - Who initiates the contact?
- [When parents initiate the contact]
- Which channel of communication do they use to contact you?
 - Do you know why they use this channel of communication?
 - Do they use any other channels of communication which are atypical to you or to them? Do you know why they use it?
 - During what time of the day do they normally contact you?
 - If they contact you, what topic are they talking about?
 - What type of information do they normally share with you?
 - In general, what are you doing when they contact you? For example, before you go to bed, at the library.
 - How do you feel when they contact you? (e.g., positive, negative, neutral interaction)
 - Do you know the reason why they contact you?
- [When student initiates the contact]
- Which channel of communication do you use to contact them?
 - Why do you use this channel of communication?
 - Which channel of communication is your least/most favorite? Why?
 - Do you use any other channels of communication which are atypical to you or to them? Why do you use it?
 - During what time of the day do you normally contact them?
 - When you contact them, what topic are you talking about?
 - What type of information do you normally share with them?
 - In general, what are you doing when they you contact them? For example, before you go to bed, while having lunch.
 - How do you feel when you contact them? (e.g., positive, negative, neutral interaction)

- What is the reason that prompts you/them to contact them/you?
- What types of messages (e.g., advice, order, soliciting Information) you receive from them?

[Other questions]

- Have you ever sent or received items (e.g., presents, cards, books, movies, and clothing) to/from your parent?
- Do you know what the purposes of these items are? How often do you send or receive them?
- Since you left Thailand, when is the last time you had a face-to-face interaction with your parents?
- Who initiated the visit?
- Where did you meet them? How long was the visit?
- Please explain your experiences in detail during your/their visits.
- When do you/they expect to see them/you again?

Part IV.

- What do you think are the most important aspects of maintaining long-distance relationship?
- What factors influence your process of maintaining LDRs with your parents?
- Tell me about how you view your relationship with your parent?
- What kind of advice you give to a Thai student coming to the U.S. to study about communicating with their parents?
- Is there anything that you might want to add or is there anything you would like to ask me before we wrap-up this interview session?