COMMUNICATING SOCIAL SUPPORT DURING SEX TALK: TESTING THE SUPPORTIVE SEX TALK MODEL

by

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(Under the Direction of Analisa Arroyo)

ABSTRACT

Sex talk is an important process between individuals as it can increase greater perceptions about relational and sexual satisfaction. Sex talk is also critical for relational partners as it allows them to discuss topics that can help maintain intimacy within their relationships. However, sex talk can be equally challenging as individuals have to navigate potential topics that one or both partners may perceive as taboo or off limits. Additionally, individuals may not have the efficacy and skills necessary to communicate about sex with their romantic partner. This dissertation project developed and advanced the Supportive Sex Talk Model (SSM) to understand how individuals seek supportive sex messages from their romantic partner. Grounded in the multiple goals theory and the supportive communication literature, SSM identifies the salience of individuals' message goals association with their evaluation about their partners' esteem supportive messages. The model also examined how evaluation about their partners' characteristics acts as an intervening mechanism that further explains the association between their message goals and supportive sex message outcomes. The results of the study indicated that as support recipients' goal-driven disclosures about sex increased, they had a greater perception about their partners' supportive messages enhancing their self-esteem. However, goal-driven

disclosures about sex were associated with lower quality supportive messages. The findings indicated that support recipients' message goals had varying outcomes on the type and quality of supportive sex messages through evaluation of their partners' characteristics. Results of this project contribute to the theoretical and empirical tenets of SSM to suggest that sex talk is a goal-driven process.

INDEX WORDS: Multiple Goals, Supportive Communication, Goal Structure, Goal Inference, Sex Talk

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

MacNeil and Byers (2005) posit that sexual communication "is important to the development and maintenance of satisfying sexual relationships" (p. 170). Communication about sex is grounded in open and honest communication about sexual matters, and a willingness to put one's social identity at risk of vulnerability (Montesi et al., 2013). Sexual communication allows individuals to disclose their sexual preferences with each other (i.e., likes and dislikes; Cupach & Comstock, 1990). Research demonstrates that sexual communication serves important functions in developing and maintaining sexual relationships (Montensi et al., 2013), sexual and relational satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999), negotiating condom usage (Schmid et al., 2015), and disclosing HIV status (Bird et al., 2017).

Open communication about one's sexual desires can increase relational satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2005), and comfort when discussing taboo sexual topics can lead to greater information seeking about others' sexual health (Afifi & Weiner, 2006). A recent meta-analysis revealed that sex talk is linked to sexual function in men and women (Mallory et al., 2019). Additionally, scholars suggest that sexual communication is associated with sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships (Roels & Janssen, 2020). Research suggests that during sexual acts communication often occurs nonverbally than verbally (i.e., pulling out a condom versus directly requesting sex; Blunt-Vinti et al., 2019).

Although individuals enter their sexual conversations with a primary cognitive task (i.e., initiating or delaying sex; Coffelt, 2018), and barriers and benefits can be gleaned from sex talk

(Edwards et al., 2022; Montemurro et al., 2015), communicators' goals can fluctuate throughout their communicative interactions (Berger, 2003). For example, what can begin as a conversation about one's expertise on sexual health matters (McManus, 2020) can progress to receiving social supportive messages about a sex-related health concern towards the end of the conversation (Byron, 2017). Thus, a comprehensive examination of how individuals co-create meaning of their sexual communicative interactions in supportive contexts is warranted. Theorists maintain that individuals' cognitions influence their own and their conversational partners' evaluation of messages (Caughlin, 2010). Further, prior research demonstrates that sex talk is a goal-driven process (Coffelt & Hess, 2014), and goal-driven message production can influence supportive communicative interactions (Berger, 2003).

Extant research on sexuality has focused on biological, behavioral (Sprecher, 2006), emotional, cognitive (Theiss & Solomon, 2007), physiological (Denes & Afifi, 2014), and dyadic or extradyadic outcomes (Birnbaum et al., 2019; Denes & Speer, 2018). Although research suggests that sexuality is a multidimensional construct that encompasses the human experiences (Sprecher, 2006), understanding how communication influences sex and sexuality is equally important as it is mutually influenced by individuals' intra- and interpersonal level perceptions (Theiss & Solomon, 2007). Scholars have called for theory-driven sexual communication research (Manning, 2021; Theiss & Solomon, 2007). Despite advances in sexual communication research that focuses on behavioral changes at the individual level (Noar, 2007), scholars have also criticized this approach because it does not consider the relational process of sexual communicative interactions (Noar et al., 2006; for exception, see Theiss, 2011). While message production theories suggest that goal pursuit can occur during sexual communicative interactions (Coffelt & Hess, 2014), influencing how individuals understand others' sexual

behaviors (Birnbaum et al., 2019), no theoretical framework currently makes these predictions in a clear and comprehensive fashion. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to understand how the cognitive process of pursuing multiple message goals is associated with supportive message outcomes to develop a model that examines supportive sex talk, the Supportive Sex Talk Model (SSM).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter the theoretical tenets of SSM are each discussed separately to provide an epistemological account of prior theories that the SSM grounds its metatheoretical framework. Specifically, this chapter covers the multiple goals theories and theories of social support. This chapter also cover the literature on esteem support in which this project provides a rationale to test in a situational context. Lastly, the theoretical tenets are integrated to highlight the enmeshment of each framework into developing the SSM.

Multiple Goals Theory

Extant theory and research on goal pursuit in social interaction models communicators as social actors attempting to achieve goals (Palomares, 2008). Goals are defined as cognitive end-states that individuals strive to achieve during their communicative interactions (Dillard, 2015). A common assumption of the multiple goals theory is that communication goals are not singular, and that communicators can pursue several goals at any one time (Worley et al., 2020). Research suggests that communicators also detect or make inferences about others' communication to understand the goals that they pursue (Palomares, 2008). Although theory indicates that individuals pursue multiple secondary goals, individuals often infer a single primary goal, relying on heuristic cues stored from memory to infer others' behaviors (Palomares, 2009). Primary goals determine the purpose of the interaction, while secondary goals reflect motivation that recur in an individual's life (Dillard & Schrader, 1998). In other words, primary goals are cognitive schemas of a desired end-state that individuals strive to attain or maintain during their

communicative interactions. Whereas secondary goals are constraints that guide concerns, considerations, and behavioral expectations (Palomares, 2014).

Scholars agree that goal pursuit (Samp & Solomon, 2005) and goal detection foregrounds cognitive constructs of message production (Palomares, 2008). While research suggests that communicators are consciously aware of the goals that they pursue (Caughlin, 2010), communicators may also pursue goals outside of conscious awareness (Kellermann, 1992). For instance, Birnbaum et al. (2017) examined how sexual priming influence individuals' motivation to disclose personal information in relationship-initiation processes. They observed that merely thinking about sex, even non consciously, can trigger individuals' motivation to initiate a first date with a potential romantic partner (Birnhaum et al., 2017). Therefore, goals are activated by a host of implicit and explicit factors (for a review, see Worley et al., 2020) that helps to facilitate the production and processing of messages (Scott & Caughlin, 2014).

Scholars propose that there are broad types of relevant goals that are significant across social settings, including instrumental, identity, and relational goals (Clark & Delia, 1979). Instrumental goals are the primary focus of the conversation (Scott & Caughlin, 2014). From a sexual communicative perspective, an instrumental goal may include giving advice about a sex-related concern (McManus & Lucas, 2018) or seeking information about a sexual health threat (Afifi & Weiner, 2006). Identity goals reflect concerns of managing the impressions of others (Scott & Caughlin, 2014). And may include individuals upholding their sexual morals regarding sexual behaviors (Skakoon-Sparling & Cramer, 2021). Relational goals are concerns about the development or maintenance of a desirable relationship between communicators (Scott & Caughlin, 2014). For instance, initiating a first date (Mongeau et al., 2004) or relational partners

discontinuing condom use in perceived committed relationships (Bolton et al., 2010) may serve as mechanisms influencing relational outcomes.

There is consensus among multiple goals theorists that pursuing multiple communicative goals can become incompatible or conflict with each other (Samp, 2013). Palomares (2008) contends that incompatible goals can arise when one's own goals does not align with their conversational partners'. In the sexual context research suggests women who are sexual assertive engage in safer sex practices (Morokoff et al., 1997), yet other studies indicate that sexual double standards can inhibit women's ability to express their sexuality freely (Fox et al., 2021). Goals can also become incompatible when individuals lack skills to effectively communicate their sexual desires (Curran et al., 2016). Identity and relational goals may conflict with each other when discussing sexual topics becomes face-threatening or potentially damage the quality of the relationship (Theiss & Elstein, 2014). Although goals can conflict with each other (Unsworth et al., 2014), research suggests that there are other strategies to manage misalignment of communicative goals.

In the next section, I briefly describe one type of multiple goals theory: Dillard's (2015) Goals–Plans–Actions (GPA) theory. Previous theoretical and empirical research have advocated for its utilization to address how communicators manage incompatible goals.

Goals–Plans–Actions Theory

GPA proposes that message production is a three-step sequential process: goals, plans, and actions (Dillard, 2015). As Coffelt (2018) notes, message production begins with an initial goal, followed by the cognitive process of developing plans, and implementing the communicative actions. A prominent feature of GPA is that the interaction goals of primary and secondary goals operate synergistically to influence how communicators engage in compliance-

gaining interactions (LaBelle & Ball, 2019). Interaction goals ensure that the communicative interaction is both smooth and coherent (Dillard et al., 1989). Thus, subsequent messages can influence how communicators pursue interaction goals (Worley et al., 2020).

Although research often focuses on the broad theoretical tenets of primary and secondary goals, scholars propose that there are five types of secondary goals that can influence primary goals (e.g., influence-gaining tactics; for a review, see Dillard et al., 1989). Additionally, research demonstrates that individuals may form other context-specific goals during an interaction (Wilson et al., 2019). For example, Coffelt (2018) linked GPA theory with sexual scripts theory to examine how individuals delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. Briefly, sexual scripts theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) outlines a sequential cognitive process of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that advances towards sexual acts. The theory proposes that men and women engage in culturally appropriate sexual behaviors, where men are encouraged to initiate sexual encounters and women are expected to be gatekeepers of sex (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). However, Coffelt's (2018) study adds an additional layer to the sexual scripts' perspective. Individuals who wanted to delay sex used "I" language to assert their personal choice against sexual activity. Individuals who engaged in a collaborative approach included their partners in the decision-making process to delay or abstain from sex. GPA and sexual scripts theory, together, illuminate how relational partners' micro-level linguistic features influence sexual outcomes in sequential processes (Coffelt, 2018).

Prior research has examined how micro-level linguistic features influence relational outcomes (Samp & Solomon, 2005). For instance, Li et al. (2018) examined how heterosexual African American women's language choice (e.g., I, you, we, and hedging) associated with their own and men's condom negotiation tactics. One hundred ninety-three women were paired with

male confederates to engage in a condom negotiation role-play scenario that lasted between 5 to 7 minutes. Li et al. (2018) observed that African American women used more I- and you-language to assert condom usage or blamed partners for not bringing a condom. For African American women, they used we-language when their partner engaged in information seeking strategies. Although prior research suggests that men often express their relational power more than women (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000), women demonstrated their relational power by using more assertive message strategies to protect their sexual health (Li et al., 2018).

Although Li et al.'s (2018) study did not directly test GPA it does help to contextualize how message production influence sexual outcomes. First, relational partners may employ a host of verbal and nonverbal communicative tactics when negotiating sexual acts (Babin, 2013; Peasant et al., 2015). Second, when relational partners discuss difficult topics, they may rely on their own self-focused goals (Li et al., 2018) or use partner-focused messages to reassert their primary goals (Samp, 2013). Thus, GPA is a useful framework because previous research has demonstrated how complex situations require more cognitive effort (Hullett, 2004), and how goals influence affective and behavioral responses through planning (Wilson et al., 2019). Now I turn to review research on social support.

Theoretical Tenets of Social Support

Theories of supportive communication has extensively borrowed from research examining the effects of social support on message quality and outcomes (Bodie, 2013a). Although social support is a broadly defined concept (for reviews, see Song & Son, 2011; Vangelisti, 2009), extensive research suggests that social support consists of emotional, informational, instrumental (Thoits, 2021), and esteem enhancing interactions (Heller et al., 1986).

Scholars contend that research on social support is generated from three perspectives (Vangelisti, 2009). A sociological perspective on social support focuses on how individuals' social networks provide some type of prosocial behavior (Thoits, 2011). This perspective examines how integrated individuals are within their social networks and is based on primary and secondary groups. Primary groups are smaller in size, informal, and intimate and may include family members and friends. Secondary groups are more formal, and individuals can enter and exit these relationships. As Thoits (2011) contend, the primary-secondary group distinction depends on the amount of time individuals spend together, level of intimacy and disclosures, and reciprocating the provision of social support amongst each other. Substantial research asserts that perceived social support from significant others can promote better mental and physical well-being, and can ameliorate the effects of stress (Thoits, 2011; Turner & Turner, 2012).

Vangelisti (2009) asserts that a psychological perspective focuses on two types of social support: received support and perceived support. Received support refers to receipt of supportive resources, whereas perceived support refers to an individuals' perceived access to support (Uchino, 2009). Research suggests that received support and perceived support are distinct constructs that are moderately correlated with each other (Eagle et al., 2019). Specifically, Uchino (2011) contends that received support reflects a situational factor that individuals seek and/or provide in response to a stressful event. For instance, in a qualitative study adolescents of sexual assault stated that they would have preferred to have received more emotional support from their parents to better cope after the negative experience (Schönbucher et al., 2014). Further, research demonstrates that receiving support can have detrimental effects on individuals' mental health outcomes (Reinhardt et al., 2006).

On the other hand, perceived support is a dispositional factor that has roots in an individuals' attachment style (Uchino, 2009). Particularly, an individuals' parental attachments foreground their reactivity to interpersonal situations. Individuals from supportive environments are more likely to have better mental health outcomes when adversity occurs (Shaw et al., 2004). Individuals from unsupportive environments develop negative mental health outcomes. Yet, Uchino (2009) notes that received support and perceived support can interact such that individuals with high levels of perceived support may be more receptive of received support.

A communication perspective of social support differs from a sociological and psychological perspective because it focuses on the effects of social supportive messages in supportive communicative interactions (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). Supportive messages are verbal and nonverbal behaviors enacted by one person that is intended to help others (Burleson, 2009). Verbal messages consists of what is explicitly said by supportive others to help alleviate distressing situations that the support recipient is experiencing. Nonverbal messages may include eye contact, forward leaning, and eye contact which represents physiological closeness and comfort (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). On the other hand, when these behaviors are not communicated by the supportive help it may signal disinterest and annoyance. Together, verbal and nonverbal messages signal that support providers are supportive listeners (Bodie & Jones, 2012).

Numerous research programs have generated theoretical insight into the effects of supportive communication. For example, Advice Response Theory (ART; Feng & MacGeorge, 2010), a context-specific theoretical framework, examines the influential nature of informational support (i.e., advice). Following the general logic of dual-process theories of communication, ART proposes that message content has a stronger influence on advice outcomes than

characteristics of the advice giver (Guntzviller et al., 2017). When advice recipients evaluate advice messages as more efficacious, feasible, and with few limitations, the advice is rated higher in quality, can better facilitate coping strategies, and intentions to implement the recommended behavior. Additionally, when advice messages are evaluated as being polite (i.e., positive face and negative face) they produce better quality advice. Substantial ART research also contends that advice givers who are viewed as an expert source of information, trustworthy, similar, and likeable can influence advice recipients' evaluation about advice messages (MacGeorge et al., 2016). Thus, ART posits that advice messages features should mediate the association between advice giver characteristics and advice outcomes.

Although ART propositions state that message politeness and message content have additive effects on advice outcomes (Guntzviller et al., 2017), research suggests that advice recipients prioritize politeness messages when the distressing situations requires them to focus on emotional-focus strategies, or on the contents of advice messages when they prioritize problem-focused strategies (Bodie & Jones, 2015). In sexual contexts, emotional and problem-focused strategies may help support providers and recipients to communicate about sex in supportive ways. For example, in a qualitative study Miller-Ott and Linder (2013) examined how individuals in romantic relationships used face saving strategies and humor to talk about sex. An in-depth thematic analysis was used to transcribe data from 22 individuals who were in a romantic relationship. Results demonstrated that individuals who openly discuss sexual difficulties that one partner was experiencing used positive face as a face-saving strategy. Individuals also use humor as a strategy to lessen the uncomfortable feelings of talking about sex with their partner. Miller-Ott and Linder's (2013) study suggests that relational partners

emotional- and problem-focused strategies can help them navigate uncomfortable conversations regarding sex.

Bodie's (2013b) line of research on emotional support is another context-specific framework that examines supportive communicative interactions. Specifically, his research program examines the effects of verbal person centeredness (VPC) and nonverbal immediacy cues (NVI) influence on supportive message outcomes. VPC refers to supportive messages that legitimize, acknowledges, and contextualizes the feelings and perspectives of others (Bodie, 2013b). Messages that are low person-centeredness (LPC) deny the recipient's feelings by challenging them or telling the distressed person how to act. Messages that are moderately person-centeredness (MPC) attempts to bring attention to the distressed person's situation. High person centeredness (HPC) messages explicitly elaborate the feelings of other's by reappraising the situation from their perspectives (Bodie & Jones, 2012). NVI cues signify physical distance between individuals and reflect nonverbal communicative behaviors such as, head nods, eye contact, and forward leaning (Bodie & Jones, 2012). According to Burleson et al. (2018) when supportive others exhibit both VPC and NVI messages together, they are viewed as supportive listeners. While speculative, the components of VPC and NVI messages may produce better supportive interactions during talks about sex. Extensive research demonstrates that while sexual communication is often nonverbal (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996), verbal sexual communication is needed to provide meaning to nonverbal behaviors (La France, 2010).

Another context-specific theoretical framework is Holmstrom and Burleson's (2011) cognitive-emotional theory of esteem supportive messages. Research suggests that esteem support is considered a unique form of social support (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). While scholars suggest that esteem support is enacted through emotional support (Dakof & Taylor, 1990;

Semmer et al., 2008), esteem support is conceptually and operationally different from emotional support (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). Esteem supportive messages focus on enhancing an individuals' state level self-esteem (i.e., how we feel about ourselves; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011), whereas the provision of emotional supportive messages focus on expressions of care, concern, and empathy toward distressed others (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Further, the distinct characteristic features of "situations that elicit esteem threats, the cognitions about these threats, the consequences of esteem threats, and the outcomes of esteem support" (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011, p. 328) distinguishes theory on esteem support from emotional support. Research demonstrates that esteem support is beneficial for the support recipient. For example, esteem supportive messages that are of high quality (i.e., helpful; Holmstrom & Kim, 2015) can improve relationships (Burleson et al., 1996), physical and mental well-being (Mann et al., 2004), and one's self-esteem in any moment (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991).

Research suggests that threats to self-esteem can arise when individuals perceive that they are the cause of a stressful event (Abramson et al., 1978). Extensive research has differentiated between "basic emotions" and "self-conscious emotions" (Tracy & Robins, 2004, p. 105), positing that basic emotions (e.g., anger, fear, happiness, sadness, disgust, and surprise) addresses immediate challenges while self-conscious emotions (e.g., pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment) has an interpersonal purpose (Kim et al., 2011). In other words, individuals may get upset (Coffelt & Hess, 2014) or avoid talks about sex because they may be fearful of potential negative consequences (Rehman et al., 2019). Although the former basic emotions can activate self-evaluative processes, they do not elicit threats to an individuals' identity (Tracy & Robins, 2004). On the other hand, feeling embarrassed for bringing up conversations about sex (Theiss, 2011) can function as a self-conscious emotion because it involves more cognitive

complex processes to activate (Kim et al., 2011). While emotion scholars contend that the distinctive features of self-conscious emotions require awareness about the self (Tracy & Robins, 2004)[1], and can act as a buffer against engaging in risky sexual behaviors (Giordano et al., 2015), the theoretical advancement of this project focuses primarily on how individuals' appraisal of self-esteem threats may elicit esteem supportive messages in their sexual and romantic relationship.

Lazarus' (1991) cognitive appraisal theory of emotion offers a framework to examine how individuals may cope with threats to their self-esteem regarding talks about sex. The theory posits that when individuals experience any situational threat to their well-being it is not the threat that elicits an emotional response, but how people evaluate the threat that elicits the emotional response. Lazarus (1991) contends that individuals evaluate threats to their self-esteem through two appraisals: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisals reflect events that are relevant and congruent to the goals the individual seeks to achieve. When events elicit a negative emotion, they are incongruent with individuals' relevant goals (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Secondary appraisals reflect the resources that are available for individuals to cope with the potential threat to their self-esteem (Lazarus, 1991).

Research demonstrates that individuals often turn to their romantic partner during times of distress (Yurkiw & Johnson, 2021). Individuals with low self-esteem may avoid seeking support from their partners because they perceive that their partner would not provide support or reject them (Murray et al., 2008). On the other hand, individuals with high self-esteem prefer to

[1] Tracy and Robins (2004) argue that when an event is evaluated as being congruent or incongruent with a person's goals, they attribute the event to internal or external causes. Their model specifies that internal appraisal of events elicits self-conscious emotions (e.g., "what did I do to make our relationship end?"). Whereas external appraisal of events elicits basic emotions (e.g., "my partner thinks I am a bad person"). However, they do posit that appraisals of relevant identity-goals can trigger basic emotions or self-conscious emotions.

seek support from their partner when they need it. Relational partners may also engage in various verbal sex strategies to enhance their own or their partners' self-esteem (i.e., flirting; Frisby, 2009). Other studies demonstrate that quality communication about sex and partner support can enhance individual's perceptions about themselves (Seidler et al., 2016). Thus, being cared for and receiving positive appraisals from close others can increase individuals' self-esteem (Holmstrom, 2012). Together, cognitive appraisal theories of emotion support the linkages to examine esteem supportive messages during relational partners' sex talks. These lines of research demonstrates that a context-specific model can be developed to examine supportive sexual communicative interactions.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

I have outlined how the multiple goals theory and theories of social support can be used to develop a model to make predictions about supportive sex talk. As demonstrated through the review of the literature, a common thread among multiple goals theories and theories of supportive communication is that human communication is activated through how individuals strive to achieve their goals (Berger, 2002) and goal-relevant knowledge structures that are stored in memory (Samp & Solomon, 2005). Further, both theoretical frameworks hypothesize that communicators' complex cognitions influence the goals that they pursue (i.e., supportive messages; High & Scharp, 2015; Scott et al., 2011) and their ability and motivation to process messages (Wilson, 1995; Petty & Carcioppo, 1986). Both frameworks can be tested and extended separately to make predictions on sex research. Particularly, research generated from the multiple goals and social support paradigm demonstrates that individuals create and respond to certain types of messages. Both frameworks also share similar theoretical tenets that scholars

have cross-fertilized in communication research to examine context-specific communicative interactions (Guntzviller & MacGeorge, 2013; Guntzviller et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2019).

What has not been made apparent is: how does these frameworks work together to explain how individuals produce and process messages? In other words, what contributions can be gleaned from both frameworks to make careful predictions about supportive sex talk? Wilson's (1990) cognitive rules model addresses how individuals evaluate salient goals during their communicative interactions. Wilson's (1990) model maintains that knowledge of goals is stored in associative networks or nodes that are stored in long-term memory. These nodes represent individual concepts (i.e., people, traits, roles, relational qualities, settings, desired outcomes; Wilson, 1990), goals, and situational features that are linked together (Worley et al., 2020). Nodes involve spreading activation that can operate directly or indirectly through other associative nodes (Wilson, 1995). Wilson (1995) accounts for the reasons as to why highly cognitive complex individuals can process features of the message more than low cognitive complex individuals through systematic or heuristic processing. Cognitive complexity is a stable individual trait that represents how individuals process information (Bodie et al., 2011). Individuals with more highly complex, differentiated, abstract, cognitive schemas have more social perception skills than less cognitive complex individuals. Thus, highly cognitive complex individuals systematically differentiate between useful or useless messages more than individuals with lower cognitive complexity. Wilson (1995) contends that spreading activation can happen through heuristic cues to reach salient goals.

In other lines of research, scholars contend that individuals who are overloaded with information (i.e., cognitive busyness; Palomares, 2011) are less able to make inferences accurately and efficiently about their partners' communicative behaviors. Theorists posit that

because individuals possess limited cognitive resources (Berger et al., 1996), individuals may prioritize an explanation for a failed goal attempt than trying to devise an explanation for a new goal (Palomares, 2011). Berger et al. (1996) theorized this process as the hierarchy principle wherein individuals may modify sub goals because they require less cognitive attention than more abstract goals. Thus, scholars assume that individuals' cognitive ability and motivation influence their production and processing of others' communicative goals (Wilson, 1995). Bodie (2013a) asserts that future communication research should examine what factors contribute to message production, processing, and variability in message quality. Manning (2021) contends that communication scholars need to theorize sex talk as a communication interaction. I argue that this literature review provides a roadmap to develop a comprehensive framework that explains how individuals pursue and process supportive sex messages.

The next section of this project provides the theoretical rationale and hypotheses to test the supportive sex talk model. In this section I examine how support recipients' message goals associated with their evaluation of esteem supportive messages from their partner during talks about sex.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL RATIONALE OF THE SUPPORTIVE SEX TALK MODEL

This chapter provides a theoretical rationale to test the theoretical tenets of SSM. This chapter focuses on how the salience of individuals' multiple message goals is associated with greater perceptions about their partners' supportive message outcomes. As discussed below, this chapter suggests that support recipients' evaluation of their partners' characteristics may intervene the association between their message goals and the quality of their partners' esteem supportive messages.

Theoretical Rationale

Communicating about sex and sexual desires is crucial for romantic relationships. Research demonstrates that romantic partners who openly and comfortably discuss sexual topics experience greater sexual and relational satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Hullman et al., 2022). Romantic partners also disclose sexual information with each other (Ritter et al., 2021) in order to enhance their sexual life and intimacy (Anderson et al., 2011), disclose their sexual likes and dislikes (Byers & Demmons, 1999), gain insight on topics that are "off limits" or "taboo" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 285; Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010), reveal past sexual experiences (Ritter et al., 2021), or as a form of sex talk (Brown & Weigel, 2018). Partners may also engage in post sexual disclosures to promote better relational and physiological well-being (i.e., pillow talk; Denes et al., 2022). Thus, disclosing information that is deemed private and secret is a goal-driven process (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2009; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010).

Although disclosing sexual information is beneficial for sexual health and well-being (Impett et al., 2015), discussing sexual topics can also be emotionally challenging (Theiss & Estlein, 2014). Individuals may find it difficult to reveal information about their sexuality because it can elicit feelings of embarrassment and perceptions of partner infidelity (Brannon & Rauscher, 2018). Disclosures of stigmatizing information can make individuals feel anxious (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006), rejected (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010), and can potentially upset their partner (Rehman et al., 2019). In some instances, individuals may find it comforting to talk about their sex life with their partner (Herold & Way, 1988) increasing how they feel about themselves (i.e., self-esteem; Oates & Offman, 2007). Indeed, prior research has examined how the cognitive-emotional process of message goals influence goal-driven disclosures of sexual topics (Caughlin et al., 2008; Hullman et al., 2022) and theories of self-disclosure and secrecy have provided key insight into the strategies individuals use to disclose private information (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Omarzu, 2000; Stiles, 1987). Yet a rarely tested assumption is how the comfort of revealing sexual information from distressed others can elicit better esteem supportive messages from their romantic partner. Sexual comfort is defined as "the ease of discussing sexuality, and feeling comfortable with one's own sexual life and with other's sexual behaviors" (Couture et al., 2022, p.1). Esteem support is a particular type of social support that is provided to others to enhance how they feel about themselves, their attributes, abilities, and accomplishments (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Preliminary evidence has provided support for such links, yet a comprehensive theoretical framework to tests such claims have not been developed in a coherent parsimonious fashion.

Thus, to make predictions about individual-level factors that influence cognitive-emotional supportive messages, Supportive Sex Talk Model (SSM) is outlined to consider the

reasons why and how individuals craft and process their sexual messages. First, I provide a brief overview of the theoretical tenets of SSM in which the cognitive appraisals of revealing sexual information (i.e., instrumental goals, self-oriented goals, relational goals, partner-oriented goals, and sexual comfort goals) associate with the quality of esteem-supportive messages (i.e., esteem support and message quality). Second, I provide a detailed explication of esteem support during communicative interactions. SSM integrates the theoretical tenets of social support to examine how individuals think about others' supportive messages. Specifically, I nominate two characteristics of the speaker (i.e., perspective taking and partner openness) that should act as explanatory mechanisms that intervene the process of how further goal-driven disclosures of sex information enhances esteem-supportive messages during support recipients' talks about sex as displayed in Figure 1.

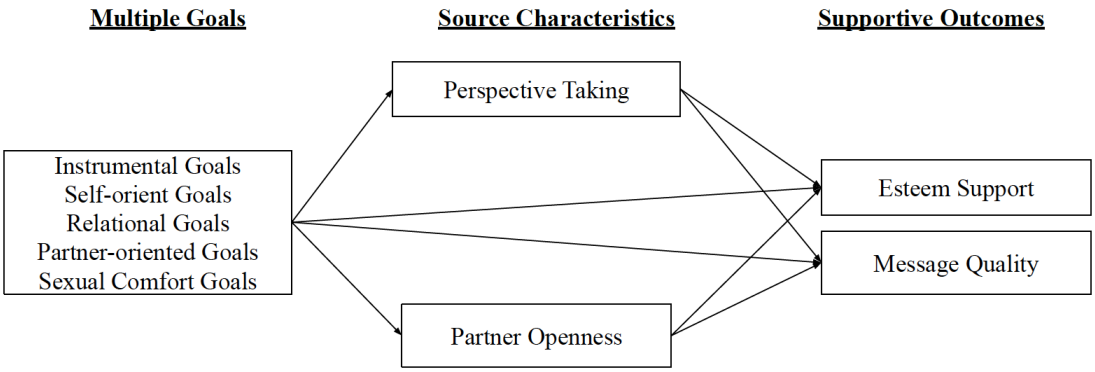


Figure 1 provides an overview of the hypothesized model.

An Overview of SSM

Guided by the notions that communication is strategic (Caughlin, 2010), that communicators often pursue multiple goals during a single interaction, and that activation of goal-relevant knowledge structures guides what and how we say it (Wilson, 2002), SSM identifies the situational, individual, and relational factors that predict features of supportive sex

messages. Supportive messages are communicative behaviors provided by supportive others with intentions of helping distressed others (Burleson, 2009). And during talks about sex, supportive messages may include informational support, emotional support, tangible support (McManus, 2020) and esteem support (Frisby, 2009). Thus, individuals may evaluate the helpful or unhelpful effects of supportive sex messages. Accordingly, SSM posits that individuals' message goals should drive the influence of supportive sex messages. SSM is grounded in the multiple goals theory perspective by articulating that individuals can pursue more than one goal during their communicative interactions (Caughlin, 2010).

SSM maintains that individuals can also make inferences about others' communicative behaviors when pursuing their goals (i.e., seeking supportive sex messages). Goal detection or inference assumes that there is a connection (i.e., linkage) between a factor (i.e., cue) and the pursuers' true goal (Palomares, 2008), restricting the scope of inferable goals. In other words, the narrower the set of goals being made when making inferences about others' behaviors, "highly accessible goals lead to higher levels of agreement and certainty in goal inferences" (Palomares, 2008, p. 113). Because goal inference is linked to context-specific interactions, individuals are more likely to infer highly accessible goals than less accessible goals (Palomares, 2011). SSM assumes that goal-driven sex talk can trigger goal pursuit and detection about others' supportive sex messages. Therefore, SSM theorizes that as support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sex information become more salient, support providers will produce more quality supportive sex messages.

Cognitive appraisal theories also propose that the type of message (emotion-focused vs. problem-focused) can influence cognitive evaluation of messages outcomes (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). As this study focuses on the emotional process of sex talk, prior research

supports the argument that individuals' cognitive ability and motivation can influence their evaluation of supportive messages (Bodie, 2013a; Feng, 2009; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Thus, SSM proposes that features of the source's characteristics should mediate the association between their sexual message goals and quality supportive sex messages.

In sum, SSM advances our understanding of the impact of goal-driven disclosures of sexual information association on supportive sex messages. The salience of individuals' disclosure goals should activate their cognitive evaluation about the source communication features. When individuals are cognitively motivated and able to think about supportive sex messages, their evaluation of the features of supportive sex messages from the supportive helper should enhance their self-esteem.

Goals of Disclosing Sexual Information to Esteem Supportive Messages

As mentioned earlier, disclosing or concealing information is a goal-driven process (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2009). Message production theorists argue that goals influence multiple levels of communicative behaviors, ranging from macro-level plans (Dillard, 2015) to specific micro-level linguistic features (Samp & Solomon, 2005). Prior sex research provides empirical evidence that sexual partners' micro-level linguistic features influence their communicative behaviors (Li et al., 2018). Thus, SSM posits that individuals are driven to achieve their communicative goals when discussing sexual topics. SSM identifies five categories of goals that reflect individuals' concerns during their interactions: instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals.

Instrumental goals reflect concerns about achieving the tasks of the conversation. For example, asking for a favor, giving advice, or requesting information (Brannon & Rauscher, 2018; Caughlin, 2010; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) may serve as instrumental goals. *Self-oriented*

goals are concerns about how others perceive us, managing a desired social image, or focusing on one's needs instead of a partners' needs. Self-oriented goals may reflect partners concerns about protecting their sense of self (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006) or their need to prioritize their beliefs about sex (Hullman et al., 2022). Research demonstrates that individuals may be more inclined to pursue self-oriented goals to reestablish their sense of identity during difficult conversations (Samp, 2013). *Relational goals* involve concerns about maintaining the relationship when discussing sensitive topics. Individuals may share tasks together (e.g., cleaning; Goodboy et al., 2022), be flirtatious or seductive to maintain their relationship (Frisby et al., 2011). Other relational goals may center around discussing or avoiding sexual topics that can improve or threaten relational satisfaction (Theiss & Estlein, 2014). *Partner-oriented goals* reflect validating partners' perspectives (Keck & Samp, 2007), and being receptive of their viewpoints (Kohut et al., 2018). Lastly, *sexual comfort goals* are specific types of goals that reflects individuals' comfort and ease with discussing sex and sexuality (Couture et al., 2022).

While each goal has been examined separately throughout sex research, multiple goals theorists argue that examining them in isolation may not adequately capture the concerns of relationally linked individuals (Samp, 2013). For instance, an individual may seek to accomplish an instrumental goal of trying to initiate a conversation about sex with their partner. Yet, the initiator of the conversation may wish to protect his or her identity from risk of rejection. On the other hand, the initiator may seek to bond closer with their partner through sex talk. A core tenet of SSM is that when communicators pursue multiple goals in an interaction, their goals can become incompatible with each other. Communicators goals may become incompatible when one's goals does not align with the goals of their conversational partner (Caughlin, 2010). Shifts in momentary goal pursuit can influence how individuals evaluate their own and their partners'

communication outcomes (Worley et al., 2020), and how partners strive to adapt their goals to their partners' goals (Lakey & Canary, 2002; Samp, 2013). Thus, how individuals prioritize their goals can change throughout their communicative interactions.

In the context of the current study, individuals may form their own perceptions about supportive sex talk. Specifically, theorists assume that goals are organized and stored in memory within an associative network (nodes) of knowledge structures (Levine & Pizarro, 2004; Wilson, 1995). When one node is activated, it activates a parallel node forming a spreading activation between networks (Worley et al., 2020). For example, being exposed to sexual content can trigger a relational-initiation goal (Gillath et al., 2008). Being satisfied with one's relationship can motivate individuals to pursue more pro-relational goals (Worley et al., 2020). Relatedly, goal-driven disclosures about sex can influence individuals' progression towards enhancing their self-esteem (May & Johnston, 2022), and their inferences about others' communicative behaviors (Palomares, 2008). Thus, individuals' perceptions about their message goals should positively associate with their evaluation of supportive sex messages. I propose the following hypotheses:

> **H1**: Support recipients' (a) instrumental, (b) self-oriented, (c) relational, (d) partner-oriented and (e) sexual comfort goals will be positively associated with their evaluation of their partners' esteem-supportive messages.
>
> **H2**: Support recipients' (a) instrumental, (b) self-oriented, (c) relational, (d) partner-oriented and (e) sexual comfort goals will be positively associated with the quality of their partners' supportive messages.

Perspective Taking and Partner Openness as Message Features

Another component of SSM is that it proposes that evaluation of goal-driven disclosures of sexual information is achieved through how individuals understand their own and their partners' goal pursuit. Scholars posit that characteristics of the message source should directly influence message outcomes (Burleson, 2009; Palomares, 2008). SSM maintains that characteristics of the message source may serve as an intervening mechanism that influence individuals' understanding of the source's supportive sex messages. Because supportive communication is complex scholars propose that any single factor (e.g., source, message, context, and recipient factor) can serve multiple roles in the supportive interaction (Burleson, 2009). Scholars posit that features of the message can include what is explicitly stated, ideas, information, perspectives, arguments, or source factors (Burleson, 2009; Holmstrom et al., 2015). SSM proposes that source characteristics is a message feature that support recipients evaluate regarding supportive sex messages. Thus, support recipients' evaluation of the message source characteristics should elicit greater evaluation about the supportive outcome messages.

Theorists maintain that source characteristics such as likeability, trustworthiness, similarity (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010), and perceived source expertise (Guntzviller, Liao, et al., 2020a) are positively associated with supportive outcome messages. Cognitive and relational assessments of the message source have been shown to influence message outcomes (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Guntzviller et al., 2017). For example, Lakey and Canary (2002) argue that partners who are sensitive and considerate of others' goals are evaluated as more competent communicators. Two characteristics that should influence evaluation of individuals' disclosure goals are perspective taking and partner openness. *Perspective taking* is the cognitive ability of viewing problematic issues from another persons' perspective (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013). Specifically, perspective taking involves messages that explicitly acknowledge, contextualize,

legitimize, and elaborate on the feelings and perspectives of others (Bodie & Jones, 2012). Research suggests that perspective taking is linked with empathetic accuracy in helping distressed individuals work through their problems (Ickes, 1993; Rains & High, 2021). Empathetic accuracy is the ability to accurately infer other's thoughts and feelings (Ickes, 1993). Thus, perspective taking allows relational partners to make sense of differences and similarities (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013) regarding sex talks.

Although taking others' perspectives is beneficial for cognitive and emotional outcomes (Lakey & Canary, 2002), perspective taking can also lead to negative outcomes. For example, negative evaluations during perspective taking may occur when individuals perceive that there is a threat to their self-interest or identity (Sassenrath et al., 2016). In one study, Mooijman and Stern (2016) examined how conservates who took the perspective of individuals in a same-sex relationship can lead to motivational threat toward same-sex sexual behaviors. A motivational threat occurs when individuals evaluate the individual or object as an inhibitor towards their motivations and goals. Mooijman and Stern (2016) found that conservatives held more prejudicial attitudes towards same-sex couples than non-conservatives. Additionally, considering others' perspectives can be a face-threatening act (Erbert & Floyd, 2004). Yet, perspective taking can often buffer the deleterious experiences of low emotional states when seeking information from other (Trötschel et al., 2011). Thus, I posit that support recipients may thoughtfully consider their partner's perspectives about supportive sex talk.

Partner openness is broadly conceptualized as communicative acts that individuals in their relationships use to communicate openly about various topics (Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013). Scholars propose that partner openness is a multidimensional construct (Donovan et al., 2017), and may include having access to information, being honest with each other, and

relating as peers (Donovan et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that willingness to communicate about sex serves as the vehicle to improve relational dynamics (Montesi et al., 2011). As Manning (2021) notes, conversations about sex are an interpersonal and health process. Because sex talk is an interactive and dynamic process, openly communicating about sex allows partners to work through difficult discussions that can impact their relational and sexual well-being (Manning, 2021). Thus, open communication helps relational partners to form positive perceptions and expectations to discuss emotionally challenging topics (Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013).

Research suggests that support recipients are also triggered to evaluate the salience of their own and others' perspectives (Palomares, 2011) and communicative messages (Guntzviller, Liao, et al., 2020a). Particularly, sexual message goals may be positively associated with support recipients' evaluation of their partners' perspectives and openness towards achieving their goals. Being attentive to each others' goals allows recipients to effectively acknowledge and validate the support providers' perspectives (Lakey & Canary, 2002). Support recipients' evaluation of their partners' perspective and communication helps them to consider the pragmatic implications of supportive messages (Guntzviller, Liao, et al., 2020a). Additionally, open communication can serve to elicit emotion-focused and problem-focused messages (Donovan et al., 2017; Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013). Therefore, disclosure goals about sex can influence greater openness about sex (Hullman et al., 2021). Thinking critically and openly can help both interactants create comfortable environments to discuss difficult sex topics (Miller-Ott & Linder, 2013). I propose:

> **H3**: Support recipients' message goals (i.e., instrumental, self-oriented, partner, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals) will be positively associated with their evaluation of their partners' perspective taking.

H4: Support recipients' message goals (i.e., instrumental, self-oriented, partner, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals) will be positively associated with their evaluation of their partners' openness to communicate about sex.

Perspective taking and partner openness may promote better quality esteem supportive messages during distressed individuals' sex talk with their partner. For instance, research suggests that viewing problematic issues from another persons' perspective is linked with higher self-esteem (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Particularly, taking other's perspectives into consideration allows individuals to consider their own beliefs as well as their partners. Being open to communicate about sensitive topics also promotes better supportive messages (Feeney & Collins, 2015). While speculative, it seems logical that being sensitive and open to communicate with a partner about difficult topics during sex talk may elicit better quality esteem supportive messages. Research suggests that individuals can accurately detect each other's sex goals (Elsaadawy et al., 2022). And that relational support can contribute to individuals' beliefs about their attributes and abilities during emotion-focused conversations (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). Thus, I propose the following hypotheses:

H5: Support recipients' perception of their partners' (a) perspective taking and (b) openness to communicate will be positively associated with their evaluation of esteem-supportive messages.

H6: Support recipients' perception of their partners' (a) perspective taking and (b) openness to communicate will be positively associated with their evaluation of the quality of their partners' supportive messages.

H7: Support recipients' evaluation of their partners' characteristics (i.e., perspective taking and partner openness) will positively mediate the association between their message goals and esteem supportive messages, such that their message goals will be positively associated with their evaluation of their partners' characteristics, and their evaluation of their partners' characteristics will be positively associated with esteem supportive messages.

H8: Support recipients' evaluation of their partners' characteristics (i.e., perspective taking and partner openness) will positively mediate the association between their message goals the quality of the messages, such that their message goals will be positively associated with their evaluation of their partners' characteristics, and their evaluation of their partners' characteristics will be positively associated with esteem supportive messages.

CHAPTER 4

The section of this project explains the methodological procedures used to collect data from individuals that were in a relationally-linked relationship. Also provided are analysis procedures and results of tests used to analyze this data.

METHODS

Procedures

As part of the research study design, participants were recruited through convenience sampling via posting on the university departmental research pool website. Respondents clicked on a link to the online survey that was hosted by Qualtrics where they read a consent form and confirmed they were 18 years of age or older to be eligible to participant in the study. Participants provided demographic information (e.g., age, gender, relational status). After confirming that they were in a romantic relationship for at least three (3) consecutive months or more, participants completed survey measures examining their perceptions of multiple goal importance, sexual comfort goals, perspective taking, partner openness to communicate, perceived esteem support, and the quality of their supportive messages. Lastly, participants provided their racial/ethnic identity, and sexual orientation.

Participants

G*Power 3.1 software (Faul et al., 2009) was used in post hoc analyses to determine if the current sample size (N = 266) would achieve significance based on regression models, with a recommended effect size (f^2) of .15 as determined by the software and prior research (Holmstrom

et al., 2014; Study 1). G*Power 3.1 software indicated that an effect size of .15 and the sample size achieved significance ($p < .05$).

Two hundred sixty-six participants (154 females, 110 males, 1 gender non-confirming, and 1 who did not provide their gender identity) were recruited from a large southeastern university. Participants were excluded if: they were not in a current romantic relationship (N = 103), were not in a romantic relationship that lasted for three (3) consecutive months or more (N = 44) and if they were not sexually active with their current romantic partner (N = 2). Participants reported their age (M_{age} = 19.5, SD = 1.45), their romantic partners' age (M_{age} = 19.8, SD = 1.81), and their romantic relationship length (M_{months} = 16.3, SD = 13.9). Participants also reported their relationship type as being seriously dating and not living together (n = 190, 71.4%), casually dating (n = 52, 19.5%), seriously dating and living together (n = 12, 4.5%), talking (n = 9, 3.4%), married (n = 2, .8%), and engaged but not living together (n = 1, .4%). Participants identified as White/European American (n = 210, 78.9%), Asian/Asian American (n = 35, 13.2%), Black/African American (n = 16, 6%), Hispanic/Latin(x)(a)(o) (n = 15, 5.6%), other (n = 3, 1.1%), and preferred not to answer (n = 3, 1.1%). Lastly, participants reported their sexual orientations as Heterosexual (n = 239, 89.8%), Bisexual (n = 14, 5.3%), Gay (n = 6, 2.3%), preferred not to answer (n = 4, 1.5%), Lesbian (n = 1, .4%), Queer (n = 1, .4%), and one person did not provide their sexual orientation (n = 1, .4%).

Measures

Multiple Goal Importance

Sixteen items were modified from Samp and Solomon (1998) to measure participants' perception of their own message goals. These items were modified from the original 28-item inventory that focused on participants goal intensity during their conversations. For example,

items were modified from "I wanted to ease my fears" to "I wanted to ease my partner's fears." Prior studies suggest that these four subscales have good reliability with Cronbach's *α*s ranging from .74 to .92 (Li & Samp, 2019; Samp & Solomon, 2005). Participants read the following statement: "Thinking about you and your romantic partner's conversations about sex, please rate the following statements" and answered the following multiple goals measures. Four items measured *task/instrumental goals* (e.g., "I wanted to keep the conversation going;" Cronbach's α = .76, *M* = 3.54, *SD* = .71), four items measured *self-oriented goals* (e.g., "I wanted to be true to myself;" Cronbach's α = .72, *M* = 3.91, *SD* = .74), four items measured *partner-oriented goals* (e.g., "I wanted to make sure that we kept talking;" Cronbach's α = .86, *M* =3.86, *SD* = .84), and four items measured *relational goals* (e.g., "I wanted my partner to know that I have morals and values;" Cronbach's α = .81, *M* = 4.4 *SD* =.59). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The subscales were mean scored. Higher scores reflected greater message goal importance during conversation about sexual topics.

Sexual Comfort Goal

Five items were taken from Couture et al. (2022) to measure participants' comfort with discussing sexual topics. Participants read the following statement: "Thinking about you and your romantic partner's conversations about sex, please rate the following statements." Sample items included "talking about sexuality," "initiating sexual activities (i.e., kissing, touching, sexual intercourse)," "refusing sexual activities," "discussing contraception or protection against sexual transmitted infections," and "discussing what is and what is not sexually allowed outside of their relationship;" Cronbach's α = .77, *M* = 4.34, *SD* = .61). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very uncomfortable*, 5 = *very comfortable*). Previous studies reported

good reliability with Cronbach's α = .74 (Couture et al., 2022). This scale was mean scored. Higher scores reflected greater comfort to discuss sexual topics.

Perspective Taking Messages

Eleven items were modified from Bodie (2011) to measure participants perception of perspective taking communication. For example, sample items were modified from "I am sensitive to what others are not saying" to "I am sensitive to what my partner is not saying." Prior studies reported to have acceptable reliability with Cronbach's αs ranging from .66 to .89 (Bodie, 2011). Participants read the following statement: "Thinking about you and your romantic partner's conversations about sex, please rate the following statements." Sample items included (e.g., "I am sensitive to what my partner is not saying," "I understand how my partner feels," and "I assure my partner that I will remember what they say;" Cronbach's α = .79, *M* = 4.29, *SD* = .45). The original scale contained subscales of sensing, processing, and responding. Although reliability was evaluated for each subscale, reliability for sensing and processing subscales fell below the .70 threshold of acceptability (i.e., sensing: Cronbach's α = .48; processing: Cronbach's α = .65). Responding Cronbach's and reliability for responding was acceptable: α = .90. While reliability for processing and responding aligns with prior research (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011) all subscales were collapsed as a unidimensional scale (Jones et al., 2019) because they were highly correlated with each other (i.e., .48 < *r* < .53; Gearhart & Bodie, 2011). Here, intercorrelated reliability ranged from .35 < *r* < .59, with processing and responding having a high correlation (*r* = .59). Thus, this global scale was used to measure participants perception about considering their partners' perspectives about sex. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, (1 = *Almost never true*, 5 = *Almost always true*). This scale was mean scored. Higher scores reflected greater perspective taking.

Partner Openness

Twelve items were modified from Donovan et al. (2017) to measure participants' openness to discuss sexual topics. For example, items were modified from "After my parent(s) told me the news, I felt that I could ask questions about what had been shared with me" to "After discussing the sexual topic with my romantic partner, I felt that I could ask questions about what had been shared with me." Previous studies reported good reliability with Cronbach's α ranging from .78 to .90 (Donovan et al., 2017). Participants read the following statement: "Thinking about you and your romantic partner's conversations about sex, please rate the following statements". Five items measured *access to information* (e.g., "My partner did not seem to want to talk about the sexual topic beyond the conversation;" Cronbach's α = .79, *M* = 4.19, *SD* = .63), five items measured *candor* (e.g., "My partner was/not completely honest" [reverse coded]; Cronbach's α = .88, *M* = 4.20, *SD* = .72), and three items will measure *relating as peers* (e.g., "I could see my partner for who they really are;" Cronbach's α = .80, *M* = 4.52, *SD* = .63). All items will be measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Almost never true*, 5 = *Almost always true*). Each subscale was mean scored, and then summed to create the composite variable for partner openness (Cronbach's α = .91, *M* = 12.91, *SD* = 1.72); higher scores reflected greater partner openness.

Esteem Support

Eight items were modified from Holmstrom (2015) to measure participants' self-esteem. This scale measured participants perceived feelings in the given moment about sex talk (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). For instance, items were modified from "This message would help my friend feel less rejected by others" to "This message would help me feel less rejected by my partner." Previous studies reported good reliability with Cronbach's α = .86 (Holmstrom, 2015).

Participants read the following statement: “Thinking about you and your romantic partner’s conversations about sex, please rate the following statements”. Sample items included (e.g., “I think this conversation would help me feel better about myself,” and “I think this conversation would help me feel less rejected by partner”; Cronbach’s α = .89, *M* = 3.61, *SD* = .78). Although Holmstrom’s (2015) original scale contained four second-order factors with two items each to measure self-esteem (i.e., general state self-esteem, acceptance by others, self-worth, and self-efficac), the current study followed Holmstrom’s (2015) suggestion to combine the second-order factor to form a composite self-esteem variable. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Almost never true*, 5 = *Almost always true*). This scale was mean scored. Higher scores reflected greater esteem-supportive messages.

Message Quality

Five 5-point semantic difference scale items were used from Goldsmith and MacGeorge (2000) to measure participants’ perceptions of the quality of the esteem supportive messages they received; the items included: *helpful-unhelpful, supportive-unsupportive, sensitive-insensitive, effective-ineffective,* and *appropriate-inappropriate*; Cronbach’s α = .84, *M* = 1.56, *SD* = .60. Previous studies reported good reliability with Cronbach’s αs ranging from .75 to .89 (Brisini et al., 2022; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge et al., 2004). Each semantic difference item was mean scored to create a composite variable for message quality. Higher scores reflected greater quality of supportive messages.

Results

Data Analysis Procedures

Preliminary analyses to examine univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses were examined using SPSS version 28. The data showed multivariate abnormality (Mardia’s

multivariate kurtosis = 34.79). Because multivariate kurtosis was greater than the critical χ^2 statistic recommended value for normality (i.e., 4.61; Mendenhall & Sincich, 2012), Mardia's multivariate kurtosis is a statistical procedure used to examine the multivariate model to correct and handle missing data (Yaun et al., 2004). For the data to be considered distributed normally, the Mardia's multivariate kurtosis should be less than the critical χ^2 statistic value based on the degrees of freedom (Mendenhall & Sincich, 2012). Thus, as the Mardia's multivariate kurtosis in the current study was well over the recommended critical χ^2 statistic value for normality, a total of four multivariate outliers on the dependent variables (i.e., message quality and esteem support) were present and removed because they significantly altered the results.

All variables were represented as latent variables because they were formed as the composite variable for observed items. In each structural equation model (SEM), exogenous variables, exogenous mediators (i.e., perspective taking and partner openness), and endogenous variables were correlated. A two-step process was used to access overall model fit. Specifically, using (1) confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and (2) SEM to access overall model fit, the data was estimated in *Mplus* 8 using a maximum likelihood estimation to correct for measurement error (Kline, 2015; see Figure 1 for hypothesized model). First, CFA was used to estimate the relationships between the latent variables and their observed items. Second, SEM was used as a test of the structural model to estimate and examine the relationships between latent variables (Arroyo et al., 2020). Thus, these steps were used to find the best fitting measurement model and the best fitting structural model to analyze hypotheses H1-H6. The following fit indexes were used to access acceptable model fit: χ^2/df less than 3, comparative fit index (CFI) approximately .95, Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) approximately .95, a root mean square approximation (RMSEA) < .08, 90% confidence interval (CI) that does not contain zero, and standard root mean square

residual (SRMR) < .10 (Kline, 2015; McLaren et al., 2012). Bootstrap estimation was used to examine the indirect effects of the mediation models (Hayes, 2013). Specifically, a 5,000 samples 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) estimation was used to analyze H7-H8.

Preliminary Analysis

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether variable means were statistically significant due to participants' gender identity. Although data were collected on individuals' gender identities, software such as SPSS often collapses gender into two groups to examine potential differences among the variables when conducting independent samples *t*-tests (Wilson et al., 2019). Results determined that women (M = 4.02, SD = .69) pursued more self-oriented goals than men (M = 3.75, SD = .77) ($t(262) = 3.01$, $p < .001$), women (M = 4.49, SD = .55) pursued more relational goals than men (M = 4.36, SD = .64), ($t(262) = 1.02$, $p < .05$), and women (M = 13.07, SD =1.74) were more open to communicate about sex with their romantic partner than men (M = 12.65, SD = 1.66) ($t(262) = 1.99$, $p < .05$).

Bivariate correlations (see Table 1) showed that participants' instrumental goals were positively correlated with their self-oriented goals, partner-oriented goals, relational goals, perspective taking, openness to communicate with their partner, and their esteem supportive messages. Individuals' self-oriented goals were positively correlated with their partner-oriented goals, relational goals, perspective taking, openness to communicate with their partner, and esteem supportive messages. Partner-oriented goals were positively associated with relational goals, sexual comfort goals, perspective taking, partner openness, and esteem support. Participants' relational goals were positively associated with sexual comfort goals, perspective taking, partner openness, esteem support, and negatively associated with message quality. Sexual comfort goals were positively associated with perspective taking, partner openness, and negative

associated with message quality. Perspective taking was positively associated with partner openness, and negatively associated with message quality. Lastly, partner openness was positively associated with esteem support and negatively associated with message quality.

Table 1

Bivariate correlations for each study variable.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Instrumental Goals	—								
2. Self-Oriented Goal	.33**	—							
3. Relational Goal	.31**	.49**	—						
4. Partner Goal	.24**	.41**	.54**	—					
5. Sexual Comfort Goal	.08	.10	.19**	.26**	—				
6. Perspective Taking	.21**	.17**	.28**	.39**	.48**	—			
7. Partner Openness	.13*	.18**	.16*	.29**	.60**	.49**	—		
8. Esteem Support	.25**	.45**	.38**	.25**	.04	.05	.12*	—	
9. Message Quality	– .08	– .04	– .11	– .18**	– .48**	– .66**	– .66**	– .07	—

Notes. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .001$.

Model Construction

As a first step, CFA was estimated to obtain factor loadings to form latent variables through parceling to examine the overall measurement model fit. Parceling was chosen as a measurement technique because it allows for the aggregation of two or more items to be averaged on a single indicator (Little et al., 2002). Providing a reliable assessment of the latent variables (Little et al., 2013). Parcels are used as manifest indicators of the latent variable as opposed to the alternate methods of using the original items to form the latent variables (Little et al., 2002). Parcels were created for perspective taking and esteem support because these variables consisted of eight (8) items or more. Parcels were not created for sexual comfort goals because this variable only had five items with only one variable left on a single indicator. Additionally, parcels were not created for instrumental goals, self-oriented goals, relational goals, and partner-oriented goals because these latent variables contained only four items each, respectively. Thus, these latent variables would not follow the recommended procedure of parceling (Little et al., 2002). Item-to-construct balance parceling was conducted in which the items with the highest factor loadings are used as anchors and matched with the lower loading factors (Little et al., 2013). A domain-specific parcel was created for partner openness because this variable contained subscales of access to information, candor, and relating as peers (Little et al., 2013). Further, the error variances of the parcels and other latent variables were set to $(1 - \alpha)(\sigma^2)$ to account for measurement error (Bollen, 1989; McLaren et al., 2012). Results determined that this model had good fit: $\chi^2(314) = 522.27$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.66$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05(90% CI [.04, .06]), SRMR = .05.

Next, a structural model was run to test the hypothesized direct paths (See Figure 1). Although this model had good fit: $\chi^2(314) = 522.27$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.66$, CFI = .93 TLI = .92,

RMSEA = .05(90% CI [.04, .06]), SRMR = .05, only seven direct paths were statistically significant. For example, partner-oriented goals → perspective taking (β = .22, *SE* = .08, p < .05); sexual comfort goals → perspective taking (β = .22, *SE* = .11, p < .01); sexual comfort goals → partner openness (β = .63, *SE* = .13, p < .001), self-oriented goals → esteem support (β = .58, *SE* = .13, p < .001), self-oriented goals → message quality (β = .22, *SE* = .09, p < .01), perspective taking → message quality (β = – .22, *SE* = .11, p < .05), and partner openness → message quality (β = – .68, *SE* = .11, p < .001).

Stephenson and Holbert (2003) suggests that in addition to fixing the error variances of the observed variables to $(1 - \alpha)(\sigma^2)$, fixing the error variances of the latent variables to one (1) can also control for measurement and random error. Unlike the observed variable approach that tests the relationships among single-item measures or multiple items of composite variables, the latent variable approach allows for researchers to test the relationships among latent composite variables. Because this study uses a latent composite approach to estimate the structural model, and consists of multiple exogenous and endogenous latent variables, these models must be overestimated because "there are multiple unknowns to be estimated" (Stepheson & Holbert, 2003, p. 335). Thus, several models were run to determine which error variances of the latent variables should be fixed. A model where all exogenous and endogenous latent variables fixed to one was estimated. This model had poor fit: $\chi^2(337) = 865.59$, p < .001, χ^2/df =2.57, CFI = .82 TLI = .80, RMSEA = .08(90% CI [.07, .08]), SRMR = .16. Two separate models were examined where the error variances of esteem support were constrained in the first model, and message quality was constrained in the second model in order to compare against this model. Results determined that the separate models with esteem support ($\chi^2_7\Delta = 234.35$, p < .001, CFI = .90,

TLI = .88) and message quality ($\chi^2_7\Delta = 54.75$, $p < .001$, CFI = .84, TLI = .82) constrained still had poor fit.

Allowing the error variance of sexual comfort goals free to covary and constraining the error variances of esteem support and message quality, a subsequent separate model was estimated. This model ($\chi^2_{16}\Delta = 329.85$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92) was a significant improvement from the other models. A subsequent model allowing the error variance of sexual comfort goals free to covary, with the latent endogenous variables (i.e., esteem support and message quality) fixed to one in separate models were examined. Results determined that the model with four of the message goals (i.e., instrumental goals, self-oriented goals, partner-oriented goals, and relational goals) and esteem support fixed to one ($\chi^2_9\Delta = 283.11$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91) was a better model compared to the message quality model fixed to one ($\chi^2_9\Delta = 173.24$, $p < .001$, CFI = .88, TLI = .86), the model with the constrained endogenous variables, and the original model. Therefore, this model: $\chi^2(328) = 581.89$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.77$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05(90% CI [.05, .06]), SRMR = .07 was used to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of hypotheses 1-8 (see Figure 2 for final statistical model).

Hypothesis Testing

See Figure 2 for results from the hypothesized structural model.

Direct effects.

H1 proposed that support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sexual information (i.e., instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals) would be positively associated with their evaluation of their partner esteem-supportive messages. Results demonstrated that support recipients' instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and

sexual comfort goals were positively associated with esteem support. Thus, H1 was fully supported.

H2 proposed that support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sexual information (i.e., instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals) would be positively associated with the quality of their partners' messages. Results showed that instrumental ($\beta = -.12$, $SE = .12$, $p = n.s.$), partner-oriented ($\beta = -.03$, $SE = .10$, $p = n.s.$), relational ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .08$, $p = n.s.$), and sexual comfort goals ($\beta = .03$, $SE = .10$, $p = n.s.$) were not statistically significant with message quality. However, support recipients' self-oriented goals ($\beta = .28$, $SE = .11$, $p < .01$) were positively associated with message quality, but perspective taking ($\beta = -.20$, $SE = .10$, $p = .05$) and partner openness ($\beta = -.71$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$) were negatively associated with message quality. Thus, H2 was partially supported.

H3 posited that support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sexual information would be positively associated with their evaluation of their partner's perspective taking. Results showed that support recipients' instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals were all positively associated with their evaluation about their partner's perspective taking. Thus, H3 was fully supported.

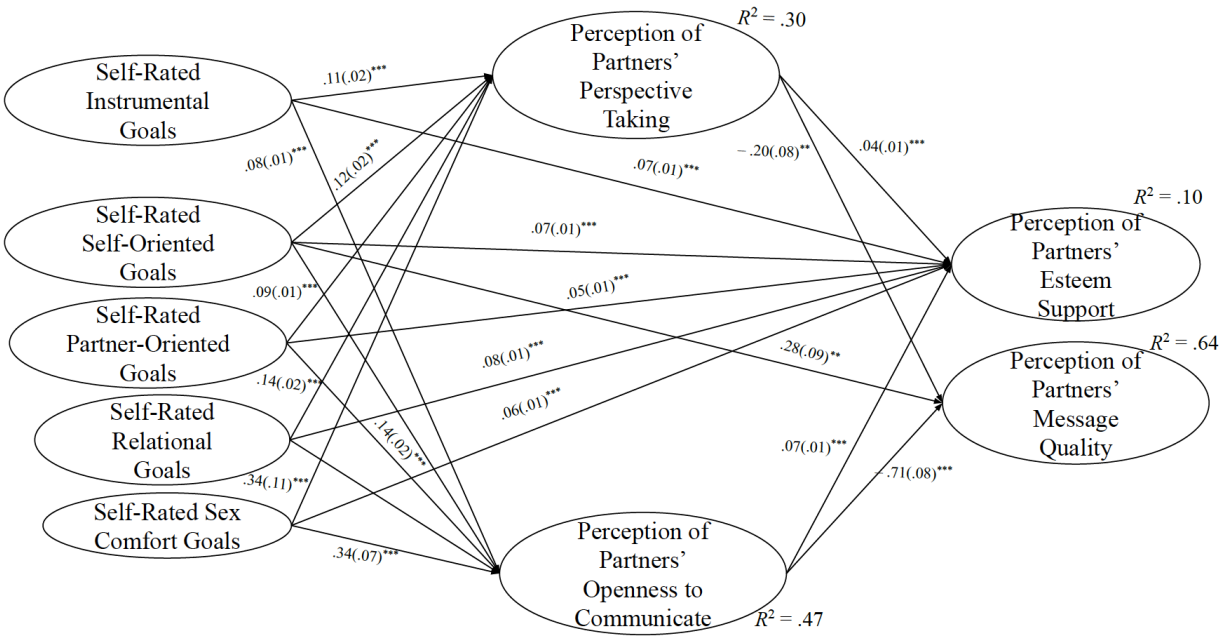
H4 hypothesized that support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sexual information would be positively associated with their evaluation of their partner's openness to communicate about sex. Results demonstrated that support recipients' instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals were all positively associated with their partner's openness to communicate about sex. Thus, H4 was fully supported.

H5 posited that support recipients' perception of their partners' (a) perspective taking and (b) openness to communicate about sex will be positively associated with their evaluation of

esteem-supportive messages. Results indicated that perspective taking and partner openness were positively associated with esteem supportive messages. Thus, H5 was fully supported.

H6 predicted that support recipients' perception of their partners' (a) perspective taking and (b) openness to communicate will be positively associated with their evaluation of their evaluation of the quality of the message. Results showed that perspective taking was negatively and marginally associated with message quality, and partner openness was negatively associated with message quality. H6 was significant, but in the opposite direction. Thus, it was not supported.

Figure 2



Notes. Final SEM model with direct and indirect effects. Standardized coefficients (β) are shown first followed by standard errors (*SE*) in paratheses. Correlations are not shown for parsimony. Negative association between the latent variables that were significant in the opposite direction than was predicted are shown.

Indirect effects.

Table 2 provides results of standardized indirect effects. H7 proposed that support recipients' evaluation of their partner's characteristics would positively mediate the association between their goal-driven disclosures of sexual information and esteem-supportive messages.

Results showed that support recipients' instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals were positively associated with their partners' esteem-supportive messages through association with perspective taking. Specifically, participants goal-driven sexual messages were associated with higher levels of perspective taking and, in turn, perspective taking was associated with higher levels of esteem support. Additionally, results indicated that support recipients' instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals, were positively associated with their partners' esteem-supportive messages through association with partner openness. The total indirect effect of support recipients' instrumental ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .01$), self-oriented ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .001$), partner-oriented ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .01$), relational ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .00$, $p < .01$), and sexual comfort goals ($\beta = .05$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$) on esteem support were significant. Thus, H7 was fully supported.

H8 posited that support recipients' evaluation of their partner's characteristics would positively mediate the association between their goal-driven disclosures of sexual information and their partner's message quality. Results indicated that instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals were not statistically significant with message quality through perspective taking. However, support recipients' instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals were negatively associated with their partners' message quality through association with partner openness. The total indirect effect of support

recipients' instrumental ($\beta = -.07$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), self-oriented ($\beta = -.08$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), partner-oriented ($\beta = .06$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$), relational ($\beta = -.09$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), and sexual comfort goals ($\beta = -.47$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$) on message quality were negatively significant. Thus, H8 was supported in the opposite direction.

In sum, results demonstrated that support recipients' disclosures of sexual information elicited better esteem-supportive messages through their evaluation of their partners' characteristics. However, support recipients' disclosures of sexual information did not elicit greater evaluation about the quality of their partners' messages through their evaluation of their partners' characteristics.

Table 2

Standardized bootstrap analyses of indirect effects.

			95% CI	
Indirect effect	β	*SE*	Lower	Upper
Instrumental Goal → Perspective Taking → Esteem Support	.01***	.00	.00	.01
Self-Oriented Goal → Perspective Taking → Esteem Support	.01***	.00	.00	.02
Partner-Oriented Goal → Perspective Taking → Esteem Support	.01***	.00	.00	.02
Relational Goal → Perspective Taking → Esteem Support	.01***	.00	.00	.01
Sexual Comfort Goal → Perspective Taking → Esteem Support	.02***	.01	.02	.03
Instrumental Goal → Partner Openness → Esteem Support	.01*	.00	.00	.01
Self-Oriented Goal → Perspective Taking → Esteem Support	.01*	.00	.00	.02
Partner-Oriented Goal → Partner Openness → Esteem Support	.01*	.00	.00	.02
Relational Goal → Partner Openness → Esteem Support	.01*	.00	.00	.01
Sexual Comfort Goal → Partner Openness → Esteem Support	.05**	.01	.02	.04
Instrumental Goal → Perspective Taking → Message Quality	– .02*	.01	– .04	– .01
Self-Oriented Goal → Perspective Taking → Message Quality	– .02*	.01	– .04	– .01
Partner-Oriented Goal → Perspective Taking → Message Quality	– .02*	.01	– .04	– .01

Relational Goal → Perspective Taking → Message Quality	– .05***	.01	– .04	– .01
Sexual Comfort Goal → Perspective Taking → Message Quality	– .06	.04	– .14	– .02
Instrumental Goal → Partner Openness → Message Quality	– .05***	.01	– .07	– .03
Self-Oriented Goal → Partner Openness → Message Quality	– .05***	.01	– .07	– .03
Partner-Oriented Goal → Partner Openness → Message Quality	– .05***	.01	– .07	– .03
Relational Goal → Partner Openness → Message Quality	– .05***	.01	– .07	– .03
Sexual Comfort Goal → Partner Openness → Message Quality	– .40***	.11	– .60	– .22

Notes. Indirect effects analyses were run with a 5,000 samples 95% confidence interval bias-corrected bootstrap samples.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

CHAPTER 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This study examined support recipients' perceptions about their romantic partners' prosocial behaviors during conversations about a sex-related concern. Guided by the multiple goals theory and theories of social support, the Supportive Sex Talk Model (SSM) was developed to account for how individuals' message goals associated with their perceptions of their partners' supportive sex messages. Results indicated that support recipients' message goals were associated with greater perceptions about their partners' esteem supportive messages. However, support recipients perceived that the quality of their partners' messages were less supportive. In the sections that follows, I discuss the results in the context of how message goals and supportive sex communication is a dynamic interaction.

SSM and other multiple goals theories posit that goal pursuit and detection forefronts cognitive constructs of message production (Samp & Solomon, 2005; Palomares, 2008). A core tenet of multiple goals theories is that goal pursuit can be examined from a macro-level perspective (i.e., sequential-level processes; Dillard, 2015) to micro-level message goals (i.e., Li & Samp, 2019). This study specifically examined support recipients' message goals because it provides a more nuanced understanding of how individuals' goals (i.e., instrumental, self-oriented, partner-oriented, relational, and sexual comfort goals) are associated with their perceptions of supportive messages (Guntzviller et al., 2020b). SSM proposes that individuals' cognitive understanding of their partners' communication should activate their perceptions about the messages (Palomares, 2009). Thus, this study adds to prior research to suggest that goal-

driven disclosures about sex can elicit greater perceptions about the effects of supportive sex messages.

The predictions that support recipients' message goals would be positively associated with their partners' esteem support messages were fully supported. Specifically, results revealed that support recipients perceived that their instrumental, self-oriented, relational, partner-oriented, and sexual comfort goals were all associated with perceptions of esteem support. This may suggest that the association between support recipients' goal-driven disclosures about sex and their perceptions about their partners' esteem supportive messages is a complex process. When individuals pursue more than one goal during sex talk, the structure of the goals that they pursue becomes significantly complex (Samp & Solomon, 2005). What is interesting is that while support recipients' message goals are theoretically assumed to guide their message production (Samp & Solomon, 2005), these message goals are directly associated with their perceptions about their partner's esteem supportive messages. Recall that esteem support is a type of social supportive behavior that is provided to support recipients to enhance how they feel about their accomplishments, attributes, abilities, and themselves (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Message goals are individuals' desired end-states they seek to achieve when communicating with others (Cauglin, 2010). Because esteem support is conceptually and operationally different from other forms of social support, how individuals pursue their goals can shape their perceptions about feeling valued (Guntzviller & MacGeorge, 2013; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011).

Although social support research has traditionally held that individuals often turn to a significant other to seek some type of prosocial interaction when they are experiencing a distressing situation (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), research on esteem support posits that individuals

evaluate the source of the threat that potentially damaged their self-identity (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). When individuals' appraisals about the esteem-threatening situations changes, they are more receptive towards esteem-enhancing messages. Thus, while support recipients' appraisals of their partners' messages can influence their supportive outcomes (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011), support recipients in the current study were at least assertive with their partner (Li et al., 2018) while also maintaining other relational dynamics through their communicative messages (Keck & Samp, 2007). These findings suggest that support recipients' who have the efficacy and skills to communicate their sexual desires may experience greater cognitive well-being (Theiss & Solomon, 2007). As prior research indicates communication efficacy is an individuals' perception that they can successfully engage in conversations with another (Afifi & Weiner, 2006). Social skills are defined as "the ability to express both positive and negative feelings…without suffering loss" (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Research demonstrates that effective social skills are needed to communicate about sex with one's partner (Curran et al., 2016). Although perceptions about having the skills and efficacy to communicate about sex with one's partner was not directly tested in the current study, both factors have shown to have positive effects on individuals' relationships and self-esteem (MacGeorge et al., 2011; Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Thus, these findings contribute to our understanding that individuals' multiple message goals are driven by their ability and motivation to communicate about sex effectively and appropriately during prosocial interactions (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003).

Results revealed that support recipients' self-oriented goals were the only goals that were positively associated with message quality. I speculate that recipients' self-oriented goals were associated with greater message quality because these goals focus on the needs and concerns of the support recipient. Message quality, based on semantic differences, is support recipients'

perceptions that the supportive message is helpful, they feel supported, effective, sensitive, and appropriate (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). Support recipients' other message goals may not produce greater quality messages, because these messages may be perceived as insensitive, unhelpful, or hurtful (Jones & Wirtz, 2006). In addition to perceptions that their partners' messages are unhelpful, research demonstrates that distressed individuals are more familiar about the cause of their stressful situation (Danziger et al., 2012). Thus, their perceptions for the conversation may not align with their partners' intentions for the conversation. These findings align with prior research that goals can conflict with each other during goal pursuit (Caughlin, 2010), and communicators often fail to reach their desired goals (Palomares, 2011). Therefore, support recipients may perceive that pursuing goals that align with their self-interests would have a lasting impact on their self-esteem (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011) for future conversations about sex.

The glaring question is if support recipients gleaned more esteem supportive messages from their partner, why do the association of their other message goals not elicit better quality supportive messages? Cutrona and Russell's (1990) optimal matching model may offer some theoretical justification for these findings. According to the model, stressful events differ by controllability and desirability, and different types of stressors require different supportive interactions. Controllability refers to individuals' perceptions about whether the stressful event is within or outside of their control, and desirability refers to individuals' perceptions that the undesirable events will have long lasting impact on their support seeking behaviors than desirable events (Cutrona, 1990). Prior research contends that matching the type of support to the stressful event may not always elicit positive supportive outcomes as certain stressors require different forms of social support (Malloch & Feng, 2022). Thus, while disclosures about sex with

one's romantic partner may produce better esteem supportive messages, the quality of their partners' messages may not be as beneficial as expected. In other words, support recipients' needs for prosocial interactions are matched with the type of esteem enhancing message from their romantic partner, because they messages are communicated to help individuals think about their abilities and accomplishments (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). Additionally, their perceptions about the quality of their partners' supportive messages may suffer when support providers are assumed to be invested in helping them alleviate the cause of the stress (Feng & Magen, 2016). Thus, this study provided a more nuanced and richer perspective about how support recipients' message goals associated with supportive outcomes. Specifically, the results of this study support prior empirical and theoretical research that posits how individuals frame their messages to help individuals cope from distressing events can have different outcomes on their supportive messages (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015; Malloch & Feng, 2022).

Message Goals Association with Perspective Taking

The predictions that support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sexual information would be positively associated with their evaluations about their partners' perspectives were supported. Specifically, support recipients' message goals elicited greater perceptions to consider their partners' perspectives about sex. Prior research indicates that individuals' knowledge structures guide *wha*t they say and *how* they say it (Wilson, 2002). Perspective taking is the process of legitimizing and contextualizing others' viewpoints (Bodie & Jones, 2012). Research suggests that perspective taking is both a cognitive and behavioral process (Long & Andrews, 1990). From a cognitive standpoint, perspective taking is linked to empathy and being helpful towards others (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013). A behavioral perspective on perspective taking argues that it is an interpersonal process. When support recipients think thoroughly and carefully

about their partners' perspectives about sex, they are mentally putting themselves in their partners' shoes. Perspective taking as a behavioral component is communicated through affirming their partners' perspectives about sex. Thus, as support recipients' messages goals increased in salience it positively associated with their ability to think and communicate their understanding of their partners' communication. Therefore, the results support prior research that posits that goal pursuit can influence individuals' communicative behaviors (Wilson, 2002).

Message Goals Association with Partner Openness

Findings of this research study contribute to an understanding that support recipients' message goals elicited greater perceptions to communicate openly about sex with one's partner. These findings indicated that their instrumental, self-oriented, relational goals, partner-oriented goals, and sexual comfort goals elicited better evaluation about open communication. Specifically, support recipients' pursuit to seek esteem support, while focusing on their needs, and their desires to maintain their relationship to talk about sex comfortably and openly with their partner illuminates our understanding on the factors that motivates support recipients to communicate in certain ways. Additionally, the findings support prior research that demonstrates individuals' message goals can help to facilitate their disclosures about sex with their romantic partner (Hullman et al., 2022).

Although communicating about sex is challenging and individuals may experience negative emotional consequences (Theiss & Estlein, 2014), Koening Kellas et al. (2013) posits that "relationships are fashioned through talk, and couples often create the reality of their relationship…together or jointly" (p. 330). Relationship talks also allows partners to have access to each other's information that others outside the relationship may not be privy to (Donovan et al., 2017). Thus, the findings extend prior research that individuals use various communication

strategies to openly communicate about topics with their conversational partner (Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013).

Perspective Taking and Partner Openness Effects on Supportive Outcomes

This project elucidates the understanding that support recipients' perceptions about the type and quality of supportive messages can have varying outcomes on their evaluation about the supportive interactions. Support recipients' who are willing to openly communicate about sex may experiences greater esteem support. Specifically, the more positive evaluations about their partners' openness to communicate elicits better esteem support from their partner. Prior research demonstrates that having similar past experiences with another can influence one's ability to consider their perspectives about a particular situation (Gerace et al., 2015). Additionally, openly communicating about sexual aspects of one's relationship helps in facilitating exchanges of sexual knowledges and disclosures about sex (Rehman et al., 2019). Although discussing certain sexual topics can be intrinsically threatening to one's identity (Theiss & Estlein, 2014), appraisals about the topic through communication with one's partner can generate positive evaluations about their partners' esteem supportive messages (Burleson & Kim, 2011). Thus, the findings of the current study are consistent with research that suggests open and comfortable sexual conversations between romantic partners can elicit better cognitive and sexual outcomes (Denes & Afifi, 2014; Pascoal et al., 2014).

While support recipients' self-esteem is associated with positive prosocial conversations about sex with their romantic partner, the quality of the supportive messages may suffer. This may suggest that while the type of esteem-enhancing messages can influence individuals' appraisals about the situation (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011), the quality of their messages may be perceived as unsupportive or unhelpful (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). Theoretically,

supportive messages such as advice provide individuals with recommendations that tell them how to feel, cope, and behavior regarding distressing situation (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010). Holmstrom and Burleson (2011) theorized this process as an assertive strategy because they are "coercive, demanding targets to engage in particular behaviors or to change how they think and feel" (p. 332). In the current study support recipients may react negatively to supportive messages that they perceive as less supportive because they may perceive that these messages are infringing upon their decision-making processes (Tian et al., 2020). Thus, individuals may disregard any message that does not align with their perceptions about the conversation.

Prior research examining reactance theory in social supportive contexts posits that when individuals experience a threat to their freedom, they seek to re-establish their freedom from the threat (Tian et al., 2020). Similarly, when individuals perceive that they are the cause of a negative event, they seek to appraise the threat that diminished their self-esteem (Lazarus, 1991). As the results of the study demonstrated, support recipients' goal-driven disclosures of sexual information revealed mixed findings on the intervening mechanisms that elicits evaluation about their partners' characteristics (i.e., perspective taking and partner openness) on their perceptions about their partners' esteem supportive messages and the quality of their partners' supportive messages. While support recipients' message goals positively predicted their partners' esteem supportive messages through evaluation of perspective taking and partner openness, results also indicated that support recipients' message goals negatively predicted message quality through a negative significant association through perspective taking and partner openness.

As Sassenrath et al. (2016) argue, taking on the perspective of another person with different viewpoints can be challenging during interpersonal interactions. The contents of what individuals imagine while considering another's perspective may lead to developing negative

evaluations that threatens their motivation to process the information (Mooijman & Stern, 2016). Thus, scholars suggest that threats to motivation may result from anxiety-inducing situations (Xu & McGregor, 2018). Because communicating about sex with one's romantic partner can make one anxious (Rehman et al., 2019), support recipients may seek to re-establish their sense of self through supportive messages (Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). Overall, the findings of this study revealed that while individuals' self-esteem is enhanced through prosocial interaction with their romantic partners, support recipients may perceive that the quality of their partners' supportive message is less supportive because sex talk is a complex process to navigate than nonsexual communicative interactions (Rehman et al., 2017). Thus, future research should examine how romantic partners' micro-level messages change over the course of an interaction during supportive sex talk conversations.

Implications for Theory

SSM's framework posited that as individuals' goal-drive message production becomes salient, the salience of their messages should influence evaluation about the outcomes of supportive sex messages. Further, the theory proposes that characteristics of the message or message source should influence cognitive processing of the information. Empirical findings of this project contributions to existing theoretical frameworks. Specifically, this project contributes to theories of multiple goals and supportive communication.

Multiple Goals Theories

As this project demonstrates goals (i.e., desired end-states) forefronts cognitive constructs of goal pursuit (Caughlin, 2010) and goal understanding (Palomares, 2008). Theorists agree that goal-relevant knowledge structures that guides what people say and how they say it are stored within memory in an associative network or nodes (Wilson, 2002). When individuals receive

information that triggers a node if forms a spreading activation that triggers parallel nodes. Multiple goals theory is a metatheoretical framework that was expanded from the traditional message production paradigm. Message production theory posits that situational information and goal structures operate under a procedural process (Dillard & Solomon, 2000). Specifically, accessibility of contextual information is activated by one's memory system, followed by activated of goal structures. Multiple goals theory extends this theorization to propose that a host of individual, relational, and situational factors can contribute to how individuals guide their message productions through interpersonal interactions. Grounded in this perspective, SSM contributes to these theories by providing a parsimonious, comprehensive framework to explain how individuals' different message goals are associated with perceptions of their partners' communication. Further, the model adds to the multiple goals literature by highlighting that individuals' message goals can also influence the outcomes of their supportive sex messages. The project indicates that different goals can work together synergistically (Caughlin, 2010) or have different outcomes on communicative interactions. As SSM demonstrates, communicating about sex during prosocial interactions is a goal-driven process.

It is important to consider that this project examined how romantically linked individuals' perceptions about sex influence their support seeking outcomes. Romantic partners' communication about sex is different from non-romantic communication about sex. Specifically, romantic partners' sexual communicative interactions may center around decreasing uncertainty while increasing their relational and sexual satisfaction (Theiss & Estlein, 2014). On the other hand, nonromantic partners' communication about sex is different from romantic relationships as the focus may be on hooking up with each other or becoming friends with benefits (Holman & Sillars, 2012; Lehmiller et al., 2014). Additionally, friendship communication about sex

(McManus, 2020) is conceptually and operationally different from parental, romantic, and nonromantic communication about sex (Evans et al., 2020; Williams & Russell, 2013) during prosocial interactions (Fedd & Samp, 2023; McManus & Lucas, 2018). Taken together, this project contributes to an understanding that individuals' goal-driven sex disclosures can generate supportive messages from a romantic partner. Although this project provided a roadmap that provides both clear and concise predictions about supportive sex communication, scholarship is needed to examine if the properties of SSM can be extended to other relational types. Particularly, the current study is grounded in a multiple goals framework that makes specific predictions about the relationships between individuals message goals and supportive sex outcomes. Future work is needed to examine what other factors may intervene or moderate these associations. This may further provide theoretical clarity about the strengthens and weakness of the framework.

Supportive Communication

The findings of SSM are applicable to diverse settings where relational dynamics influence interpersonal sexual communication. The propositions that individuals' goal-driven sexual messages would directly influence their evaluation about supportive sexual messages through the source's characteristics were mostly supported. As prior supportive communication research demonstrates, the communicator's relational factors and the support recipients' understanding of the support providers' goal pursuit, as independent and joint effects, can positively predict supportive outcomes (Guntzviller & MacGeorge, 2013; Guntzviller et al., 2021). Consistent with prior research the results found that support recipients use their understanding of the sexual communicative interaction to make judgements about the relevance of supportive messages during talks about sex with their romantic partner.

As stated earlier, the results showed how individuals' message goals can associate with individuals' evaluation about the type and quality of supportive sex messages. Scholars posit that variations on the impact of supportive messages may be because of how individuals experience different types of supportive messages (Bodie et al., 2011b), and their ratings about the quality of the messages (Bodie et al., 2012a). How individuals pursue and understand their own and their partners' communication can elicit evaluation about supportive messages. This study also contributes to theories of cognitive appraisal that posit how individuals evaluate the intensity of the threat as an internal or external factor, can influence how they seek to cope with the threat (Lazarus, 1991).

Practical Implications

This project examined SSM in the context of how individuals seek supportive messages about sex from their romantic partner. Manning (2021) challenged communication scholars to theorize sex as a communicative interaction. Echoing his call, this project took an initial step to theorize supportive sex talk as a communicative interaction to examine how individuals' message goals associated with their perceptions about their partners' supportive messages. As described below, this section provides practical implications to guide research and relational interventions about the importance of supportive sex talk in safe and comfortable environments.

Suggestions for Supportive Sex Communication Research

Indeed, this dissertation project focused on individual-level factors that elicits supportive outcomes; however, the corpus of sexual communication research highlights the need of research efforts to examine how psychosocial factors influence behavioral outcomes (Maheux et al., 2023). For example, Afifi and Weiner (2006) advanced three distinct components of efficacy (i.e., coping, communication, target) that should influence individuals to engage in a particular

behavior. Coping efficacy is an individuals' perception that they have the cognitive and social resources to manage information seeking outcomes. Communication efficacy is an individuals' perception that they can successfully engage in communication to gain more information. Lastly, target efficacy are individuals' "belief that the information target is able and willing to produce the sought information" (Afifi & Weiner, 2006, p. 38). Other lines of research have identified social self-efficacy as a salient construct in sexual communication research, as it is defined as an individuals' belief that they are able to initiate, engage, and maintain their interpersonal relationships (Brasileiro et al., 2021). McManus and Lucas (2018) contend that research should explore the mediating factors that explains how one's goals associate with their perceptions about prosocial behaviors, and the importance of efficacy in this process. The findings demonstrate that perceived efficacy is communicated through support recipients' perceptions about their ability to consider and being open to communicate about sex with their partner. Thus, this study provides a framework to guide research and intervention projects to examine how perceived efficacy is an important tool to promote better discussions about supportive sex talk.

This project demonstrates that individuals' perceptions about their efficacy to communicate and express their concerns are communicated through their messages. Particularly, self-oriented goals focus on attaining one's needs during the interaction while partner-oriented goals reflect consideration of their partners' viewpoints (Keck & Samp, 2007). As self-oriented goals may reflect sexual messages that are assertive and direct about performing a particular sexual behavior (Li et al., 2018), partner-oriented goals incorporate the partner in the sexual decision-making process (Coffelt, 2018). Thus, this project illuminates that individuals are cognizant about the effects of their partners' sexual messages. A recommendation for future supportive sex communication is to examine how individual-level psychosocial factors influence

individuals' message production as their unfold over the course of the interaction. Keck and Samp's (2007) research demonstrate that individuals' goals can change over 1-minute increments. Therefore, future supportive sex communication research should examine how psychosocial factors such as psychological well-being (Biss & Horne, 2005), stress and coping (Denes et al., 2022) influence individuals message production and reception.

This project adds an additional layer on the focus of sexual communication to illuminate that multiple goals are influenced by cognitive-emotional factors. Extensive supportive communication research demonstrates that individuals' perceptions about prosocial interactions can influence individuals' emotional states (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). Worded differently, supportive messages are given to help others manage challenging issues. The style, delivery, and contents of supportive messages can also influence individuals' perceptions about the supportive message outcomes (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010). As perceptions about social support can change individuals' emotional states in the current moment (Uchino, 2009) while having long-lasting effects (High & Solomon, 2016), participants in the current study may be more receptive to supportive sex messages that can make them feel valued. Thus, results of this project suggest that support recipients' craft and seek supportive messages from their romantic partner to enhance how their feel about themselves and their capabilities as a sexual and romantic partner.

This project demonstrates that evaluation of relational partners' characteristics can vary on the type and quality of supportive messages. Specifically, when support recipients are driven to pursuit their desired end-state (i.e., enhancing their state level self-esteem) they are more motivated to consider their partners' perspectives and openness to communicate about sex. This also highlights that support recipients can pursue more specific types of sexual goals. Here, the study demonstrates that support recipients are comfortable to talk about their sexual life with

their romantic partner. Conversely, individuals may feel threatened talking about sex with their partner because their partners' message quality is perceived to be less supportive and helpful. For support recipients, being more honest about whether they are getting quality supportive messages may help shape their partners' supportive sex messages to match the type and quality of messages they want and need.

This project suggests that scholars and sex therapists should focus efforts on understanding how individual level and relational level language use influence individuals' supportive sex communication and their subsequent communicative behaviors. As the results demonstrated, supportive sex communication is a goal-driven process that is influenced by a host of individual, situational, and relational factors. Wilson et al. (2019) posit that individuals can pursue specific types of goals that can influence their affective and behavioral outcomes. Thus, a recommendation for scholars is to extend this line of reasoning to develop theory-driven research that accounts for how individuals pursue certain sex talk goals and why they main avoid others. There are corpus amounts of literature that provide recommendations for practitioners or clinicians that focus on sexual dysfunction (Sever & Vowels, 2023), sexual experiences after cancer (Perz et al., 2014), and cognitive-based therapy for LGB identifying individuals (Pachankis et al., 2015). Although this is not an exhaustive list of sexual health interventions, they do provide opportunities for theory-driven sex communication research to highlight the importance of interpersonal communication influence on sexual behaviors.

This project provides an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to challenge current notions about supportive sex communication. Specifically, this project illuminates our understanding about the function of supportive messages about sex between relational partners. Additionally, this study contributes to an understanding of how characteristics of the message

source can elicit better evaluation about the outcomes of their partners' messages. From the support recipients' perspectives, receiving messages that enhances their self-esteem are perceived more useful because these messages target their attributes that they may bring to their relationship. Additionally, these messages are considered ego-centered (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Thus, scholars and practitioners may consider what specific types of esteem-enhancing messages can generate better conversations about sex. This project points to the need to identify what other relational, cognitive, behavioral, and personality factors may influence perceptions about supportive sex talk. Although this project only examined the support recipients' perspectives, examining a dyadic interaction may contribute to a more nuanced perspective about sex messages. Thus, scholars may consider how relational-level factors influence conversational partners' behaviors during supportive sex talk interactions.

This project provides relational partners framework to consider the impact of their supportive messages about sex. Specifically, relational partners can create comfortable and open environments to discuss difficult sexual topics. For relational partners' being cognizant about the multiple message goals that they pursue can potentially lead to better intentions to provide positive prosocial behaviors. Additionally, relational partners should consider that their perceptions about their partners' perspectives and openness to communicate can influence their perceptions about the type and quality of their supportive sex messages.

Limitations and Future Directions

The results of this project should be considered within the context of the current study. First, participants consisted mostly of White, female identifying college students. Further, majority of the participants (71.4%) stated that they were seriously dating and not living together. Thus, generalization should be made beyond the scope of this line of reasoning.

Although individuals were asked to provide their sexual orientations the study consisted primarily of individuals who identified as being heterosexual. Prior research indicates that LGB individuals face more barriers regarding their sexual health than heterosexual individuals (Pachankis et al., 2015), and their coming out messages influences their message production (Li & Samp, 2019). Future research should specifically examine how LGBTQ individuals' message goals influence how they seek and proffer supportive messages about sex-related topics.

Future research should consider the importance of gender and sexuality in their research efforts. Prior research demonstrates that individuals' language use is linked with their gender (Palomares, 2004). Specifically, gender-linked language use is salient when gender is situationally accessible. For instance, research demonstrates that women are more flirtatious and seductive than men during sexual settings (Frisby, 2009). Although these findings have provided mixed results of gender and sexuality on individuals' communicative behaviors (Frisby et al., 2011; Palomares, 2004), these may provide avenues to investigate how gender influences individuals' message goals and understanding of others' communication. Thus, scholars should examine the bidirectional effects between gender and communicative behaviors during individuals' conversations about sex.

Another limitation is the discrepancy between the conceptualization and operationalization of perspective taking. Specifically, perspective taking was conceptualized as a cognitive factor that enables individuals the ability to view potential problematic issues from their conversational partners' perspectives. Bodie's (2011) original scale was used in the current study to measure perspective taking as it shares similar theoretical tenets with person-centered messages (Bodie & Jones, 2012). Yet, Koening kellas et al.'s (2013) study measured perceptions of perspective taking using a three semantic difference scale (i.e., misunderstood/understood,

ignored/acknowledged, and disconfirmed/confirmed). Thus, this may explain the low reliabilities of sensing and processing as these constructs are theoretically assumed to be discrete components of active-empathic listening. Perhaps Koening Kellas and Trees' (2005) perceptions of perspective taking scale may be more useful to measure individuals' consideration of their partners' perspective taking.

While this project did provide support for the theoretical tenets of SSM the study design was cross-sectional consisting of mostly young adults. Research demonstrates that young adults communicate about sex differently than older adults (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010; Gillespie, 2017). Further, communication about sex is different between married couples (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Additionally, this study is a retrospective account of their most recent conversations about sex. One solution is to conduct lab-based studies to examine how conversations in supportive context occurs during conversations. Pre- and post-test analyses can be conducted to see if perceptions about sex changes from baseline to after having these sexual conversations. Indeed, results of this study provided insight into how individuals' message goals positively associated with their perceptions about their partners' openness to communicate about sex. What was not examined is association between partner openness predicting individuals' messages goals. Specifically, if individuals' messages goals elicited better evaluations about others' openness to communicate, then perceptions about others' openness to communicate should predict subsequent message goals. Extant multiple goals research suggests that cognitive schemas about communication guides how individuals structure their goals (Wilson, 2002). Thus, it is possible that openness to communicate may predict individuals' messages goals which may elicit further evaluation about the outcomes of their supportive sex messages.

Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this project offered a glimpse about the outcomes of supportive sex talk and how characteristics of the source intervened the association between support recipients' message goals on esteem support and message quality. A longitudinal study may help to map out the salience of supportive sex messages and highlight how an instrumental goal may be salient at different time points. This may add an additional layer of how goals shift in importance regarding the same conversation across time.

A methodological issue of the current project is the negative association between perspective taking and partner openness on message quality. A possible explanation for this finding is that participants were asked to rate the same statement "Thinking about the sexual topic you discussed with your romantic partner" on five bipolar items. Although reliability was acceptable (i.e., Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$) participants likely experienced testing fatigue as this scale was placed near the end of the survey. Another explanation is that prior research (i.e., Guntzviller et al., 2017) asked participants to rate the quality of supportive messages as being helpfulness, supportiveness, and effectiveness on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. As systematic error may occur from both methods (Friborg et al., 2006), asking participants about sex using a semantic difference scale may require more cognitive effort to answer. Which may potentially bias participants' responses.

This project provided a roadmap for research examining the effects of message production and reception on sexual communicative interactions. Prior research has examined how individuals' perceptions about sexual behaviors influence greater perceptions about supportive sex messages (Fedd & Samp, 2023; McManus, 2020). However, SSM is a post-positivist theoretical framework that offers both theoretical and pragmatic explanations to understand why individuals respond to unsupportive and supportive messages. Future research

should extend the theory to examine how the dyad influences their own and their partner's communication during the provisions of support (Guntzviller et al., 2017). Lastly, a suggestion for future usage of the theory is to examine how other cognitive, behavioral, and emotional factors influence goal-driven sex talk. This may provide a nuanced understanding of what contributes to individuals understanding of communicative interactions.

Conclusion

Guided by the multiple goals theory and theories of supportive communication, the Supportive Sex Talk Model (SSM) was developed and tested to understand how individuals' message goals associated with their perceptions about their partner's supportive sex messages. This project identified the situational, individual, and relational factors that explain how individuals seek some type of prosocial interaction with their romantic partner. The results of the project demonstrate that support recipients state level self-esteem is enhanced through conversations about sex that are proffered in open and comfortable environments. This dissertation adds to the existing literature by providing both theoretical and practical implications for the study of supportive sex talk.

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APPENDIX A: MULTIPLE GOAL IMPORTANCE SCALE

Instruction: Thinking about the sexual topic you discussed with your romantic partner, please rate if you agree or disagree with the following statements using the 5-point scale below…

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. I wanted to keep the conversation going.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I wanted to fill the pause in the conversation.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I felt that it was my turn to say something.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I wanted to make sure that we kept talking.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I wanted to be true to myself.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I wanted to relieve my stress.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I wanted to establish confidence in myself.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I did not want my partner to think less of me.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I wanted to make sure my partner felt better.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I wanted to calm my partner down.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I wanted to ease my partner's fears.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I wanted to relieve my partner's stress.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I wanted to say something to let my partner know that I value his/her opinion of me.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I wanted my partner to know that I have morals and values.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I wanted my partner to know that I am loyal to them.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I wanted to maintain my relationship with my romantic partner.	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring: **All Items were averaged scored**

Task/instrument goal: Items 1-4

Self-oriented goal: Items 5-8

Partner-oriented goal: Items 9-12

Relational goal: Items 13-16

Note. Adapted from Samp and Solomon (1998)

APPENDIX B: SEXUAL COMFORT SCALE

Instruction: Thinking about the sexual topic[s] you discuss[ed] with your romantic partner, please rate how comfortable or uncomfortable are the following statements using the 5-point scale below…

Very Uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very Comfortable
1	2	3	4	5

1. Talking about sexuality.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Initiating sexual activities (i.e., kissing, touching, sexual intercourse).	1	2	3	4	5
3. Refusing sexual activities.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Discussing contraception or protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).	1	2	3	4	5
5. Discussing what is and what is not sexually allowed outside of our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring: **All Items were averaged scored**

Note. Adapted from Couture et al. (2022)

APPENDIX C: PERSON-CENTERED MESSAGES SCALE

Instruction: Thinking about the sexual topics you discussed with your romantic partner, please rate how true or never true are the following statements using the 5-point scale below…

Almost Never True	Never True	Neutral	Almost True	Almost Always True
1	2	3	4	5

1. I am [was] sensitive to what my partner is not saying [did not say].	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am [was] aware of what my partner implies but do not say [did not say].	1	2	3	4	5
3. I understand [understood] how my partner feels [felt].	1	2	3	4	5
4. I listen[ed] for more than spoken words.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I assure[d] my partner that I will remember what they say [said].	1	2	3	4	5
6. I summarize[d] points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I keep [kept] track of points my partner makes [made].	1	2	3	4	5
8. I assure[d] my partner that I am [was] listening by using verbal acknowledgements (e.g., mhmm).	1	2	3	4	5
9. I assure[d] my partner that I am [was] receptive to their ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I ask[ed] questions that show[ed] my understanding of my partner's position.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I give [gave] my partner time and space to present information.	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring: **All Items were averaged scored**

Note. Adapted from Bodie et al. (2011)

APPENDIX D: PARTNER OPENNESS SCALE

Instruction: Thinking about the sexual topic[s] you discuss[ed] with your romantic partner, please rate if you agree or disagree with the following statements using the 5-point scale below…

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. After discussing the sexual topic with my partner, I felt that I could ask questions about what had been shared with me.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My partner did not seem to want to talk about the sexual topic beyond the conversation. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
3. If I wanted to know more information about the sexual topic, my partner would be willing to talk about it more with me.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I could not get any more information out of my partner more than they gave to me. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
5. My partner was/were open and willing to talk about the situation.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My partner was/were straightforward with about discussing sex.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My partner was/not completely honest. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
8. My partner did not hide anything from me about the sexual topic.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My partner gave me all the facts and details about the sexual topic.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My partner did not “sugarcoat” about the sexual topic.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I could see my partner for who they really are.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I related to my partner as a friend.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My partner treated me like an equal.	1	2	3	4	5

Scoring: **All Items were averaged scored**

Access to Information: Items 1-5

Candor: Items 6-10

Relating as Peers: Items 11-13

(R) = reverse coded

Note. Adapted from Donovan et al. (2017)

APPENDIX E: SELF-ESTEEM SCALE

Instruction: Thinking about the sexual topic you discussed with your romantic partner, please rate if you agree or disagree with the following statements using the 5-point scale below…

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. I think this conversation would help me feel better about myself. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I think this conversation would improve how I feel about myself. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I think this conversation would help me feel less rejected by my partner. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I think this conversation would help me feel more liked by my partner. 1 2 3 4 5
5. I think this conversation would help me feel more like a moral person. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I think this conversation would help me feel like a more ethical person 1 2 3 4 5
7. I think this conversation would help me feel like a more capable romantic lover. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I think this conversation would help me feel more confident about my abilities in our relationship. 1 2 3 4 5

Scoring: **All Items were averaged scored**

General State Self-Esteem: Items 1-2

Acceptance by Others: Items 3-4

Self-Worth: Items 5-6

Self-Efficacy: items 7-8

Note. Adapted from Holmstrom (2015)

APPENDIX F: MESSAGE QUALITY SCALE

Instruction: Thinking about the sexual topic you discussed with your romantic partner, please rate the quality of you and your partner's communication using the 5-point scales below…

1. (R)

Helpful				Hurtful
1	2	3	4	5

2. (R)

Supportive				Unsupportive
1	2	3	4	5

3. (R)

Sensitive				Insensitive
1	2	3	4	5

4.

Effective				Ineffective
1	2	3	4	5

5.

Appropriate				Inappropriate
1	2	3	4	5

Scoring: **All Items were averaged scored**

(R) = reverse coded item

Note. Adapted Goldsmith & MacGeorge (2000)

APPENDIX G: QUALTRICS SURVEY CONSENT FORM STUDENT SAMPLE

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CONSENT LETTER

Communicating about Sex in Romantic Relationships Study

Researcher's Statement

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator(s):

Andre Fedd, Department of Communication Studies, andre.fedd@uga.edu

Dr. Analisa Arroyo, Department of Communication Studies, arroyo@uga.edu

- The aim of this study is to understand how communicating about sex enhances how one feels about themselves from supportive conversations between romantic partners.
- Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- There are no major risks involved in participating in this study.
- The results of this study will contribute to our understanding of how romantic partners communicate about sexual topics in supportive conversations.

Study Procedures

In order to participate in this study, you and your romantic partner must be 18 years of age or older and be involved in a current romantic relationship. Additionally, your romantic partner must be present to participate in the study as well. You will be excluded if you are not in a current romantic relationship. Approximately 200 individuals will take part in this study.

If you agree to participate, you and your romantic partner will answer questions about yourself and your relationship. You will be asked to write down up to 10 sexual topics that you and your partner are comfortable discussing. Then, you and your partner will have a 10-minute digitally recorded conversation about the sexual topic you both agreed on. After the conversation, you and your partner will respond to several measures. Lastly, you and your romantic partner will re-watch the conversation and answer questions regarding to the conversation at 1-minute intervals.

Incentive for Participation

If you are enrolled in COMM 1110 or COMM 1500, participation in this study will satisfy two (2) of the research requirements of your class. However, participating in this research study is not the only option for satisfying your research requirement. Other non-research options, as noted in your syllabus, include writing a summary of a research article or attending a Communication Studies event, serve as an alternative to participating in this study. These alternative options are equivalent in time commitment. If your instructor has granted an opportunity for extra credit in other COMM classes, you may receive a small amount of extra credit as indicated by your instructor.

Risk and Discomforts

There are questions that may make you uncomfortable, including those about the nature of your communication about sex with your romantic partner. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

If you experience any discomfort during the survey, you can immediately close out of the survey without penalty. To mitigate harm/risks you may contact the University of Georgia Equal Opportunity Office at: https://eoo.uga.edu/node/128 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233, or your local domestic violence service center.

- UGA Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) – (706) 542-2273
- UGA Office of Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) (provides 24-hour crisis support, information, advocacy, education and outreach) – (706) 542-7233 or (706) 542-8690
- Survivor Support Group for student survivors of sexual and/or relationship violence – contact Caron Hope, chope@uhs.uga.edu, (706) 542-7233
- UGA Center for Counseling and Personal Evaluation – (706) 542-8508
- UGA Psychology Clinic – (706) 542-1173
- Aspire Clinic (offers individual, couple, and family therapy) – (706) 542-4486
- UGA Family Justice Clinic – (706) 369-6272

Privacy/Confidentiality

Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. You will have to report your name and class so that you will receive proper credit. However, this information will be recorded in a separate file from your responses to survey measures, and digital recordings. All data will be identified using numeric codes, and no identifiable features will be used to classify or organize data. All survey responses and recordings will be kept in a locked lab in a locked cabinet, which

only the research team has access to. Electronic materials will be stored on a password protected computer. Video recordings will be transcribed. Direct quotes may be used, but you will not be identified by name. Digital recordings will be kept for up to five years and may be used in future studies, but will only be used by the current study team. Researchers will not release identifiable information to anyone other than the individuals or offices identified in this document without further written consent unless required by law.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Although we would like you to answer all of the questions that apply, you have the right to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty. You decision to participate or not to participate in this study will have no bearing on your grades or class standing. Your participation is completely voluntary.

The researchers conducting this study are Andre Fedd, a graduate student, and Dr. Analisa Arroyo, associate professor, both from the Department of Communication Studies. If you have any questions, please ask them now before participating. You may contact Andre Fedd at andre.fedd@uga.edu or Dr. Analisa Arroyo at arroyo@uga.edu to ask any questions. You may also ask any questions during or after participation as well. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706-542-3199 or irb@uga.edu

Research Participant's Consent to Participate in Research:

By signing below, you are confirming that you are 18 years of age or older and agreeing to participate in the above described research project. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

_____ _____

Signature Date