

Conflict management in long-distance intercultural relationships

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

The current research studies how long-distance intercultural couples deal with conflicts. Based on theoretical framework of conversational constraints theory and conflict management theory, this study is focusing on answering questions of what are the motivations behind individual's preferences for different communication styles, how do couples cope with conflicts caused by intercultural communication issues when they are geographically separates and to what extent the outcomes would influence the relationships. Semi-structured interview is the research method, and all together 7 long-distance intercultural couples were interviewed. Thematic analysis is applied to analyze the data. It is revealed in this study that couples concern more about the distance problems rather than cultural differences, and conflicts may be caused whether the couples are using similar or different communication styles if one party fails to interpret the other's motivations behind. Further study should test the findings in larger samples to exam how cultural differences would affect the process of conflict management in long-distance intercultural relationships.

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long-distance relationships, intercultural conflicts, communication styles, conflict management.

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Introduction

According to Stafford and Reske's research, almost one-third of college dating relationships may be long-distance relationships (1990), and Dellmann-Jenkins, Bernard-Paolucci, and Rushing (1994) later contributed data to this study area by reporting that 43.2% of their college dating couples was in a long-distance relationship. The growing population of long-distance couples leads to increasing attention to relationship maintenance between these couples. People may meet their intimate partner with different cultural background while they are traveling, studying or working abroad. When the intercultural couples are isolated by distance, they are considered to be in long-distance intercultural intimate relationships. Like general intimate relationships, challenges and benefits coexist in long-distance relationships. This research aims to study how conflicts are caused by couples' use of communication styles in this kind of relationship, and the reasons for individual's preference for certain communication styles. Also, this study explores how long-distance intercultural couples deal with conflicts.

There are a range of studies on long-distance relationships (Sahlstein, 2004; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Pistole, Roberts & Chapman, 2010; Borelli, Rasemussen, Burkhart & Sbarra, 2015) and intercultural relationships (Reiter & Gee, 2008; Bennett, Volet & Fozdar, 2013; Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver & Liu, 2015), but there has been very limited study on long-distance intercultural relationships. This study aims to find out how do geographical distance and cultural differences cause conflicts, and what are the main concerns when couples are dealing with these conflicts. It is a start of its area, which means it could and should be improved. In this research, conversational constraints theory is applied to explore

the question of why parties communicate with their partner in certain ways when they are not able to meet physically, and conflict management theory is applied to study how long-distance intercultural couples deal with conflicts caused by communication issues.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the motivations behind individuals' preferences for different communication styles?

RQ 2: How do intercultural couples usually deal with conflicts caused by intercultural communication issues when they are geographically separated? To what extent the outcomes would influence the relationship?

Conversational Constraints Theory

It is generally believed that a conversation is led by specific goals, which need coordination from both parties. Conversational constraints are the motivations behind individuals' preferences for different communication styles. In cross-cultural situations, achieving the goal of a conversation mostly requires compromise and even sacrifice from both the speaker and hearer. Conversational constraints theory focuses more on the speaker's expectation for the outcome of the conversation, and how he adjusts the interaction strategies to achieve this expectation. M. Kim (1995) pointed out that conversational constraints are essential concerns regarding the manner in which a message is constructed, and intend to influence the general character of every conversation, and an individual's communication style in general.

According to M. Kim (1993), there are two origins for conversational constraints. The first is "face support as relational concern" (p. 138). This concern relates to the speaker's

awareness of supporting the hearer's desire in order to gain approval. The sociological principle of relational harmony is the fundamental motivation behind the preference for face-supporting behavior (M. Kim, 1993). An ideal relationship would be in which the interactants' face is maintained, thus few conflicts happen. Although the concept of face is most valued in some Asian culture (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan), the concern for reducing conflicts and maintaining a harmonious relationship is universal. The second origin of conversational concern is "clarity as task-orientation" (M. Kim, 1993, p. 138). In some particular situations, the speaker may be required to convey the message as clearly and explicitly as possible, in order to not waste time or to avoid unnecessary steps. To do this, the speaker is more likely to take more direct communication tactics. Although these two constraints above seem to be contradictory to some extent, M. Kim (1993) believed that they need not be in conflict on every occasion.

M. Kim (1995) divided the conversational constraints into two kinds: (a) concern with face support, interpersonal relations, needs for others, and of one's relationship with them and (b) concern with getting one's own way. The former constraint contributes to the intention of maintaining social relationships, while the latter focus more on completing tasks and achieving personal goals. In total, three conversational constraints are defined in the following section.

The Three Concerns

Concern for clarity.

According to M. Kim (1995), clarity is the possibility of a speech making one's intention clear and accurate. That is, the more the speaker want to make himself/herself clear,

the more explicitly he/she expresses. Therefore, increasing need for clarity would lead to a choice of more direct conversational strategies, to achieve the goal of making the conversation efficient. For example, if one attempts to use “hint strategies” (M. Kim, 1995, p. 152), what the speaker said might not be the central meaning. This kind of strategy is considered not effective because the hearer may need to spend more time on figuring out what the speaker is trying to imply, which leads to slowing down the process of communication. However, speakers need to talk in a very clear and accurate way if they have strong intention to save time and get to the point. Just as Raines and Ewing (2006, p. 71) have noted, one way to minimize the risk of being misinterpreted is to state clearly to yourself what your intention is.

A strong concern for clarity has both pros and cons. To convey a concise and resolute message, the speaker usually tends to use an indubitable tongue, which makes a dominant conversation. This notion is similar to Norton’s dominant communication style (1978). In his article, Norton discussed that the intention of a dominant communicator is to take charge of social interactions (1978). This, however, could lead to a good outcome or consequence of a conversation. For instance, patrons who do not visit luxury restaurants frequently may need suggestions from service employees. Even though the service employees strongly recommend certain menu items, because of patrons’ lack of familiarity with the menu, this kind of dominant communication style can still maintain a high level of trust (Kang & Hyun, 2012). Conversely, misuse of dominant constraint would result in hurting the listener’s feeling, or even worse, causing misunderstanding. For example, in Luring’s research (2011), the Indian employees would regard the direct communicative act of their Danish manager as

an obstacle to interaction, because in Indian culture people tend to communicate in a more indirect way.

Recent studies tend to attribute the different preference for communication styles to individual-level reasons, among which self-construal has been most frequently mentioned. According to Cross, Hardin and Swing (2009), self-construal refers to how individuals define and make meaning of self in relation to others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) identified two types of self-construals: independent and interdependent. The independent self-construal emphasizes the uniqueness of individuals, and being more interested in achieving personal goals. Thus high independent self-construal would result in direct communication styles, because with independent self-construal, individuals care less about other's thoughts and feelings than theirs. (Cross, Hardin & Swing, 2009). By contrast, interdependent self-construal might result in less concern for clarity, because individuals with high interdependent self-construal consider it important to maintain social relationships.

Concern for avoiding hurting the hearer's feelings.

If the listener feels bad about the conversation, he/she may stop the process of communication. Therefore, the speaker may tend to protect the listener's feelings in order to achieve communication goals (M. Kim, 1995). These goals might be seeking approval, reaching agreements or leaving a good impression. For instance, rude instructions (e.g., "Keep quiet!") are more likely to make the listener uncomfortable and lead to uncooperative manners. Instead, gentle hints (e.g., "It will be very nice of you to talk later.") are more acceptable, increasing the possibility of an efficient outcome. This concern for avoiding hurting the hearer's feelings (M. Kim, 1995) has similar names, such as "concern with

support” (Green & Lindsey, 1989).

In Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, they argued that people cooperate in maintaining face in interaction, and face could be ignored in cases of social breakdown, urgent cooperation or in the interests of efficiency (1987). Since people may choose to defend when their face is threatened, speakers who hurt others’ face risk retaliatory attacks on their own (Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998). Therefore, it is vital to identify different face-threatening acts for the purpose of not threatening others’ face by accident, as well as maintaining our own face. Brown and Levinson proposed the concepts of *negative face* and *positive face* (1987, p. 62). Negative face refers to the want to maintain one’s own autonomy, while positive face is the desire to have one’s actions approved by others (Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998). Later in their book, Brown and Levinson distinguished face-threatening acts that hurt both the speaker and listener’s negative and positive face. Acts like giving order and command increase the risk of hurting others’ face, thus speakers who tend to protect the hearer’s feelings ought to avoid such acts.

Concern for minimizing imposition.

This constraint refers to the degree to which an utterance avoids imposing on the hearer or interfering with the hearer’s freedom of action (Brown & Levinson, 1978). That is, in a conversation, the speaker might prevent forcing the hearer to accept his points of view, or trying to persuade the hearer to make any changes in behavior. For example, by saying “I don’t know why people are having so much fast food. It’s high in fat and sugar”, the speaker is trying to force the hearer to approve this idea and quit fast food, which can be seen as making imposition on others. This imposition could happen when the speaker feels really

worried, annoyed or has other negative emotions, and it could also happen when people are giving orders and commands. However, when saying “Fast food is always in high fat and sugar, but since it’s convenient, it is understandable that why people are having so much” the speaker tends to avoid compelling the hearer agree to the central idea (fast food is unhealthy), but only to express personal ideas.

In Brown and Levinson’s research, the concern for minimizing imposition was abstracted as “negative politeness” (1987). Thus, this constraint can be considered as avoiding to hurt other’s negative face. In order not to make the hearer feel that he/she is forced to agree on speaker’s ideas, the speaker offers the hearer “options of noncompliance” (M. Kim, 1995, P. 153). That is, the hearer is able to decide whether he agrees with the speaker, to which degree he agrees, and whether or not to he will act according to the speaker’s hints. In this case, the hearer is compelled to accept what the speaker says.

Like the other two constraints, this concern could also influence the using of communication styles. Individuals who concern more about minimizing imposition are more likely to choose to communicate indirectly, while individuals concern less about avoiding making compositions on others might use direct communication styles. However, conversational constraints can meanwhile be affected by different cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism and collectivism), which will be discussed later in this study.

In summary, these three conversational constraints are viewing as individuals’ considerations while they are choosing different interaction strategies. The more eager the speaker wants to complete tasks or achieve primary goals, the more explicit and clearer the message would be. The more approval the speaker needs from the hearer, the more he/she

cares about protecting the hearer's feelings or minimizing imposition.

From a Practical Perspective: Singelis's Exercise of Understanding Communication

Styles

By analyzing M. Kim's interpretation of conversational constraints, Singelis (1998) believed that interactive constraints strongly affect people's preference for choosing different communication styles across cultures. To better teach people to understand this notion, Singelis designed an exercise in which three sample conflict situations handouts were included. The situations are (a) your roommate has too many guests and they often make a lot of noise even when you are concentrating on course work, (b) your friend is always late when you are in charge of the office where you work, while he is seldom late when the manager is present, and (c) in a very important group project, you are designated to be the leader. One group member always skips group meetings without even informing anyone. After the description of each situation, there are five questions that require the participants to answer how important they feel it is to (a) make the point clear and direct, (b) get the other person to do what is wanted, (c) avoid hurting other's feelings, (d) avoid imposing on the other person, (e) avoid looking negative in the eyes of the other person. These five questions apply well to the five conversational constraints.

This simulation exercise was designed to offer an opportunity for the participants to perceive the reasons behind people's preference for communication styles. Singelis believed that understanding each other's styles, and motives behind them, would be the first step to overcoming intercultural misunderstanding (1998). In his analysis, Singelis regarded the conversational constraints as a tool for understanding communication styles. Meanwhile, he

also introduced the notion of conflict management as a motivation for choosing different communication styles. Thus the logic would be like this: In intercultural situations, individuals might turn to certain communication styles in order to avoid or deal with conflicts. However, conversational constraints are the “general motivating force in the selection of conflicts strategies and tactics” (Singlelis, 1998, p. 102).

From a practical perspective, Singelin’s exercise provides a thought for studying the relationship between conversational constraints and conflict management, which is letting the participants feel the differences in simulated situations. The current study on long-distance intercultural relationships is not conducted to test existing theories, but to investigate how people maintain a special intimate relationship. The participants involved in this study may have seldom related their experience of dealing with conflicts to communication styles, and during the process of investigation they might not be able to recall being in a real situation where conflicts are caused by communication styles. Therefore, creating simulated situations could help participants think about the questions in more realistic contexts. However, the risk is that in this case the participants may be led by the investigator, and some unexpected answers are less likely to appear. This strategy is reviewed because it helps to design the research, such as introducing important notions of communication styles and conflict management to participants. It might be advantageous, but it should be very carefully used.

Recent Studies

M. Kim is still working on this theory with her associates. In her most current version of conversational constraints theory, M. Kim (2005) added two more constraints: “concern for avoiding negative evaluation by the hearer” and “concern for effectiveness”. This expansion

of the theory provides opportunities for new research (Y. Kim, 2012).

Although individualism and collectivism have been regarded as major cultural dimensions, M. Kim is turning to focus on individual-level dimensions of culture. Self-construal has been found to make a contribution to the concerns for communication styles. In a recent study, M. Kim et al. (2010) designed a questionnaire to reflect the participants concern for the five conversational constraints. The results showed that interdependent self-construal did affect the participants' concern for avoiding hurting others' feelings, but it did not influence their concern for effectiveness. This study examined the concept of self-construal as a culture dimension at the individual level. However, there are still few studies on distinguishing conversational constraints for verbal and nonverbal communication, which might be another consideration for future researches.

Conclusion

Conversational constraints are the motivations behind people's preference of conversational strategies. The three main concerns: concern for avoiding hurting the hearer's feelings, concern for minimizing imposition and concern for clarity can generally be categories from two origins of this theory: face-support and clarity as task-orientation. Scholars have been using this theory to teach people to understand communication styles, and improve their abilities to cope with conflicts.

The reason why conversational constraints theory is reviewed for this study is that in long-distance intercultural relationships, conflicts may be caused by many facts, and the current study is focusing on the conflicts that are caused by communication styles.

Long-distance intercultural couples may realize that their partner is using different kinds of

communication styles, but they might simply believe that this is due to cultural differences.

Cultural differences could be the reason for these couples to understand each other, but it also might be an excuse to leave the problems unsolved, because cultural differences are usually considered unsolvable. The motivations behind people's choice of communication styles could be cultural or individual, but the key is whether couples could perceive the real motivations of their partner and deal with conflicts appropriately.

Conflict Management Styles

Defining Conflict

The definition of conflict has been expanded and complemented throughout decades. In Coser's book *The Function of Social Conflict*, from a sociological perspective, he defined conflict as "a struggle between opponents over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources" (Coser, 1956, p. 8). Using words of "struggle" and "opponents", he implied the competitive properties of conflict and defined it as a driving force behind the replacement of social power. Later in 1973, Deutsch further defined the concept of conflict as "an action which is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes with, or injures, or in some way makes it less likely or less effective" (1973, p. 51). Although the notion of parties of conflicts are not literally mentioned, Deutsch also elaborated on the irreconcilable between parties and emphasized the unequal results. The concept of parties was referred in Wall's further elaboration of this term, in which he stated "Conflict is a process in which two or more parties attempt to frustrate the other's goal attainment... the factors underlying conflict are threefold: interdependence, differences in goals, and differences in perceptions" (1985, p. 155). The emphasis is put on the differences between parties, which leads to the development

of the concept to a new direction.

Later in 1991, Conrad redefined conflict from a communication perspective. He stated that “Conflicts are communicative interactions among people who are interdependent and who perceive that their interests are incompatible, inconsistent or intension” (p. 137). Here communication is regarded as an essential element in conflicts, as it takes place during the process when people are interacting. With the development of the concept of conflict, the possibility of conflict management was proposed. Folger, Poole, and Stutman elaborate on the term as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals” (2001, p. 5). Even though the “goals” are still “incompatible”, the competitive proportion of conflict is weakened, which means parties may not tend to achieve their goals by sacrificing the other’s interests. One of the newest developments would be Mayer’s including of emotional reaction to a situation where disagreement happens. He pointed out that we express our feelings when facing conflicts in order to get our needs met, and this action may potentially hinder other parties’ abilities to achieve their goals (2012).

These definitions include some common elements. First, they indicate that conflict is a social phenomenon by emphasizing the indispensable participation of people. Second, parties involved in the conflicts more or less perceive incompatibility between them. Third, conflict usually ends up with certain parties’ abilities to achieve goals being interfered or weakened. Throughout the study on conflict, it’s contingent negative effects and dangers have been brought up repeatedly. However, more recent studies begin to reconsider the functions of conflict with a new vision. For example, Hocker and Wilmot regarded conflict as “a normal

human event that occurs in all important relationships” (1991, p. 42). They stated that conflict could be creative and useful if managed effectively, and managed in a safe environment (1991).

Deutsch classified five types of conflicts: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup and international (1973). The current studies conflict management between two parties of long-distance intercultural couples, so the focus will be put on interpersonal conflict.

Conflict Management Styles

Table 1

Five Conflict Styles

Mode	Concern for Self	Concern for Others
Competing	High	Low
Compromising	Moderate	Moderate
Collaborating	High	High
Avoiding	Low	Low
Accommodating	Low	High

Source: Adapted from Kilmann & Thomas, 1977.

Kilmann and Thomas (1977) developed a mode of five conflict management styles based on Blake and Mouton’s (1964) five conflict-solving strategies. In their mode, Kilmaan and Thomas examed five different attitudes towards conflict, based on how much parties concern for themselves and others. This conflict-mode instrument has been used in a wide range of studies on conflict (Brisoff & Victor, 1998; Folger, Poole & Stutman, 2001,

Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Competing is the extreme behavior when parties concern much about achieving their own goals, while the cost is sacrificing other parties' interests. In an interpersonal conflict, one party may use strategies to win to be acknowledged. However, the party who has lost may feel frustrated or dissatisfied (Borisoff & Victor, 1998). Thus, competing is a relatively dangerous conflict management style to interpersonal conflict, because the outcome more or less hurts some parties' interests, causing negative effect on the relationship.

The other extreme behavior would be avoidance. This strategy is usually employed when "individuals does not immediately pursue his or her own concerns or those of the other person" (Thomas & Kilmaan, 2008). Avoidance behavior reflects parties' denial of the problem, inability or unwillingness to deal with the conflict, which can be considered as a negative attitude (Borisoff & Victor, 1998).

Accommodating happens when parties try to protect other's interests or care more about the relationship rather than outcomes of the current conflict, and they have less intention to achieve their own goals. According to Folger, Poole, and Stutman, accommodation is usually designed to "improve a bad or shaky relationship or to preserve a good one" (2001, p. 227). They believe that accommodating is useful when parties pay more attention to future relationships than with conflict itself, and when one party is too much weaker than the other to win any competition.

Compromising style has moderate levels of concern for self and others, which tries to find a balance between parties' interests. It happens when parties have strong intention to achieve certain goals with, but have to give up some needs. The feature of this style is that

“with the satisfaction of achieving some goals comes the bitterness of having to give up others” (Folger, Pool, & Stutman, 2001, p. 228), which means only part of each party’s requirements can be met. It is an effective behavior when parties involved in the conflict have agreements on some main issues but disagree on some minor problems.

When parties try to find solutions that achieve all their goals, they are more likely to choose to collaborate. It is generally considered as the most positive and productive conflict management style because it seeks a win-win situation. Collaborating requires both high levels of concern for self and others in order to meet all parties’ needs. Collaborating is easily confused with compromising, while the difference is that in a compromising situation certain goals have to be given up, but in a collaborating situation, all requirements are met.

Recent studies explore conflict management styles from different perspectives. In Chen, Wu, and Bian’s study (2014), they investigated the relationship between conflict management styles and cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment, and they found that active conflict management styles work as moderator. Saiti studies the potential source of conflict in Greek primary schools (2014), and she discovered that strategy of confrontation is used more by school leaders than strategies of compromise and avoidance when dealing with conflicts among teaching staff. Moreover, in their case study of cross-cultural conflict management styles, Vollmer and Wolf (2015) suggested that managers of intercultural collaboration projects need to address conflict management styles effectively, and include conflict behavior techniques in training for members.

Conflict Management in a Cross-culture Context

According to Borisoff and Victor, the first step to evaluate a potential intercultural

misunderstanding is to understand the importance of intercultural communication (1998).

This may include the awareness of the need for intercultural competence, which enables parties to distinguish intercultural conflict from other conflicts.

Understanding the concept of culture may be considered as a basic element of developing intercultural competence. However, culture is such a complicated notion that there is actually no universal agreement on it. Culture has many different meanings, which “differ along the dimensions of use, content, scope and status” (Piller, 2011, p. 15). For example, Hofstede and Hofstede defined culture as “the collective programming of mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (2005, p. 4), while Ting-Toomey and Oetzel stated that “Culture is a learned system of meaning that fosters a particular sense of share identity and community among its group members” (2001, p. 9). Although understanding the definition of culture is not a compulsory ability to manage intercultural conflict, parties’ awareness of culture may still influence their judgment on the issue.

Culture and communication cannot be separated, especially when communication becomes even more important in dealing with an intercultural conflict after identifying it with knowledge and experience. Effective intercultural conflict management requires us to communicate adaptively and flexibly in many different conflict situations, and also it requires the ability to recognize differences and similarities of various of factors that affect the intercultural conflict episode (Ting-Toommy & Ozetzel, 2001). Folger, Poole, and Stutman emphasized the importance of communication in conflict management by stating “conflicts are best understood if we view them as a form of interaction” (2001, p. 17). As conflict

happens between parties, it is natural that it is caused by and developed through interpersonal interactions, which contributes to the complexity of most conflicts.

Conflict Management in Intimate Relationships

As what is mentioned above, conflict exists through people's interaction, thus the frequency of interactive activities may affect degrees of conflict. In close relationships (e.g. parent-children relationships, marital relationships and dating relationships), it is believed that people usually communicate more frequently than in some less close relationships (e.g. seller-customer relationships, doctor-patient relationships, teacher-student relationships). According to Canary, Cupach, and Messman (1995), "People experience conflict in their most important, close relationships" (p. 18), emphasizing the nature of conflicts in intimate relationships.

Conflict in dating relationships has received more scholarly attention. If managed appropriately, conflict in intimate couples can contribute to a better understanding between partners. When not handled well, conflict can hurt both the relationship and the partners. There are several explanations for conflict in dating relationships. The first explanation would be individual's ability to face and cope with the conflict. Secondly, gender differences are commonly acknowledged to be an important cause of conflict. Besides, individual differences and goals are also believed to be associated with relationship conflicts (Caughlin, Vangelisti, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013).

For intercultural intimate couples, conflict may be caused not only by the reasons above but also by cultural issues. A certain level of intercultural competence is required to distinguish intercultural conflict from other conflicts. Let's assume intercultural couples are

more open to cultural differences because they choose to be in such kinds of relationships, but they still need the ability to measure the situation before actions are taken when intercultural conflict happens. According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001), three competences are required to manage dating intercultural-intimate conflict. First, partners should spend an enormous amount of time on expressing their own cultural values and expectations as well as listening and understanding their partner's. Second, partners need to make it clear both to themselves and to their partners where and why the confusion arises. Third, couples have to learn to respect each other rather than blaming and criticizing. They also need to use appropriate words, phrases, and nonverbal gestures to create a friendly and relaxing environment. With these competences, couples are more likely to listen, understand, and deal with the conflict in a more peaceful and effective way.

Method

Basic Study Parameters

This research is purely qualitative, in which snowball sampling and semi-structured interview are applied. Altogether seven long-distance intercultural couples were interviewed. In this study, no limits for ages and nationalities are set, and parties of these couples come from Europe, East Asia, Australia and America. Interviews were completed by meetings, Skype meetings, and emails. With the approval of interviewees, conversations were recorded during meeting interviews and later transcription of recordings was carried out. The study took place both in Denmark and Finland.

Sampling

Considering the small scale of this study, snowball sampling is applied in the study.

According to Oliver (2006), snowball sampling is a kind of non-probability sampling in which the first appropriate respondent who is identified by the researcher is then asked to recommend another respondent. This is a repeated process that will stop when the researcher has collected enough data. This technique can be applied to a context which involves surveying members of a rare population (Chromy, 2008), and it can help the researchers include the people in the research that they have never known. In this study, long-distance intercultural couples can be categorized as a “rare population” because these couples both have to be geographically separated and intercultural. Some people may choose not to mention their personal life to acquaintance but only to family and close friends, which adds to difficulties in locating this hidden population. Although it cannot be guaranteed that every long-distance intercultural couple knows some people who are also in such a relationship, it is still a more practical way to find the next respondents compared to other data samplings, which often require the researcher to locate respondents randomly.

Snowball sampling is “particular relevant to interview data” (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015, p. 94). As semi-structured interview is the research method for this study, snowball sampling helps guide the research. As what will be discussed, the interview questions will touch upon private information, which makes it rather important to build trust between the interviewer and interviewees. In snowball sampling, the next “potential participants” (Oliver, 2006, p. 283) are recommended by the former participants who they trust (It will be much less likely for them to participate in the interview if they don’t trust the recommenders). This costs less effort for the interviewer to build trust before the interview takes place. In this case, snowball sampling is also a low-cost research technique.

In this study, interviewees are initially recruited through a Facebook group post, university group email list, and recommendation from an acquaintance, then these interviewees are requested to recommend other people they know who might be able to take part in the interviews. In the description of adequate interviewees, it is mentioned that couple should come from different cultures and be currently geographically separated, and have been in a long-distance intercultural relationship for at least half a year (see Table 1). The requirement for the duration of such relationship is set because half a year allows time for these couples to learn their partners' communication style, to experience conflicts, and to think about their relationships. No age or nationality limits are set for this research.

Table 1

	Duration of long-distance intercultural relationship	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation
Couple 1	10 months	Female	23	Swiss	Student
		Male	26	Australian	Student
Couple 2	2 years	Female	25	UK	Student
		Male	28	Estonian	Engineer
Couple 3	6 years	Female	29	Mexican	Doctor
		Male	30	French	Engineer
Couple 4	1.5 years	Female	25	Japanese	Movie Publishing
		Male	25	Colombian	Jeweler
Couple 5	8 months	Female	24	Finnish	Student

		Male	23	Austrian	Student
Couple 6	4 years	Female	28	Russian	Student
		Male	30	Mexican	Student
Couple 7	2.5 years	Female	25	Finnish	Student
		Male	26	Polish	Architect

Data Collection

Semi-structured interview is the data collection method for this study. It is a qualitative data collection technique in which the researcher asks respondents a set of predetermined questions, which lead to open-ended answers (Ayres, 2008). The list of questions in such interviews acts more like a flexible guide, which helps the interviewer guide the conversation with their interviewees (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher avoids “yes or no” questions but will ask specific questions based on the research questions or hypotheses. In the study of long-distance intercultural intimate relationships, interviewees are asked to tell personal stories about the conflicts caused by their different communication styles. Therefore, narrative interviews are designed in which the interview questions could not be to close-ended.

Altogether 14 interviews were done during six months from November 2015 to April 2016, among which 4 were done in Denmark and 10 were done in Finland. Meeting and Skype interviews were done with interviewees who were willing to talk and meet by person. For those who were not comfortable with speaking with a stranger, interview questions were sent by email, and later answers were collected through email. The list of interview questions acts as a semi-structured guide. What is structured is that all interviewees are asked about their

cultural background, use of communication style, and their ways to deal with conflicts. Most questions were asked verbatim, but some concepts were explained when interviewees asked, which might lead to different perceptions. Some questions were also skipped when interviewees already provided enough relevant information in previous answers, or when interviewees were not able to answer.

Another consideration of data collection is to create an appropriate environment when doing interviews. According to Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2015), many semi-structured interviews are conducted in locations which are agreed upon both by the interviewer and interviewees. This is particularly important for interviews that require a comfortable and confidential environment especially when interview questions concern privacy. Taking the interview in a location that allows the interviewees a higher sense of security helps build trust between interviewers and interviewees. In this study, each party was interviewed separately, to minimize the influence from their partner. When recruiting, it was mentioned that the conversation would be recorded, to make sure that interviewees were comfortable with that. For the interviews that were conducted by meeting and Skype, conversations took place in some quiet places without interference like empty classroom and dormitory, also it was stated at the beginning of each interview that the conversation would be kept private. Likewise, interviewees who did interviews via emails were told that no third person would see the script. This proved to work well to reduce interviewees' worries about privacy, making them more willing to express.

Data Analysis Procedure

In this qualitative research, thematic analysis is applied as data analysis method. In Braun

and Clarke's *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology* (2006), they not only give the definition of thematic analysis, but also indicate the advantages, some considerations before conducting analysis, and a step-by-step guide. The data analysis procedure of this study mainly follows the 6 phases of thematic analysis process that is inducted by Braun and Clarke.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79), and one of the most essential advantages of it is flexibility. The flexibility is reflected by researchers' freedom of deciding the themes and forms of thematic analysis based on their research questions. Braun and Clarke also identify different forms of thematic analysis on the basis of whether it is driven by data or by the researcher's theoretical interests. In this study, research questions are mainly based on the theoretical framework; however, the purpose of this study is not to "confirm a predetermined idea" (Guest, MacQueen & Namney, 2012, p. 39) but to explore a special form of romantic relationship. The function of the review of two specific theories is to offer directions for designing research questions. Therefore, data analysis of this study is both data-driven and theoretically driven.

The whole data analysis process is divided into 6 stages in accordance with Braun and Clarke's 6 phases of thematic analysis.

Table 2

Stage	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing myself with my	6 interviews were done by meeting and Skype, and each interview lasted for 20 minutes on average. In order not to miss any information, I wrote

data	down every word said by interviewees as well as some nonverbal language (sign, smile and laugh). As for email interviews, I printed out all the answers as soon as I got them, and I highlighted some repeated information when I was reading the data.
2. Generating initial codes	After I had done with all the data collection and transcription, I started to re-read my data, and I wrote down some initial ideas. I also tried to find connections between answers to different questions.
3. Searching for themes	I wrote down some potential themes such as “awareness of cultural difference”, “types of communication styles”, “level of compromise” and so on. I roughly sorted the themes based on their connections with my research questions.
4. Reviewing the themes	I drew a thematic map and checked how each theme is related to a certain code. I reviewed and refined my coding for several times, to make sure that the thematic map fits the data set.
5. Defining and naming themes	After I decided the themes, I check whether a theme contains any sub-themes. I worked on explaining each theme until it was clearly described, and also naming the themes concisely.
6. Producing the report	The report includes results part and discussion part. In results part, samples quotes are given to illustrate a certain theme, in forms of tables and indications. In discussion part, I will provide analytic narrative beyond description of the data, and make arguments in relation to my

	research questions.
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Source: Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006.

Results

All interviewees stated that “being long-distance” is a more severe problem than “being intercultural”. They talk more about where and when to meet physically, instead of how much their cultures are different. Misinterpreting partners’ wording in written messages and two parties’ different ideas about planning future sometimes cause misunderstandings, and it makes the situations worse when they are not able to solve the problems face-to-face. On the other hand, “language” is also a notable issue even if the couples speak the same language. This problem becomes more obvious when two parties have different levels of knowledge about the shared language, and also when parties are communicating with their partners’ family members or friends who don’t speak their shared language.

When interviewees were asked about their and their partners’ cultural background, most of them mentioned national cultures (see table). Among the 10 interviewees who believed that there were obvious cultural differences between them and their partner, 4 of them stated that the differences were only stereotypical, and 3 of the 10 first denied there were cultural differences but later named some notable ones.

Table 3

Code 1: Cultural awareness		
Perception of culture and cultural differences	Number of interviewees (out of 14)	Sample Quotes

National culture	13	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> European. I'm from Poland, my girlfriend from Finland.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> I am from Finland. My partner is from Austria. His mother is Austrian and his father is Greek.</p> <p><i>Quote 3:</i> My culture is from Japan, his is from Colombia</p> <p><i>Quote 4:</i> I am from Netherlands, but my nationality is English or British. So I grew up in Netherlands so I suppose maybe we can include that as my culture because I grew up there and I am more familiar with the culture from Netherlands than with British, so...</p>
Other	2	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> Caucasian? I'm French. She is Latin, from Mexico.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> I am Swiss, he is Australian. Despite the distance we both feel that we mostly share the same "Western" culture.</p>
There are obvious cultural differences	10	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> The Swiss are quite punctual and organized. I'm not.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> The biggest difference, at least now when I am still experiencing I think, it's like our um...sense of time and responsibility.</p> <p><i>Quote 3:</i> Rules, Japanese people have a lot of rules and Colombians are more spontaneous and cheerful.</p> <p><i>Quote 4:</i> I think as far as sort of stereotypical culture goes; I think Estonians might be more afraid of confronting people. But I say stereotypical because my boyfriend isn't really like that at all, but from his culture's perspective I'd say...People are not good at small talk, and maybe less likely to confront someone with their...something bothers them.</p>
There are not obvious cultural differences	4	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> Um...I don't know. I don't think there are that big major differences.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> I don't see so many differences in our cultures. I have only once visited Austria and there I saw a lot of stuff relating to religion, something that is not so visible in Finland.</p>

The 4 cross-continent couples all named big differences between their and their partner's cultures. The most frequently mentioned word is "rules". These couples noticed different

requirement for being punctual, being responsible, and respecting privacy in their and their partner's cultures. As for the European couples, only couple 2 indicated obvious stereotypical cultural differences, while couple 5 and couple 7 believed that the differences were too minor to be taken into account.

Interviewees addressed 5 concerns that they have when they are in a long-distance relationship (see table). They worry most about the distance problem, which they think is the source of questions such as "How long-distance relationships work and am I going to be good at being one", "How is it going to be different compared to 'normal' relationship, or is it", "Are we going to stay in love even we are not able to see each other every day". Only one interviewee (female party from couple 6) thinks that distance is a good part of the relationship because she feels comfortable about not having to be with the person all the time. Another issue that was mentioned by over half of the interviewees is verbal language. Among the 7 couples that were interviewed, 4 couples (couple 1, 3, 5,7) speak only English with each other, couple 2 speak English and Estonian, couple 4 speak Japanese and Spanish, couple 6 speak English and Spanish. From their situations, we can conclude that English becomes the shared language, if not the only one, when at least one party is from a European country. 10 interviewees speak English with their partner when English is not their first language, 9 of them feel more or less stressed when they are communicating with their partner's families, friends and even with their partner. The stress may come from insufficient capabilities for using the language (English or partner's first language), different senses of humor and lack of confidence.

Three other problems that were addressed by less than half of the interviewees were

planning for future, support from family and cultural differences. Both parties from couple 2, 3, 6 were thinking much about whether they are finally living together, and also when and where they were going to live. They said that sometimes disagreements occurred when they were planning the future with their partner, which added to uncertainty in their relationships. Two interviewees from Mexican both mentioned their concern for the lack of family support, which was caused by different expectation from their and their partner's family. For instance, some parents care more about whether their children are happy with their relationships, while some may look at more the economical situation. The interviewees from Japan and Russian also have this concern. Only one interviewee thinks that the cultural difference does harm to their relationships, while the rest of them believe it helps them learn from different people.

Table 4

Code 2: Main concern for the relationship		
Themes	Numbers of interviewees (out of 14)	Description
Concern 1: distance	13	Interviewees regard distance as a big challenge. They think much about when and where they are going to meet, how long the meeting will last, what the best contact method is, and how the relationship will go when they are not able to meet each other physically.
Concern 2: verbal language	9	Language problems usually occur when interviewees are communicating with their partners' parents, who are less capable of speaking English.
Concern 3: the future	6	Almost half of the interviewees are thinking of the place where they are finally living together, and whether they are doing to build a family together.
Concern 4: family support	4	For interviewees who are from the culture where

	family connection is relatively stronger, they concern about how much the relationship is supported by their and their partner’s family.
Concern 5: cultural differences 1	Most interviewees do not regard cultural differences as an important issue, but 1 of them conveyed her worry about her partner’s “inappropriate” interaction with heterosexual friends, which is culturally different.

When interviewees are talking about their concerns with their partner, there are particular communication styles that they prefer (see table). The majority of the interviewees prefer to get to the point directly, even if they know that their partner would not be happy to hear what they say. Interviewees who prefer this communication style hold the opinion that they would get tired if they pretend to be someone that they are not, and they believe that it is important to be honest. They have a strong intention to get the problems solved, rather than to leave them aside. Some of the interviewees would express themselves more indirectly. They usually first tell part of the truth to see how their partner reacts, and talk about the concerns by asking their partner’s opinions. Two interviewees would ignore the problems when they realize them, in order to avoid potential conflicts. From Table 5 we can see that parties from 5 couples are using different communication styles when they address their concerns for their relationships.

Table 5

Code 3: Ways in which concerns are addressed		
Themes	Description	Demographic information of interviewees who prefer this way (see also Table 1)
Directly	Interviewees who prefer to express the	Female party from couple 1

	concern directly emphasize the importance of being honest and being themselves. They usually prefer to talk about these issues with their partners face-to-face.	Male party from couple 2 Female and male parties from couple 3 Female party from couple 4 Male party from couple 5 Male party from couple 6 Female and male parties from couple 7
Indirectly/sugarcoat	Three of the interviewees address their concerns indirectly. One of them first tells a “light version” to his partner and then the “real version”. The other two will use a tone of inquiry.	Male party from couple 4 Male party from couple 5 Female party from couple 6
Avoid	Two of the interviewees will try to put aside the problems. One of them does this in order to be polite, and the other is trying to avoid spending time on fighting.	Female party from couple 2 Male party from couple 1

Interviewees have different opinions about whether it is positive or negative if they and their partner are using different communication styles. Half of them believe that it is good to communicate differently, which helps them learn from each other. They consider diversity as an important feature of humanity, and they are more open to differences. 4 of the interviewees assume that it would be easier if they and their partner share similar communication style, as they think that different communication styles may cause communication problems. The other three interviewees stated that the best situation would be that both of them take one step back to achieve “a middle way”. They use a special communication style when communicating with their partner, which is distinct from the way that they use to communicate with anyone else.

Table 6

Code 4: Perception of communication styles

Themes	Number of interviewees (out of 14)	Sample Quotes
Similar communication style preferred	4	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> Maybe it's better this way, so maybe it's good. It's not bad that I adapted.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> That's... Well I feel... I suppose we have small differences in the way that we communicate but I think it's basically the same. And that's in a way good, because you understand each other pretty quickly. Whereas if we would have very different communication styles it might be difficult sometimes to...eh...sort of...understand the differences or to understand each other. So for me, similar communication style is a plus.</p> <p><i>Quote 3:</i> I think we are not, but if we would I think it would not be so good as listening to indirect style could start to annoy the person using direct style. And of course with such differences more communication problems can arise.</p>
Different communication styles preferred	7	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> Learning about the other person helps us both to grow, and the fact that I want to please her is a huge motivator to develop my own sense of empathy.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> I have not realized this and I actually think we are not trying to imitate each other's styles of communication.</p> <p><i>Quote 3:</i> I think it's...it's been really good to me that we have different communication styles cuz mine definitely needs some developing and kind of...Because mostly I've been communicating...well throughout my life with people who are by share very similar communication style, so it's been good to...I have...that I had to um...adapting kinda learn to communicate with different styles as well.</p>
A middle way preferred	3	<p><i>Quote 1:</i> Yeah, it's "concession" both have to make a step toward the other.</p> <p><i>Quote 2:</i> We have created our own style with time so no we don't change.</p>

Quote 3: A little bit of both so we can meet up middle way.

All 14 interviewees are feeling positive toward their relationships. Although some of them repeat the negative effect caused by distance, they believe that being in an intercultural relationship help them learn something different from their partners, and they both grow. Some of them even consider their relationships stronger and more valuable, because they treasure the time when they can meet, and they think they are closer to each other after they have been through all the hard time. Many of the interviewees have emphasized the importance of being with the right person who deserves all their commitments to the relationship. They described their changes of attitude toward long-distance intercultural relationships, from negative to positive, because they meet the right person. 5 of the interviewees said that they would recommend it to people, and even the only interviewee who would not recommend is happy with his own situation.

Discussion

Interviewees asked about how to define “culture” and “communication style” during interviews, and they gave answers according to their own understandings of these two concepts. None of the interviewees have received systematic training on developing intercultural communication competence, which might help them build up higher awareness of culture and cultural differences, thus it is not surprising that most of them divide cultures based on national boundaries, not to mention that there is not yet a universal acknowledged definition of “culture”. Sometimes interviewees said that the interview made them think about terms that they had never thought before, such as “communication style,” which they use to ignore, or simply attributed to personalities. Even if they have no stronger awareness

of intercultural communication than normal couples, long-distance intercultural couples are more open to cultural differences, because they need to first psychologically accept the people who are culturally different before they decided to develop an intimate relationship together. In other words, they don't regard cultural differences as barriers. They acknowledge that people are different, no matter culturally or personally, and they are ready to tolerant.

Despite the tolerance for cultural differences, distance is considered to be a great challenge by these couples. Even if they knew that they would be in a long-distance relationship in advance, they are still struggling with problems of missing each other and not being able to meet physically. Some of the interviewed couples believe that they are talking more to each other than normal couples because they cannot learn from each other by doing things together such as going to see movies or partying with friends. Their interactive activities are through written messages or video-chat applications, which force them to talk. However, many of them still feel the difficulties. One interviewee described the hard time as follows:

When delivering bad news I would want to be next to him so that I could comfort and be there for him. This is one of the sides that is a bit hard in a long-distance relationship, not being able to be there physically for the other person when they need you (personal communication, April 22, 2016).

The problem of verbal language is frequently mentioned but not taken very seriously by interviewees. There are three reasons for this situation. The first is that both parties are able to speak the shared language very well, or they don't mind the small mistakes made by themselves or by their partner. The second reason is that one party is enthusiastic about

learning the other's language. Thirdly, even if interviewees realized the difficulties in communicating with their partner's family or friends, they don't feel too stressed because they don't spend much time together.

For couples that have already been in a long-distance intercultural relationship for over 2 years, it is more likely that they have started to think about the future. Questions about the future include when and where they are going to finally live together, how are they getting jobs there, and whether they are going to build a family. According to social penetration theory, individuals talk about more private and intimate topics when the relationship reaches the stable exchange stage (Miller, 2002), which explains why long-distance intercultural couples start to discuss more serious problems with each other after they have been in the relationship for a comparatively longer time, they consider their relationship more intimate and stable. Another possibility is that these couples have suffered more from the distance problems, and they are tired of being geographically isolated.

The problem of lack of family support is concerned by interviewees from Mexico, Russian, and Japan. These interviewees believe that family connections are stronger in their cultures, which forces them to take the family expectations into account when they are in a relationship. According to these 4 interviewees, frustration and anxieties arise when they cannot meet expectations of their or/and their partner's family, which as one of them told:

Her family has a lot of more...in terms of what they think will... our relationship will be in terms of a success. They measure it in economic metrics, like "Are you working already? How much are you earning", and that's more important for them. Whereas my families are a little bit more of...eh...how perhaps happy and fulfilled you are living

together. It's not obviously neither is good or better, but that is a difficulty (personal communication, April 6, 2016).

Although cultural differences are not considered to be significant by the participants, it doesn't mean that they don't exist. Actually, many of the concerns could be strongly linked to cultural differences. For example, concerns for family support reflect power distance among national cultures. It is noted that in the large-power-distance culture, children are supposed to be obedient towards their parents, while in the small-distance culture children are encouraged to be independent when they are able to act (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The level of how much an interviewee wants to meet the family expects is connected to the power distance of his/her national culture. Another cultural difference would be the different attitude toward future, which is based on uncertainty avoidance in a culture. As what is reflected in Table 3, most interviewees admit there are obvious cultural differences between them and their partner, but what we can still learn from Table 4 is that cultural differences actually don't bother them much. Despite the reason that they are more open-minded, another possibility would be that they believe cultural differences are natural and can't be solved.

In some cases, these concerns turn into conflicts if they are not expressed in appropriate ways. Here inappropriate ways refer to that the tones they use (by written or by voice), the levels of being direct or indirect are not equally acknowledged by their partner. According to the results of this research, only 2 couples address their concerns in a similar way, which is the direct way. Whereas at least one party of the other 5 couples would circle around the question, or be very careful when they are discussing the problem with their partner. For example, if one of the parties has to change the plan for next meeting, some of the

interviewees would directly tell the reasons and change the plan, some would first say they might be busy those days and ask advice from their partner, while some would even not mention about changing the plan. Interviewees who prefer a direct communication style are trying to be honest, and they want to get the problem solved as soon as possible, while interviewees who prefer indirect communication styles care more about their partner's feelings. If we apply conversational constraints theory to these two situations, the former group of participants have stronger intention to make themselves clear, and to do things effectively, while the later group is trying to avoid hurting their partner's feelings.

Unfortunately, in the example about planning the next meeting, all the three situations might lead to conflicts. One party might not be able to hide the feeling of disappointment if the other one unilaterally announces to change the plan that they made together. It also happens that one party thinks that he/she finally becomes the one who is forced to change the plan when his/her partner asks advice, even if he/she doesn't want to. Also, one party would feel not being trusted or respected if the other is trying to hide something from him/her. Therefore, the term of misinterpretation in this study refers to parties' fail to perceive their partner's real motivations behind the choice of communication styles.

This finding reveals that in this study, although some of their concerns may be rooted from the cultural background, the ways in which interviewees address their concerns are not linked too much to the idea of national culture but appear to be personal choices. When conflicts happen, at that moment participants pay more attention to getting problems solved or temporarily leaving them aside, rather than thinking about the cause. It has been discussed in this study that long-distance intercultural couples may be more open to cultural differences,

so no matter what the real cause is, as long as the couple believes the cause is cultural, they would be more likely to ignore the personal factors. Thus the dilemma would be that couples' high level of tolerance for cultural differences is advantageous to maintaining the relationship, but it could also be disadvantaged when couples take cultural differences for granted but neglect the personal choices behind.

Despite the fact that the majority of interviewed couples are using different communication styles and they sometimes feel the difficulties in communicating with each other, most of them still prefer to be different this way. When asked whether they wish to communicate similarly or differently with their partner, they regarded this question more or less equally to the question of whether they wished to date with someone similar or someone different. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they realized there were some problems with their ways to express themselves, and they were happy that their partner made them willing to talk.

In long-distance intercultural relationships, couples may not be able to deal with conflicts as effective as normal couples do, because of the distance and time difference. However, according to the results, long-distance intercultural couples commonly have a positive attitude toward conflicts, which they believe is a part of any relationships. Two couples even stated that they had never experienced intercultural communication conflicts, or they thought the problems were too insignificant to be noticed. They concern about the distance problem but they also consider it as a testing stone for their relationships. As for conflicts or potential conflicts caused by cultural differences, most of the interviewees stated that they would choose to understand.

All the interviewees in this study feel positive about long-distance intercultural relationships, or at least about their own situation. A lot of them mentioned the importance of being with “the right person”, with whom the pain of being separated, being culturally different is reduced because they are feeling being loved. Some of them described the change of their attitude toward this kind of relationship before and after they met their partner as follows:

Well to be honest, if you would've asked me three years ago “Would you want to be in a long-distance relationship” I would've said “nah”. Cuz like I mean who can be that special that you can cope with living so faraway. It's going so well and I'm happy that he brings his own culture to mine and I bring mine to his, and that's where we grow (personal communication, March 6, 2016).

Before meeting my girlfriend I would not have been able to believe how good this kind of relationship could work if both partners are committed to it so much. But now I see the long distance as a challenge that is totally makeable and worth it in every way. The distance and the problems you have to solve based on that make the relationship even stronger and more valuable (personal communication, April 22, 2016).

Conclusion

RQ 1: What are the motivations behind individuals' preferences for different communication styles?

In long-distance intercultural relationships, couples concern more about the distance problems rather than cultural differences. Due to their openness to cultural differences, mostly they will understand when they realize that their partner has different ideas just

because he/she is thinking from his/her cultural perspective. In this case, they are trying to avoid judging or forcing their partner to accept their ideas. However, when it comes to the problems of distance and future, couples would become more serious. Parties who prefer to discuss the problems directly intend to express their feelings explicitly, and they wish to get the problems solved as soon as possible. It doesn't mean that parties who choose indirect communication styles don't want to solve the problems, but they care too much about how their partner will feel. They know that they cannot put the questions aside forever, but they believe that their relationship requires more commitment than other relationships, so they appreciate the time they have when they are together and try to avoid fighting.

RQ 2: How do intercultural couples usually deal with conflicts caused by intercultural communication issues when they are geographically separated? To what extent the outcomes would influence the relationship?

Conflicts may be caused whether the couples are using similar or different communication styles if one party fails to interpret the other's motivations behind. For long-distance intercultural couples, even though they are ready to tolerate cultural differences, they sometimes are not able to accurately interpret their partner's written and voice messages, or to be correctly interpreted by their partner. Couples cannot see each other's facial expressions or hear the tones through written messages, which might make it difficult for them to decode the messages explicitly, and sometimes the language problem worsens the situation. For example, one party would take it too seriously when the other is actually joking.

Long-distance intercultural couples consider conflicts common to any relationships, and

they regard conflict caused by distance and cultural differences as both challenges and testing stones. The conflicts don't need to be fights or quarrels, but also could be feeling each other's worry about not being able to meet frequently, the embarrassment of staying with partner's families, uncertainty about the future and so on. When conflicts occur, couples prefer to have a face-to-face talk with their partner when they meet or through video-chat applications. Some of them decided to communicate very openly and honestly before they were separated by distance. Another extreme would be that they decided to ignore the distance and cultural issues and value the time that they have together.

Their awareness of potential problems makes long-distance intercultural couples more ready for conflicts, and they generally take positive attitudes toward their relationships. They feel released and closer to each other after going through difficulties, especially when they realize "It was not because you hate me but it was because you didn't understand or because you are used to another way to communicate" (female party from couple 6). They believe that with the right person they are willing to face the problems and conflicts, regardless of the geographical distance or cultural differences.

Limitations and Further Studies

One obvious limitation is insufficient sample amount. Although the data covers Europe, East Asia, Australia and Central America, data from Africa, Middle East, North America, and South America is still missing. Ideas from one person are not representative enough for one culture, no matter how much the ideas are consistent with universal stereotypes. The connection between cultural differences and communication styles may be underestimated due to insufficient participants involved in this study. It is recommended further researchers

test the results with a larger sample amount.

Second, the concept of communication style in this study is based on interviewees' understandings rather than academic resources. The two mostly mentioned communication styles in this study are linked to directness and indirectness. However, the research could be made more reliable if certain communication styles are identified and tested. Again, because of the small sample amount, this study is trying to find out some general features of long-distance intercultural relationships, and researchers who are interested in this area could expand the research by introducing more intercultural concepts.

The third limitation is the lack of study within couples. In order to focus the whole study on preference for communication styles and conflict management of individuals, the comparison is mainly among individual parties rather than between two parties of one couple. For example, further researchers might think about questions like how big the cultural gap is within one couple and to what extent it would influence their attitude toward cultural differences, what if one party takes the distance problems very seriously while the other one doesn't, how much the family support matters to the couple while they are talking about future. Research within couple might be another perspective to consider when studying conflict management in such relationships.

Another consideration for further studies would be the use of online instant messenger software. Separated by long-distance, couples keep contacting through this kind of software, and also deal with problems via software like Facebook messenger, Skype, and WhatsApp. Skype is preferred by most of the interviewees, as some of them enjoy the moment when they can see each other, and even play games together. But the advantages would be that the

couple has first to agree on a time to do video chatting, and it would become a hard situation when their electronic devices cannot get connected to the Internet. One interesting finding is the couples still make phone calls and send messages through phones when emergencies happen, even though this might be much expensive. Why do they switch to telecommunication when they believe something important is happening? How much does the use of instant messenger software influence the relationship? There could be the questions to be answered.

This study is new for its kind, and the findings might be superficial. For those who wish to continue on this topic, it is strongly recommended to conduct research with a much larger sample amount. More useful data is needed to test the correctness of the results, as well as to reveal more about how long-distance intercultural couples deal with conflicts.

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