

Uncertainty reduction strategies in casual sexual relationships among college age  
women

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Casual Sexual Relationships .....	4
Uncertainty Reduction Theory.....	12
Uncertainty Reduction Theory in Casual Sexual Relationships.....	19
<b>III. METHODS</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Participants.....	23
Procedures: Recruiting Participants .....	24
Procedures: Journaling .....	25
Instruments.....	28
Data Analysis .....	29
<b>IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>33</b>
Figure 1 .....	34
Consideration of a casual sexual relationship.....	35
Open coding.....	35
Primary uncertainty reduction strategies lead to .....	38
Abstinence (decides not to have sex until marriage) .....	39
Abstains (decides not to have casual sex).....	40
Participates (communicates with partner about uncertainty) .....	41
Participates (does not communicate partner).....	42
Secondary uncertainty reduction strategies lead to .....	44
Communicates (with others but not partner) .....	46
Decides to no longer participate in casual sex.....	47
Leaves the casual sexual relationship .....	48
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>52</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>65</b>
A. Memo .....	65
B. Script .....	66
C. Consent Form.....	68

Demographic Survey .....	71
Journal Prompts .....	72

## **ABSTRACT**

Casual sexual relationships have become a common and unique part of college students' lives. Because these relationships are very ambiguous they can create uncertainty in individuals who are participating in them. This study uses uncertainty reduction theory to examine the participants' uncertainty through the use of journaling. Based on the data, a model is presented which examines four separate types of uncertainties found in the study (physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioral) and shows the uncertainty reduction techniques used by the participants and the outcomes.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“WE thought sex was free. Sex is not free. There’s a price to be paid emotionally, physically, even legally. Sex isn’t a casual thing. It’s a huge thing.”

~William H. Macy

As said about the 60s generation in USA Weekend Magazine (Zaslow, 1998)

In his book, *Lacon; Or Many Things in Few Words* (1865), Charles Caleb Colton wrote

the following:

“Anguish of mind has driven thousands to suicide; anguish of body, none. This proves that the health of the mind is of far more consequence to our happiness than the health of the body, although both are deserving of much more attention than either of them receive.” (p. 136).

Colton, a well-known clergyman, sportsman and author, speaks of our health as invaluable. He also asserts that the health of mind is as important, if not more, than the health of the body.

Even today, when looking at healthcare issues, professionals tend to divide health into physical and mental aspects. Perhaps this is a remnant of Descartes’ Dualism which assumes the “view that the mind and the brain-body are separate entities” (Devlin, 1996, p. 344). While dualistic thought ruled science for a time, over the last century there have been some major arguments about the flaws of dualism. For the purposes of this study I, too, must disagree with Descartes. Body and mind cannot be separated especially when it comes to sex (Friedman, 2009). Sex is much more than a mere physical act but an activity

which involves the person as a whole not separated into physical well-being and emotional well-being (McIlhaney & Bush, 2008).

The World Health Organization (2012) also makes note that the physical as well as the mental and social aspects must all be well in order to have sexual health. As a society we are concerned with the physical consequences of sex and do much to make sure that people are protecting themselves but there isn't much being done for the emotional consequences (Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006). It's not the inherent "goodness" or "badness" of casual sex; it's that most young people are just taught to handle the physical risks—not the emotional or relational ones. Yet, there is a relationship that ignores the connection between the physical and the mental--the casual sexual relationship.

The casual sexual relationship is unique in that it begins and ends in ambiguity (Walsh, 2008). There are no rules as to how the relationship should begin and none as to how it should end. Many students believe this relationship saves them from the hassles of dating without taking away the fun of sex (Carey, 2007). However, sex can have an array of psychological effects. It can make "a person uniquely vulnerable, both physically and emotionally" (Morse, 2006, p. 9). This distinct relationship allows each individual to come and go as they please but in doing that, it allows for definite uncertainty.

Because this relationship is indistinct, with no social standards as to how it begins, how it should evolve, or how it ends, this relationship is ripe with uncertainty. To study the phenomenon of casual sexual relationships reliance on the uncertainty reduction theory (URT) is crucial. URT has been around since the 1970s and has been applied to

hundreds of interpersonal relationships. Scholars agree that cognitive uncertainty is uncomfortable to most humans and that through communication we try to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knobloch, 2008). Uncertainty reduction is done for emotional and mental health. The casual sexual relationship seems to prosper on uncertainty and therefore seems to defy previous understandings of uncertainty reduction (Grello, et al., 2006; Paul & Hayes, 2002).

The following examines the nature of casual sexual relationships. It explores the way in which URT has previously been used and explains how I used it in my study. I used journaling to examine the participant's talk about casual sexual relationships. I then used open coding and axial coding to create a model, which shows the progression of uncertainty reduction techniques used by the participants. I define the different uncertainty reduction strategies, discuss the previous research and relate my participants' journal answers.

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## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### *Casual Sexual Relationships*

The very essence of communication is found in the ebb and flow of human relationships. Almost all people in all cultures are engaged in or have engaged in a relationship of some type. Many of these relationships can be socially, physically, and emotionally stimulating to one's life. Dickson, Hughes and Walker (2005) stated that "research has long discussed the importance of intimacy and personal relationships specifically highlighting the positive benefits intimate relationships have on our emotional, cognitive and physical self" (p. 67). Relationships seem to make people happy and have importance in society (Knapp, Daly, Albada & Miller, 2002).

Many of these relationships deal with friendships which play an essential role in the social aspects of one's life. Friendships are identified as "significant influences on identity development" according to Ting-Toomey (1989, p. 353). Other interpersonal research asserts that friendships as well as most interpersonal relationships tend to alter one's life permanently (Metts & Planalp, 2002).

Many friendships can result in sexually intimate relationships. Most of the friendships/relationships can play healthy impacting roles in our lives. Sexual health is an important aspect of these relationships. Despite the effort to make college students aware of the risks involved by their choices, safer sex among college coeds is still an area of concern. According to the book, "Anonymous M. D." (2006) the author describes society's creed on sex in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: "Central is the dogma that desires are 'needs,'

to be acted upon and satisfied; that behaviors considered aberrant by society and medicine are natural, while self-restraint is not (p. 3).” . Colleges seem to be pervaded by the “friends with benefits” dogma or the casual sex movement (Grello, et al., 2006; Lambert, Kahn & Apple, 2003; Paul & Hayes, 2002).

The definition for “casual sex” from Edgar and Fitzpatrick (1993) is “the interaction as one in which two individuals meet for the first time and have sexual intercourse within a few hours; they may or may not continue the relationship” (p. 242). The author of *Unhooked*, a recently published book that looks at the culture of hooking up and casual sex, states that the most important feature of hooking up “is the ability to unhook from a partner at any time” (Stepp, 2007 p. 17). Paul and Hayes (2002) define hooking up as “a sexual encounter (that may or may not involve sexual intercourse) between two people who are brief acquaintances or strangers, usually lasting only one night without the expectation of developing a relationship” (p. 640). For the purposes of this study, I will define casual sex as the interaction in which two individuals engage in sexual activities; these sexual activities may or may not continue beyond the first episode. The reason for this alternate definition lies in the fact that this study does not solely look at one night stands, also considered a “hook up,” but also at the longer-term casual sexual relationship referred to as “bed buddies,” “hook ups,” or “friends with benefits” (Anonymous M. D., 2006; Bisson & Levine, 2006; Boggle, 2008; Campbell, 2008).

Casual Sex is an interesting and surprisingly popular relationship. As many as 60 percent of college students have reported having at least one casual sexual relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2006), while Paul and Hayes (2002) report that 82 percent of college

students have “hooked up.” Casual sex “has become the norm on many college campuses, where the “hook up” is now a recognized pattern” (Morse, 2006, p. 8). This relationship usually begins with casual friends. They hang out and possibly get to know one another. This could happen over the course of a few days, weeks or even just one night. They may see each other in social places such as clubs or in class and are friendly to one another. They engage in sexual activities perhaps only once such as a one-night stand, or they may continue to engage in sexual activities whenever one or the other feels like it. However, these couples are not dating and are very serious about their sexual relationships not being “relationships.” Casual sex, then, is incredibly hard to describe. It takes many shapes and has various meanings for different students. These sexual experiences can be labeled as a “hook up” even if there is no sexual intercourse and can involve many sexual activities (Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000). These relationships can also vary in length from perhaps one encounter to several (Grello et al., 2006).

According to the *New York Times*, casual sexual relationships have evolved into “a cultural signature of today’s college and post college experience” (Carey, 2007, p. F5). Modern society has downplayed committed relationships and hyped up the freedom from relationships with any kind of dependency on the other person (Morse, 2006). Morse (2006) claimed that “sex has become a recreational activity, a consumer good (p. 5),” and that we now see sex as a way to concentrate on ourselves and our desires, instead of others. It seems as though the casual sexual relationship is, if not expected, at least widely accepted. Many college students enjoy this relationship because the pressure of

being a boyfriend or girlfriend is not present (Carey, 2007). Jessie Knowles (2007), a student writer for the *North by Northwestern*, lists the important factors that must be present to have a successful “friends with benefits” relationship. Knowles states that you must (1) not be looking for a relationship, (2) separate sex from emotions, (3) be honest about why you are in this non-relationship relationship, (4) discuss the rules such as contraceptive methods and having safe sex, (5) be willing to lose a friend, (6) do not make a big deal about it, and several other suggestions. Knowles ends with the assertion that being in a casual sexual relationship makes just as much sense as being in any other relationship. A similar statement comes from Morse (2006) when she describes sexual partners as objects that we use and when we no longer want them, we simply throw them away. A student from Brown University stated “In a normal relationship, you meet, get drunk, hook up” (Stepp, 2007, p. 33). Statements like these could infer why college students, specifically in the United States, are now prone to shorter relationships, higher rates of infidelity, and more game-playing behavior than students in other countries (Crary, 2007). Even though casual sex relationships can mean almost anything, the students are quick to say it is common (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

Those who have studied this relationship hypothesize that casual sexual relationships can have damaging effects on the people who engage in it (Carey, 2007; McIlhaney & Bush, 2008; Morse, 2006). In a study by Campbell (2008), women reported more negative feelings towards casual sex including feeling used and worried about their reputation. Paul et al. (2000) found that those who participated in casual sex experienced significant guilt. Anonymous, M. D. (2006), a psychologist on a college

campus, tells the story of a young woman named Heather. She is involved in a casual sexual relationship but is confused about why the guy seems to be getting all the benefits but she is not getting any of the friend part. Heather states that whenever she wants to hang out or go to the movies, the guy says that it is too much like a relationship. She is depressed and he is content. It seems like a harmless relationship but the same fears that prevail in a romantic relationship prevail here too, the fear that one of the two will want to further the relationship (Crary, 2007).

To explore the communicative aspects of friendships and relationships, scholars often use relational dialectics (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). This theory applies well to the casual sexual relationship because it explores the tensions present in any relationship and that these tensions actually allow the relationship to grow (Pawlowski, 1999). In relational dialectics there are three propositions that must be understood in tangent with one another (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006). First, the idea of integration and separation must be examined. In the casual sexual relationship there is an emphasis on autonomy and a fear of becoming too much like a couple (Carey, 2007). Second, is the idea of stability and change. A relationship must have a basis of stability in order for the individuals to feel safe in their relationship. In the casual sexual relationship, there is little certainty that the relationship will continue (Grello, et al., 2006). Finally, expression and privacy are two common tensions in a relationship. If each of these three proponents are one-sided then the relationship may falter and can cause tremendous amounts of uncertainty within the relationship and the individuals (Smith & Wilson, 2010). While this is not the theoretical foundation of my study, I do believe that it is

relevant to my research and illustrates how the casual sexual relationship lends itself to uncertainty.

College women are caught in the middle of the conflict between traditional roles and those of the liberated sexual female (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994; Moore & Davidson, 2000; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Rosenthal, Gifford & Moore, 1998). Morse (2006) writes that many people are struggling with the hurt of casual sexual relationships which leaves them feeling empty and leads them nowhere. As one student bluntly put it “Why do they tell you how to protect your body—from herpes and pregnancy—but they don’t tell you what it does to your *heart*?” (Anonymous M. D., 2006). Moore and Davidson (2000) state that society is quick to condemn the women involved in casual sexual relationship but also continues to praise sexual liberation of females. Although the actual thrill of the “casual sexual relationship” tends to be the same for women, the aftermath tends to leave women with more feelings of regret and shame than their male counterparts (Paul & Hayes, 2002). This might be caused by the traditional gender roles that are still very much alive in society that reinforce sexual activity as inappropriate for women (Hust, Brown & L’Engle, 2008).

However, it could be that women could have a biological proclivity toward attachment in sexual relationships. Some researchers (Anonymous, M.D., 2007; Morse, 2006; Stephy, 2008; Theodoridou, Rowe, Penton-Voak & Rogers, 2009) explain the role of Oxytocin in a woman’s body, a hormone that is released during orgasms and is used to help form a bond with one’s partner. Oxytocin is the same hormone that is secreted during childbirth and breastfeeding. This hormone is meant to create bonds of trust and

love as well as feelings of generosity and even reduce anxiety (Stephy, 2009). While the release of this hormone is probably not the sole reason that casual sexual relationships can be emotionally damaging, it could have an effect especially when looked at in tandem with the traditional view of women's roles in sex (Hust, et al., 2008).

Men rarely shy away from the prospect of casual sex. Oliver and Hyde (1993) reviewed over 177 studies about sex differences between men and women and found that short-term mating perceptions was the biggest difference between men and women. Haselton and Buss (2001) offer an explanation for the disconnect between the female and male perspectives on short-term mating. The mind set behind men's acceptance of mating and moving on presumably came about because of the reproductive benefits of mating with several different females. However, female short-term mating has only recently begun to be studied, but there are several hypotheses. One hypothesis suggests that women may give up the long-term mating for the benefit of having access to great genes (Gangstead & Thornhill, 1997; 1998). Another hypothesis is that women participate in short-term mating for instant access to resources (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). However, on the whole men are much more interested than women in having sex with a large number of women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) and are much more accepting of casual sex than women (Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

Haselton and Buss (2001) give us plausible explanations for the commitment-avoidance problems that can be found in relationships following intercourse. They call it the Affective shift hypothesis. This hypothesis states that:

[M]en who are able to extract themselves from a relationship after sexual intercourse, but prior to heavy investment, would have been more successful at

pursuing a short-term mating strategy than men who failed to extract themselves following a sexual encounter that was intended to be short-term (Haselton & Buss, 2001, p. 359).

Therefore, men seem to experience a negative shift in perception after intercourse and women seem to experience positive shifts. This shift in thought could provide the motivation that the men need to exit the relationship quickly rather than stick around. Women are more likely to feel an increase in commitment and attraction after sexual intercourse and therefore might not intend for their relationships to be short or even casual (Haselton & Buss, 2001). If the man then leaves the relationship because of his affective shift then the woman is often left to think about the reason he left, which causes her uncertainty.

The very proposal of the “casual sexual relationship” is innately based on a relationship that does not cause the worry or uncertainty of breaking up (Boggle, 2008; Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005; Lambert, et al., 2003). These casual sexual relationships can be fine for some people. For others there is a question as to how to deal with the emotional fallout of this non-relational relationship, and the potential uncertainty that might result. The definition lends itself to the idea of uncertainty when it states that it “may or may not continue.” Emotionally this can have devastating effects (Grello, et al., 2006).

This method of approaching relationships might have been considered unconventional in the past but now these casual sexual relationships are quite normative (Lambert, et al., 2003). One might ask why some people willingly enter into a relationship of uncertainty? One-night stands and uncommitted sexual acts are not new

and most of the research in the past has focused on “personality traits, attitudes, and individual differences in willingness to engage in such behaviors” (Lambert, et al., 2003, p. 129).

The casual sexual relationship seems to have been accepted because it tends to be an easier way to deal with the stress and uncertainty of regular relationships without sacrificing the human need for sexual connection. But casual sex is based on strictly untitled, undefined labels and so it brings its own uncertainties. As Neal and Collas (2000) argue “with the emergent emphasis on hedonistic values and personal freedom, there has also been an increase in levels of uncertainty and apprehension about such issues as consequences of casual sex...(p. 82).” Uncertainty is an idea most humans like to stay away from and yet here in the realm of casual sex it seems to thrive. Because uncertainty seems to be a likely product of casual sexual relationship, it seems only natural that this relationship would gain understanding if it were studied using Uncertainty Reduction Theory.

#### *Uncertainty Reduction Theory*

Uncertainty and means of reducing it have been studied for years. In 1975, Berger and Calabrese started researching what is known today as the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). They argued that when people first meet they are mostly concerned with reducing the uncertainty and increasing the predictability of the other person’s behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger and Calabrese also claimed that if persons cannot get to know one another, then they decrease the probability of developing a more intimate relationship, citing that higher levels of uncertainty are directly correlated with low levels

of liking (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Ironically, individuals may or may not even know that they are engaging in uncertainty reduction (Gudykunst, 1995).

URT was originally intended to dissect interpersonal relationships. URT exposes the need for people to communicate to lessen their uncertainty of people or environments (Weick, 1979). There are several assumptions in URT. It is assumed that when people first meet they are uncertain in these interpersonal situations and that this uncertainty leads to cognitive stress. So the immediate concern is to reduce the uncertainty and this is done by interpersonal communication (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). During interaction between individuals there is a sharing of information that is used to help each person become more familiar and more comfortable with the other person or situation.

Uncertainty can be between individuals who have just met and have no pre-existing relationship. Other uncertain relationships are that of people who are already acquainted but do not know each other that well or uncertainty between an individual and his or her job or task, such as doctor to patient. Uncertainty reduction has been looked at in situations such as the effects of humor in uncertainty reduction (Graham, 1995). The theory was used in analyzing intercultural relationships (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984) and the relationships between younger adults and older adults (Pratt, Wiseman, Cody & Wendt, 1999).

There are two types of uncertainty found in an initial encounter. One is cognitive, what we think and believe to be true, and the other is behavioral, how well we can predict another's behavior is predicted. Basically, uncertainty occurs when one does not know enough information about themselves or about others. There are three stages in which

the relationship can be analyzed: the entrance, personal and exit (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). The entry phase is centered on the presence of behavioral norms. The topics are normally impersonal and business-like. As the second phase approaches, the questions and information gets more personal. In the personal phase more information is shared about beliefs, values and attitudes. This phase is about understanding another individual. Increased emotional involvement follows more complex and informational answers and questions. Finally, the exit stage is characterized by exploring the want or need to further the relationship. If neither individual would like to continue the relationship it is severed; however, despite the name, the exit phase does not have to end the relationship. It is merely the closing of the uncertainty in the relationship.

The uncertainty reduction employed within an interaction can be understood through a set of axioms (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). There are seven axioms, which make up the URT. Each axiom explains an important part about the individual's reduction of uncertainty. These axioms were meant to provide assumptions about uncertainty and communication. In this study, the axioms will be used as a secondary analysis of the data. An important aspect of the URT is that it can be used not only for initial interaction such as one-night stands but it can also be used for the purposes of taking the relationship to a new level and or becoming part of a casual sexual relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

The first seven axioms were published by Berger and Calabrese (1975). In 1983, Parks and Adelman added an eighth axiom (Knoblock, 2008, p. 135). The axioms are as follows:

Axiom 1: Uncertainty is negatively associated with verbal communication.

Axiom 2: Uncertainty is negatively associated with nonverbal affiliative expressiveness.

Axiom 3: Uncertainty is positively associated with information-seeking behavior.

Axiom 4: Uncertainty is negatively associated with the intimacy of communication content.

Axiom 5: Uncertainty is positively associated with reciprocity rate.

Axiom 6: Uncertainty is negatively associated with the degree of similarity between partners.

Axiom 7: Uncertainty is negatively associated with liking.

Axiom 8: Uncertainty is negatively associated with shared communication networks between partners. (Knoblock, 2008, p. 135)

As axiom 3 states, “high levels of uncertainty lead to information seeking behaviors” (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103). It has been argued that in the mid seventies questioning strategies were seen as highly restricted because of societal norms. This dealt specifically with intimate nature of the information given (Berger, 1979; Gardner, 1976). An example of this could be the number of questions you asked a stranger in an airport or how far along you are in a friendship before asking a friend their salary.

Elaboration on URT by Berger (1995) asserts there can be several strategies in reducing uncertainty. These methods can be proactive, which happen before the communication, or they can be retroactive in which case, the event has already occurred

but the individual is trying to make sense out of it. Proactive methods of uncertainty reduction include talking to others about someone or something or looking up information on the internet or social networking sites (Dawkins, 2010). Retroactive methods of uncertainty reduction “such as discussing an experience with friends, allow us to make meaning out of events that have already occurred (Dawkins, 2010).

Three uncertainty reduction strategies, which can be either proactive or retroactive and are passive, active and interactive (Berger, 1979). Passive strategies use unobtrusive observations to gather information about another person. These normally occur in normal social situations. An example of a passive strategy might be you observing the other person at lunch in the cafeteria eating and socializing with coworkers. Active strategies are planned attempts to find out information about another person through “indirect means such as personal and mediated social networks” (Dawkins, 2010, p. 137). An active strategy would be using facebook if that person you are interested in is dating someone else. Interactive strategies take place when the observer has face-to-face communication with the other person such as asking the other person their opinion on an issue.

This theory provides an interesting look at interpersonal relationship management and structure. This theory articulates the need of every human to find out more information, to acquire more knowledge so that their uncertainty can be reduced or even diminished. This process occurs hundreds of times a day and is aimed at thousands of targets (Berger & Bradac, 1982). These uncertainties range from the mundane, “Should I bring gloves?” to the overwhelming “What if it is cancer?” Theorists have concurred that

humans see uncertainty as an undesired state (Marris, 1996). As humans our first instinct is to find a way out of such an undesired state.

URT has been applied to many types of relationships and communication phenomena. Parks and Adelman (1983) claimed that in romantic pairs uncertainty was devastating to the communication that the pair had with each other and with each other's social groups. If uncertainty were to continue in a relationship then there were generally negative consequences within the relationship (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Moreover, uncertainty is a major contributor to the dissolution of a relationship (Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978).

In non-interpersonal relationships URT has been used in organizational communication between employee and employee (Kramer, 2000) and in Computer-Mediated Communication where online friends have a tougher time reducing uncertainty because of the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues that are customary in uncertainty reduction communication (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Uncertainty reduction is employed in researching the relationship between professor and student (Haleta, 1996). URT can be applied to any interpersonal relationship making it very useful for studies involving experience based data. In the health care realm, URT has explored the relationship between provider and healthcare seeker (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Gruber, 2004) and the relationship between patients and the uncertainty their illness can bring (Sheer and Cline, 1995).

A health care study utilizing URT is a study by Brashers et al. (2000) which explores uncertainty within persons living with HIV and AIDS. They found thirteen

behaviors or experiences that seemed to be common in the patients. These experiences are:

- 1) Managing a danger appraisal.
- 2) Active information seeking.
- 3) Passive information seeking.
- 4) Experiential information.
- 5) Managing an opportunity appraisal.
- 6) Avoiding information to maintain uncertainty.
- 7) Seeking information to increase uncertainty.
- 8) Managing an appraisal of chronic uncertainty.
- 9) Managing information.
- 10) Characteristics of information.
- 11) Credibility of information sources.
- 12) Diminished information processing ability.
- 13) Accidental exposure to information.

This study will be modeled closely after the Brashers et al. (2000) study and will seek to reiterate the idea that uncertainty in a relationship can consist of more than negative emotions. The emotions that are felt by those in a casual sexual relationship are almost always confusing to the individual. The individual has feelings of excitement, exhaustion, hopefulness, fright, power, powerlessness and uncertainty or “horror and bewilderment” as one female student at Cornell describes her emotions after her first encounter in a casual sexual relationship (B. J., 2007).

While URT is still an applied theory, the societal norms and constraints that held information-seeking behaviors in check in the seventies are not as rigid now. The freedom of expression, especially in intimate relationships, has increased. With the decline of societal constraints on sexual images and scripts (Hust, Brown & L'Engle, 2008; Kilbourne, 2003) and the expansion of sexual freedom, research can now be done on the use of uncertainty reduction within casual sexual relationships. It is certain that humans still experience uncertainty every day, but what is not known is how it is experienced and in turn, interpreted in sexually intimate interpersonal interactions such as casual sexual relationships. Using URT to examine the casual sexual relationship seems to be the next step in uncertainty reduction research.

#### *Uncertainty Reduction Theory in Casual Sexual Relationships*

To further our understanding of the URT. I examined a relationship that has at its heart uncertainty. By definition a casual sexual relationship is based on the uncertainty of the relationship's continuation, how much the other partner is actually committed to the relationship and when, not if, the relationship will end. This area of study is imperative to communication research as it lends much to the "sex talk" that occurs between college-aged adults. What techniques and word choices do the participants in these relationships employ to reduce uncertainty about one-night stands, hooking up, safer sex practices and the termination of the casual relationships? The answers to these questions could do much to further the field of health and relational communication especially in the sexual realm.

Edgar and Fitzpatrick (1993) state that very little research has actually been done on safer sex communication. Although studies have found that individuals are not opposed to engaging in safer sex communication they tend to focus on the physical aspect only, such as condom use and STD testing (Cantania, Coates, Stall & Turner, 1992; Crowell & Emmers-Sommer, 2000; Edgar, Freimuth, Hammon, Donald & Fink, 1992). There is already a call for research in the area of the coping process of individuals where sexual activity is involved. Crowell and Emmers-Sommer (2000) claim that many individuals cope by using “non-communicative coping strategies or none at all,” and although this was in relation to condom use it is also a strong statement for the psychological coping practices also found in sexual activity. Most of the literature claims that increased efficacy in communication is the key to getting students to participate in safer sex (Dilorio, Dudley, Lehr & Soet, 2000; Edgar & Fitzpatrick, 1993; Hust, et al., 2008; Murnon, Perot & Bryne, 1989).

This study looks into the world of college heterosexual females and the uncertainty involved in casual sexual relationships, as well as their routines and rituals that allow them to rationalize their participation in these relationships. How do these individuals reduce their uncertainty when entering, participating or exiting these relationships? Moreover, if they cannot reduce their uncertainty how do they cope with its existence? This project also furthers our understanding of sexual customs and the knowledge gaining practices of college aged women. The URT is imperative in the realization of this study because it is at the core of the casual sexual relationship. Research has shown us that these relationships are quite prevalent on college campuses

(Feldman, Turner & Araujo, 1999; Grello, et al., 2006; Kahn, A. S., Fricker, K., Hoffman, J., Lambert, T., Tripp, M., Childress, K., et al. (2000); Mongeau, Ramiresm & Vorrell, 2003). Disregarding these relationships would be an unwise choice as this study can lend so much data to the area of young adult communication.

Using the URT in this study had a great deal of potential to expose the communication characteristics in college women involved in casual sexual relationships. As this relationship phenomenon continues to rise in popularity the need for study of its communication traits is also increased. This study provides the means to further the URT in interpersonal relationships as well as amplifies understanding of women who are involved in casual sexual relationships and their uncertainty reduction communication.

The casual sexual relationship was an interesting challenge for the URT because the participants seem to let their cognitive and behavioral selves try to trick one another leaving them with nothing but uncertainty. For this study, every phase in the casual sexual relationship was analyzed using the importance that the participants place on each phase.

This study utilized the uncertainty management communication behaviors found in the Brashers et al. (2000) study as a springboard for examining uncertainty reduction behaviors relating to casual sexual relationships. Particularly this study focuses on women's thoughts about casual sexual relationships. Women were chosen simply because the size of the study was too small to encompass the male and female perspective. This study posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of uncertainty are found within casual sexual relationships as reported by college age women?

RQ2: What are the reported uncertainty reduction strategies of women involved in casual sexual relationships?

RQ3: If uncertainty is not reduced within a casual sexual relationship how do college age women cope with its existence?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### *Participants*

Following approval from the International Review Board, the participants recruited were college women, ages 18 to 24. These ages make up approximately 78% of the student population of this university (Fall 2008 Fact Sheet, Texas Tech University). This study looked at the female populations because casual sex could end with unwanted pregnancies which primarily affect females. Females are also at a greater risk of emotional damage and depression resulting from casual sex (McIlhaney & Bush, 2008). Although the study could have just as well benefited using male participants in the interest of time and research, the project was narrowed down to females only. Homosexual females were ruled out simply in the interest of time. The participants were taken from a large university in west Texas. This university was chosen largely due to access. A total of 25 females were recruited for the study with a total of 11 females finishing or coming very close to finishing the study. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 22 with the average age being of those who completed the study was 20. There were 6 Caucasian participants, 4 Caucasian and Hispanic participants and 1 Hispanic participant. Five participants identified their religious affiliation as Christian, two as Catholic, two as Baptist and one participant claimed she was non-denominational. Seven of the participants were single, three were in an exclusive relationship and one was married.

*Procedures: Recruiting Participants*

The women were recruited through the snowballing and social network methods. College professors and instructors were recruited to ask their students if anyone would be willing to participate. If the professor wanted they could have used extra credit or bonus points to persuade students to participate in the study. I also tried to gain participation by word of mouth. I told associates and acquaintances about the study and asked those who qualified if they would like to participate. They were also asked if they knew of anyone else who would like to participate. I put out a written request asking individuals to participate if they were interested and qualified for the study. This request was noted on internet social networks such as Myspace and Facebook (Appendix A). I encouraged all who read the post to share it with friends or family members who may have been interested in hopes of generating participation.

To be included in this study, the participant must have been a heterosexual female between the ages of 18-24 and currently enrolled at Texas Tech University. The participant could have been an undergraduate or a graduate student. It did not matter if the participants were sexually active or not. Every view was considered highly educational for this study. Each woman was told about the process of the study before the actual beginning of the study either in writing or by word of mouth. Each participant was given the incentive of a ten dollar gift Visa card that could be spent at any location if she completed the study. The money for the gift cards came completely out the researcher's own pocket. Thirty participants was the goal number for this study. The number thirty was chosen in hopes of reaching saturation in the results. Saturation would be reached if

there seemed to be recurring themes throughout the journal entries (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While there is no guarantee that saturation will occur, thirty participants was a number which did not exhaust time and resources for the researcher. There was also anticipation that along the way some of the women would drop out of the study because of its intensive writing and the personal nature of the study. Ultimately, twenty-five participants were recruited with only eleven finishing or finishing all but one or two of the entries. Because this study was completely, voluntary the participants were allowed to drop out of the study at any time. There was no penalty for dropping out. If a participant dropped out, she did not earn her ten dollar gift card. If she was recruited through her professor, then she still received her bonus points.

The participants met me at different locations, wherever was easiest to meet for the participant. They were given a short explanation of the study, what was expected of them and how the research was used (see Appendix B for a script). They were then given the consent form to read and sign (see Appendix C). Once they decided to continue with the study the participants were then given a demographic survey that could be used to cross reference data (see Appendix D) in future studies. At the end of the session, the women were given their journal prompts for the first week.

#### *Procedures: Journaling*

The journal was chosen as a method for data collection for several reasons. Journaling has been used as part of qualitative studies on topics such as interethnic communication, coping with loss, depression and other emotional issues to allow participants to explain their experiences and feelings (Caplan, Haslett, & Burlseon, 2005;

Hect, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Malacrida, 2007). Britton (1970) identified journals as a way of organizing experiences and giving meaning to one's life events. Journaling is a way to "personalize the research process... a way to refine one's thoughts about qualitative research techniques" (Janesick, 1999, p. 505). Through their journaling, participants can unveil their deepest hopes, fears or even questions without feeling odd or shameful. Many scholars see journaling as a therapeutic tool and as a way in which to contemplate about one's life (Goodall, 2000). For qualitative research, journals have been recognized for their subjectivity (Harris, 1990), and personal narratives are beginning to pique the interest of those in the health communication field (Bochner, 1994; McQueen, Kreuter, Kalesan & Alcaraz, 2011). Journaling is an exceptional way to allow students to be creative and to keep limits from being set on the quantity, style, depth or range of the student's writing (McMillian & Wilhelm, 2007). A 1999 study noted that journal writing is a "tangible way to evaluate our experience, improve and clarify one's thinking" (Janesick, 1999, p. 521).

The participants were encouraged to journal on the computer. This was a timesaving mechanism that ensured immediate exchange of information from participant to researcher. This also provided each participant with anonymity. The participants were known only as a number which was handed to them at our meeting. I had no way of knowing what email address or what number went with what participant. I created a new email address that was used solely for this study and then deleted at the completion of the study to ensure privacy of the participants. The participants were also allowed to journal in a document program such as Microsoft Word or simply journal in their direct

emails. If a participant insisted on hand writing her journal she would have been allowed. I did not have one participant that wanted to hand write the journal so I did not implement any additional steps.

Each week the participants were sent via email five prompts to write (see Appendix D). Four prompts were emailed to them at a set time at the beginning of each week. They were sent the fifth prompt at a random time each week. The participants were encouraged to write on the unplanned prompt as soon as they received it. They were allowed to write a quick first thought on the prompt and then later write more after they had time to think about it if they wished. The unplanned prompt was an attempt to find out what the participant's first thoughts were on each idea. Although the women were given five prompts each week that they must write about, they were encouraged to write on any topics that they felt were important or any topic on which they simply wanted to express their feelings. They were encouraged to write about how they felt and what they thought, especially on topics about sex, sexual relationships and sexual health. Because of the intimate nature of this study the participants were encouraged to write exactly what they were thinking and feeling and were reminded often that there were no correct or incorrect responses. Every response given was a valuable piece of information and, therefore, the participants were encouraged to simply write the truth.

Each week the participants emailed their journals to me. They were allowed to email throughout the week as they finished a journal topic or they could email it all at once. Again, I received these emails at a secure email address that was only used for this project and then terminated at the end of its use. The next week's prompts were emailed

to the participants using this email address. The participants received their emails at the address that I provided for them. This address did not contain any identifying information other than their participant number.

The surveys and emails were coded with a number that was handed to the participants as they arrived at the initial meeting. They were informed that this number would be their only identifying factor. This number was on each of their journals entries and the demographic survey. This was the only way to link their journals to their demographic survey. The number did not allow me to link the journals to their names.

After all the data was collected, I followed up with the participants by emailing them a debriefing letter that thanked them again for participating in the study. It also reminded them that if this study had harmed them in any way, it was their right to seek counseling. The letter included the address and phone number of the university's counseling center.

### *Instruments*

I used 25 journal prompts (Appendix E) to collect my data. I formulated the questions using research from my literature review and from other studies. Because some of the research has shown that not every person who engages in hooking up defines it the same, I wanted to ask the participants for their definition of a casual sexual relationship (Zoe & Mulenhard, 2007). I also asked them several other questions about definitions of sex, sexual health, good sexual experiences, and bad sexual experiences. I also asked them several experience questions (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002; Moore & Davidson, 2000), including if they had ever been in a casual sexual experience, if they had ever felt

uncertain in a relationship and if they had ever had a sexual experience they regretted (Paul, et al, 2000). I also asked several directive questions, including how often do you think your friends are involved in casual sex (Dye, 2011) and where did you get your definitions (Dye, 2011; Zoe & Mulenhard, 2007). While all of my questions were created by me, I used the literature as the basis of my prompts and tried to create a variety of prompts according to Lindlof & Taylor (2002).

The journal prompts were pre-tested on six individuals to ensure quality and usability of the prompts. I gave the questions to the pretest subjects and had them answer the prompts. I then asked the subjects if any of the questions were unclear or confusing. I asked them if they were uncomfortable answering any of the questions. None of the subjects had any issues with the questions so I left the questions as they were. These findings are not included in the data analysis but were completed before the data collection began.

### *Data Analysis*

This study was closely modeled after the qualitative study by Brashers, Neidig, Haas, Dobbs, Cardillo and Russell (2000) that analyzed the uncertainty reduction methods used by AIDS patients. Their study looked at focus groups to gather data and then coded the data for key conceptual themes. I chose not to use focus groups because of the intimate nature of this study. Students could have felt uncomfortable talking about these concepts in front of other students. However, this study used the same coding method. Any major themes found they were also examined in conjunction with the URT axioms.

In the Brashers et al. (2000) study the axioms were not used; however, their study used the axioms to explain how sexual relationships fall into previously established categories (Brashers, et, al.). The reason I used the axioms as a secondary form of coding is that the axioms are more predictive in nature. I wanted my themes to be allowed to emerge from the data, something that cannot happen when the axioms are used as *a priori* categories. Since this study is based on the experiences of the participants, the axioms can only be used if it seems that there are several themes that perpetuate the axioms. However, for the purposes of this study the main focus was on the use of uncertainty reduction in general in the management of casual sexual relationships.

The data were coded in several steps. After the completion of data collection, I questioned my committee about the number of complete or almost complete journals that I received. The committee agreed that eleven journals would be enough for this study so I began the open coding phase of analysis. I coded my data answer by answer looking for general themes that might emerge, especially those that point towards coping with uncertainty or uncertainty reduction strategies. When patterns began to emerge through repetitive word or phrase use then I began groupings of topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because the participants wrote on prompts that I gave them, I coded for phrase and paragraph ideas, then I grouped them according to the sharing of properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After each answer was coded, I found that four categories were emerging from the data. This was important for understanding word choice and description of sexual acts in college-age women. These word choices could help us understand how women process uncertainty or how they negotiate sexual

relationships (Moore & Davidson, 2000). The groupings also helped with data reduction and the aim of keeping only material that was deemed necessary. The types of uncertainties experienced by college age women could be categorized by physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral.

After I categorized the data into each of these categories, I met with a colleague who agreed to code my data in order to determine the level of intercoder reliability (Richards, 2005). This colleague is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year graduate student in Communication Studies and has been trained in coding. I chose to work with her because of her training and her attention to detail. We discussed the categories and the codes and condensed some of the codes into broader areas. We came to an agreement about my codebook and cut the data into thirds. We decided that our goal would be 80% reliability. We each coded the first third of the data and then met again to assess our agreement. At that point we were at 72% agreement. We then coded the second third of the data and met again at which point we were at 86% agreement.

After establishing that the codes did accurately represent the data, I began my axial coding to investigate whether there are possible relationships between the open coding themes and the existing axioms. I was most concerned with understanding the relationships between the uncertainty reduction techniques found. Through the axial coding a model emerged (Figure 1) that examined the flow of uncertainty reduction techniques used by women who were faced with the choice of entering a casual sexual relationship. I made several revisions to the model until I was happy with it. After I was completely satisfied with the model that the data provided, I then contacted two of my

journaling participants and asked to meet with them to discuss the model. I met with each participant separately. I showed each of them the map and asked them several questions about it. The two participants seemed to agree with the findings. One participant said “I think the part where the person communicates with their friends makes a huge impact on whether or not they will leave the casual sexual relationship. It seems like girls are very influential about this topic and may follow advice they are given.” Another comment, was, “The only thing that surprises me about the study is that girls will most likely communicate with their friends about the topic, rather than their sexual partner(s). I think this is true, I just find it surprising.” One issue that was taken with the model by the participants was the understanding of the outcome of participating in the casual sexual relationship and communicating with their partner. I reworded the outcome so as to make it clearer that the participants were participating in casual sex but also communicating with their partner.

After examining the model in correlation with my research questions I then tied the data back to any of the uncertainty reduction axioms and other URT tenets to look for comparisons in the categories found in the open coding and in the model. I did not use much of the demographic information in my analysis as it fell outside the scope of this study. However, these data will be valuable as I conduct analyses of the data in the future.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to look at the way in which college women dealt with uncertainty, if it was present, in casual sexual relationships. I wanted to explore research that looked at the relational and emotional side of sexual health in relation to casual sex. My first research question asked “What types of uncertainty are found within casual sexual relationships as reported by college age women?” From this question my model emerged. During the open coding process, four categories emerged: Physical, Cognitive, Behavioral, and Emotional. These categories encompassed the different types of uncertainty found in college age women in regards to casual sex. As the models flows downward, it not only explains the types of uncertainty experienced by the participants but also what they do to reduce it and then how they cope with its existence.

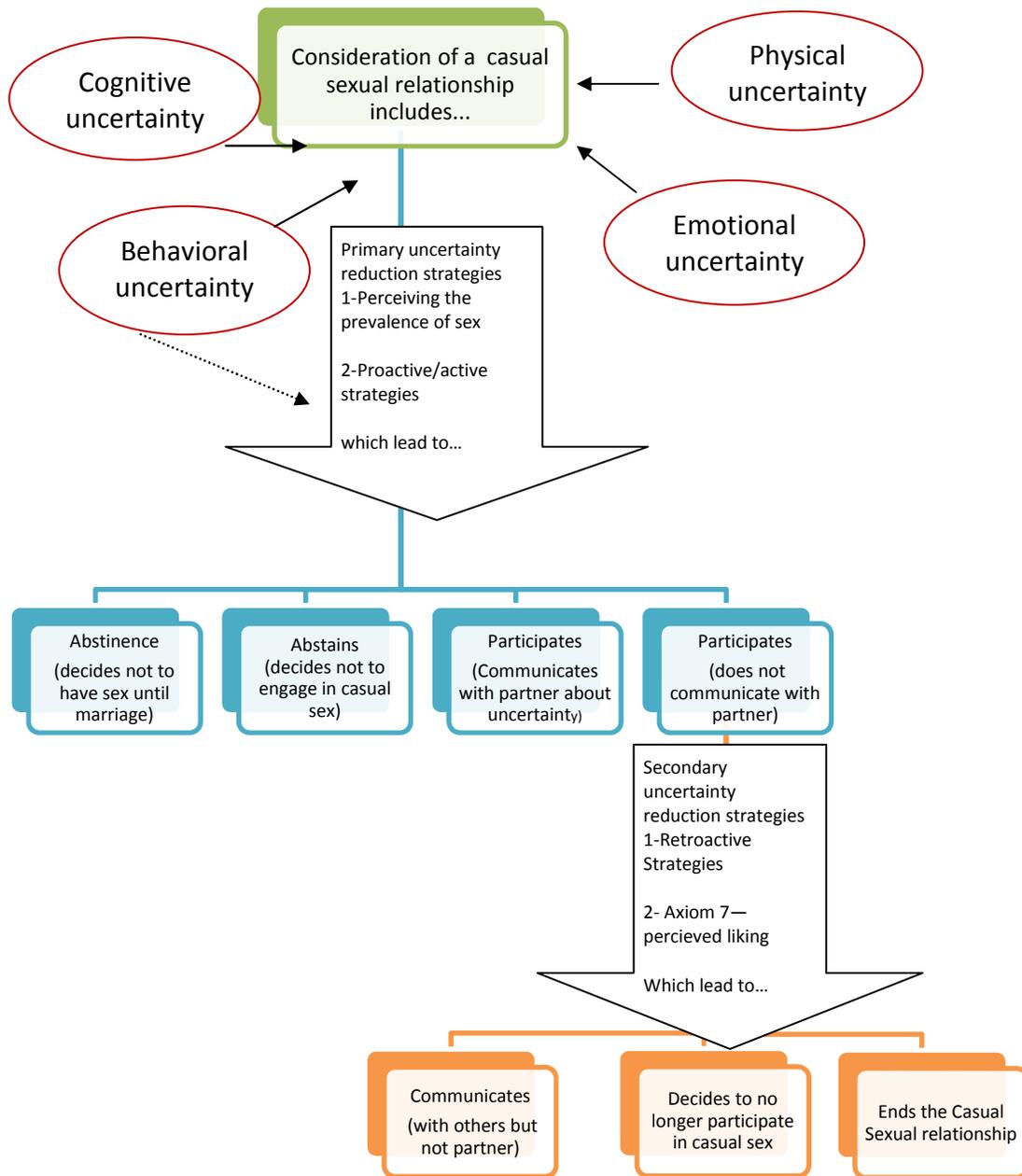


Figure 1

Uncertainty Reduction Strategies found in Casual Sexual Relationship

### *Consideration of a casual sexual relationship*

The starting point of my model begins with the consideration of a casual sexual relationship. It is the beginning of the decision making process for the participants. From here they must decide if they will engage in casual sex or any kind of sex. That decision is depends on how the different types of uncertainties found in casual sex are perceived and/or dealt with by the participants.

### *Open coding*

*Physical uncertainty.* I defined physical uncertainty as the uncertainty surrounding the physical nature of the sexual relationship. The physical uncertainty that emerged mostly dealt with the women's view of their bodies and the health of their bodies during and after engaging in sex. There were three different definitions of sexual health according to the participants. One definition of "safe sex" was the use of condoms or contraception. This definition was purely based on physical safety. As one participant, P19, wrote, "We had oral sex and then vaginal intercourse, next day felt awful and slutty, worried because we didn't use a condom." Some of the participants stated that "safe sex" included having few partners or sex with only one partner at a time while other participants viewed safe sex as having sex only when married. Other types of physical uncertainty that emerged were the early loss of virginity. P14 wrote, "I regret losing my virginity in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade," and the feeling of being gross, dirty or used.

*Emotional uncertainty.* I define emotional uncertainty as the participant's feelings of uncertainty. The emotional uncertainty found in this study came partly from their definitions of "sexual health." Several participants believed that being sexually healthy

mean having positive feelings associated with sexual experiences. The participants were very concerned with how the sexual experiences made them feel. They stated things like a “bad sexual experience is when you feel awful about it after it happens” (P17) and “when you have no feelings for that person other than sexual, if after sex he doesn’t call you back or disappears” (P16). The emotional uncertainty was also talked about as the women’s uncertainty about the male’s feelings towards her or the relationship. P15 wrote that her friend has “had casual sex with guys before moving on to a new one, often uncertainty if the guys truly cared or if they just wanted sex.” Ultimately, the participant’s emotional uncertainty centered around her feelings about casual sex during and after and the guy’s feelings for her.

*Cognitive uncertainty.* Cognitive uncertainty, I defined as the uncertainty associated with the actual understanding of terms. The cognitive uncertainty reported by the participants mainly revolved around three main areas. The first area was the actual definitions of sex. There were several different definitions of sex reported by the participants. The definitions were 1) just sex 2) all sex including vaginal, oral, and anal intercourse 3) sexual contact including all kinds of sex as well as sexual touching 4) any behavior that leads to sex. Interestingly, all of the participants claimed that they had adequate knowledge of what sex was when they entered college. The second area of cognitive uncertainty was the definition of sexual health. There were three separate definitions for sexual health, physical health only, emotional health only and physical and emotional health. P17 said “To me, sexual health is when a person is safe about sex and is very exclusive in who he/she has sex with. While P16 said that sexual health means

“to make sure that I personally have good sexual health, like not having and STD/STI. P25 wrote that sexual health “means carefully considering what I do, see, hear, say and feel concerning all things sexual, and making sure that I am not damaging myself or others (mentally/physically/emotionally/spiritually) in the process.

The final area of cognitive uncertainty deals with guilt and guilt from religious beliefs. Multiple participants stated that they felt guilty when engaging in or if they decided to engage in casual sex because it was not in line with their religious beliefs. One participant (P17) stated “He pressured me into sex. I enjoyed it during the act, but afterwards I felt bad about myself. I believe it was because I did not truly want to and because of my religious beliefs.” Another participant (18) said “...he started lifting up my shirt and kissing my stomach. When I left his house I felt dirty and was slipping away from God.” One last participant (P17) felt cognitive uncertainty because of her decision to have an abortion, “I would never [have] had an abortion. I became pregnant when I was 19. I [have] regretted this since the day it happened.”

*Behavioral uncertainty.* The final area of uncertainty in this study is behavioral uncertainty. I define behavioral uncertainty as the uncertainty surrounding the participant’s behavior. The participants revealed several ways in which they behave when faced with uncertainty about sex or casual sex. Because the participants are uncertain about how to behave, they engage in several different uncertainty reduction strategies. This brings me to my second research question, which is, what are the reported uncertainty reduction strategies of women involved in casual sexual relationships? The model explains the types of behavioral uncertainties found in the participants.

*Primary uncertainty reduction strategies lead to...*

The participant's decision-making strategies are the arrow, which lead to the outcomes. The arrow explains how the primary uncertainty strategies are the first strategies used by the participants when faced with the decision to have casual sex. These strategies can lead to a variety of outcomes. According to the research theorists have concurred that humans see uncertainty as an undesired state (Marris, 1996) and they agree that cognitive uncertainty is uncomfortable to most humans and that through communication we try to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knobloch, 2008).

We do know that the casual sex relationship is a common relationship on college campuses. According to Bisson and Levine (2006) as many as 60 percent of college students have reported having at least one casual sexual relationship. One participant, P18 who is 19, wrote:

Well now days the percentage of sex is pretty high for young people and it is more of a pressure thing in ways. People are like we did this and this so sometime it could make you want to try it.

Participant 19, age 20, wrote, "Sex factors into my life quite a bit, TV, jokes and occasional involvement." While P17, age 20, wrote, "Sex is a constant subject in my life." The participants are definitely faced with the decision of casual sex so they must decide how to deal with the uncertainty of participating.

The casual sexual relationship is a unique relationship that begins and ends in ambiguity (Walsh, 2008). Therefore, the participant must decide if they are willing to engage in that type of relationship. The method of trying to reduce uncertainty before

the event occurs is called a proactive method (Dawkins, 2010). One participant, P15, age 19, said

“I think that I gain understanding about relationships from my friends mostly based on their mistakes. Things that they have gone through help me see what I do not want to go through and they help me make better choices.”

P6, age 22, wrote about how much easier it was to make these decisions when she talked it out with her friends. “I really process things much more thoroughly if I do so outwardly rather than inwardly. Therefore I think that the understanding about relationships that I receive from friends comes mostly from just talking things out.”

These strategies of searching out information before the decision to have casual sex is made are considered active strategies. These are planned attempts to find out information about another person through “indirect means such as personal and mediated social networks” (Dawkins, 2010, p. 137). As one participant, P24, age 19, put it, “They [Friends] are able to see flaws that I cannot. They are normally right and only want the best for me.” Another participant, P23, age 19, said she gained knowledge from her friends but she also said that she researched “ I feel that researching and learning about sex and sexual health is not strange but actually a very, VERY smart things to do. College is a time full of temptations and pressures.” From the arrow one can note that there are many factors that go into the uncertainty reduction process. This leads us to the outcomes of their uncertainty reduction and to their decisions.

*Abstinence (decides not to have sex until marriage)*

The arrow leads to the first outcome which is abstinence. The definition that I use for this outcome is complete abstinence from sex. The participant has decided that she

will not have sex until marriage and therefore sex is completely out of the question. Research shows that women are struggling with the idea of casual sex. College women are caught in the conflict between traditional roles and those of the liberated sexual female (Lottes & Kuiloff, 1994; Moore & Davidson, 2000; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Rosenthal, Gifford & Moore, 1998). Oliver and Hyde (1993) state that men are much more accepting of casual sex than women. Sex can have lasting effects, and as McIlhaney and Bush (2008) state, sex is much more than a mere physical act but an activity, which involves the person as a whole not separated into physical well-being and emotional well-being. It [sex] can make a “person uniquely vulnerable, both physically and emotionally” (Morse, 2006, p.9). One of the participants, P4, age 22, was mostly concerned with her physical health when making the decision. She stated, “Sexual health for me is abstinence. I find this the most effective way to steer clear of STDs.” Another participant, P25, age 22, wrote, “Sex does not factor in my life at all. I am waiting to get married to have sex.” P24 cited religious reasons went into to her decision to wait, “The Bible is very specific about sex. It is for a man and woman to share during their marriage and only between the two.” For some of the participants, abstinence was the only rational, safe or religious choice they felt they could make.

*Abstains (decides not to engage in casual sex)*

The second outcome in the model is abstains. Abstains mean that they participant is abstinent from casual sex. It could pertain to abstinence from any casual sex or it could pertain to casual sex at this time or with this person. It is important to remember that casual sexual relationships are quite normative (Lambert, Kahn, Arnold & Apple, 2003)

but that does not mean that every time a woman is presented with casual sex she agrees to it. But we do know that intimate relationships can have positive benefits on our “emotional, cognitive and physical self“ (Dickson, Hughes & Walker, 2005, p. 5) Neal and Collas (2000) claim that with “the emergent emphasis on hedonistic values and personal freedom, there has also been an increase in levels of uncertainty and apprehension about such issues as consequences of casual sex” (p.82).

One of the participants, P18, stated “I don’t think I am ready to have such a big responsibility for the outcome of casual sex.” Several of my participants have participated in sex and/or casual sex but they contemplate participating again. P16, age 20, wrote, “It is rare for me to have sex.” P19 wrote, “I don’t have sex often but I am not abstinent. I don’t have random sex with random people.” Another participant, P14, explained “[Sex is] not a significant thing, lost virginity at a young age and could not handle the loss of attachment.” While these participants might question their uncertainty, they have not made a formal statement to themselves or to anyone that they will not have sex until married.

*Participates (communicates with partner about uncertainty)*

The participant decides to engage in casual sexual relationship but communicates with partner in order to reduce uncertainty. They may communicate before or after the sexual encounter but they do communicate. This would be considered interactive uncertainty reduction strategies, in which the participant has face-to-face communication with the other person (Dawkins, 2010). Axiom 1 of URT states uncertainty should decrease when there is verbal communication (Knobloch, 2008). P15 wrote “If they feel

uncertain they should talk to their partners...” P17 wrote “We knew we were not committed to each other but we did not have sex with anyone else.” When it comes to expectations and rules, Knowels (2005) suggests that partners should discuss the rule such as contraceptive methods and having safe sex before they engage in a casual sexual relationship. P24 agrees, “A casual sexual relationship would be one in which both parties (or more) involved have an understanding or agreement that they will engage in sexual activity with one another without additional titles or responsibilities.” The very proposal of the “casual sexual relationship” is innately based on a relationship that does not cause worry or uncertainty about breaking up (Boggle, 2008; Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005; Lambert, Kahn, Arnold & Apple, 2003). It seems that it can work for some people. P19 wrote:

I currently have a ‘friend with benefits.’ We met at a party a few years ago and what was meant to be a one-night stand turned into a friendship. We even tried dating once but found it was better to just stay friends who sometimes call each other for intimate purposed but never go beyond that.

While this participant does engage in casual sex, she and her partner have an understanding of how the relationship should materialize . There is no uncertainty about whether or not the relationship should progress.

*Participates (does not communicate with partner)*

In this outcome the participant decides to engage in the casual sexual relationship but has no prior communication with the partner about the uncertainty involved with the encounter or encounters. This seems to be what Paul and Hayes (2002) were describing in their research when they define hooking up as, “A sexual encounter (that may or may not involve sexual intercourse) between two people who are brief acquaintances or

strangers, usually lasting only one night without the expectations of developing a relationship” (p. 640). Morse (2008) claims that casual sex “has become the norm on many college campuses, where the ‘hook up’ is now a recognized pattern” (p.8). As Dye (2011) wrote, it is the epitome of uncertainty and instability and yet, it is thriving.

Crowell and Emmers-Sommer (2000) stated that many individuals cope by using “non-communicative strategies or none at all,” and although this was in relation to condom use it is also a strong statement for the psychological coping practice also found in sexual activity. P15 wrote “A friend has [been uncertain about a relationship], had casual sex with guys before moving on to a new one. [She] is often uncertain if guys truly cared or if they just wanted sex.” Paul and Hayes (2002) also warn that the actual thrill of a ‘casual sexual relationship’ may be the same for women but the aftermath tends to leave women with more feelings of regret and shame than their male counterparts. P19 wrote “[We] had oral sex and then vaginal intercourse, enjoyed myself emotionally. [I am] surprised when a member of the opposite sex wants me. [The] next day felt awful and slutty, worried because we didn’t use a condom.”

The URT axiom 4 directly relates to this situation as it states that “High levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content “(Knobloch, 2008, p. 135). If the participants of the casual sexual relationship are quite uncertain about it, then they may not communicate much or any about what is really going on.

*Secondary uncertainty reduction strategies lead to...*

My final research question asked “If uncertainty is not reduced within a casual sexual relationship how do college age women cope with its existence?” I believe that the model answers this question as well. However, to address this question properly the second uncertainty reduction strategies must be explored further in comparison to the other outcomes. The participants who decided to enter a casual sexual relationship after the first round of uncertainty reduction strategies seem to enter another round of uncertainty reduction strategies. The secondary uncertainty reduction techniques are used after the first set of techniques when the participants decided to engage in casual sex but did not communicate with the partner about her uncertainty. The participants must then use other uncertainty reduction strategies since the first strategies did not reduce all the uncertainty the participant felt. The uncertainty might be something new such as wondering now if the relationship will continue. As Carey (2007) wrote, it seems like a harmless relationship but the same fears that prevail in a romantic relationship emerge here too, the fear that one of the two will want to further the relationship.

The Relational Dialectics Theory states that if any of the three overarching relational dialectics (connectedness-separateness, certainty-uncertainty, openness-closeness) are one-sided then the relationship may falter and can cause tremendous amount of uncertainty within the relationship and the individuals (Smith & Wilson, 2010). In the case of the casual sexual relationship there is much uncertainty and very little certainty. P17 wrote “I have been uncertain, I felt gross and dirty, like I was doing something I shouldn’t. [I had] horrible feelings once the sex was over.” In this casual

sexual relationship, the participant did not feel less uncertain after it was over. She must now engage in a second round of uncertainty reduction techniques in order to reduce the lingering uncertainty.

Retroactive methods of uncertainty reduction “such as discussing an experience with friends, allow us to make meaning out of events that have already occurred (Dawkins, 2010). P 18 wrote, “They [my friends] help me understand what should happen, what the boy is thinking and what they would do.” The participants’ use of her friends allows her to reduce uncertainty even though the event has already occurred. Other retroactive methods of uncertainty reduction involve talking to family or professional counselors. P15 wrote “I would feel the need to talk to my parents, maybe a close friend or even some type of doctor or psychologist.” P23 explained that she would use God to help her deal with the situation, “I know I would have a very hard time dealing with this experience. I would just reach out...to my God for guidance. P18 wrote “I would probably try to get my mind off of it and stay as busy as I can.” This participant would try not to think about the situation at hand so she does not have to deal with it. P19 wrote “I don’t talk about myself to anyone. I’ve found over the course of my short life-time that things are best kept to yourself to avoid hurt.” In this retroactive strategy, the participant believes that keeping it to herself will do less damage than talking about the experience with others. While not all of the participants used the same retroactive strategies, many of them did or would explore the incident after it occurred.

Another reason the participants found themselves still uncertain could be explained by Axiom 7 of URT which states that “uncertainty is negatively associated

with liking” (Knoblock, 2008, p.135). The more uncertainty the less the participants in the relationship can like each other. P16 wrote “[I] had a relationship with sex involved,...decided it was a mistake.” Those who have studied this relationship hypothesize that casual sexual relationship can have detrimental effects on the people who engage in it (Carey, 2007; McIlhane & Bush, 2008; Morse, 2006). After the participants have participated in a casual sexual relationship and if they still find they are uncertain, they engage in a new set of uncertainty reduction strategies. These can lead to three separate outcomes, which are discussed below.

*Communicates (with others but not partner)*

The participant communicates with other people but not her partner about the uncertainty in the casual sexual relationship. Axiom 3 states that uncertainty is positively associated with information seeking behaviors and “the more uncertainty there is the more individual seek out information about the other person” (Gudykunst, 1995, p. 71). Notice that the individual can seek out information about the other person but it does not have to be directly from that other person. P25 wrote that if she were involved in a relationship that made her uncertain or uncomfortable she “would definitely talk to friends and/or family about it.” In this outcome the participants seem to engage in active uncertainty reduction strategies which are planned attempts to find out information about the another person though “indirect mean such as personal and mediated social networks” (Dawkins, 2010, p. 137). P16 wrote that she “would probably tell my best friend, maybe” if she were uncertain or unhappy about a relationship. P14 wrote “I would talk to whoever I trust and am closest to at the moment.” P23, age 19, wrote “I would just reach

out to my friends for help and to my God for guidance.” The need to communicate with someone allows the participants to relieve that uncertainty using a retroactive strategy of uncertainty reduction (Dawkins, 2010).

*Decides to no longer participate in casual sex*

In this outcome the participant engaged in the casual sexual relationship but then did not like the uncertainty still felt in the relationship, so she decided that casual sex is not for her. P16 wrote “[I] had a relationship with sex involved,...decided it was a mistake and to be more cautious with who I share that side of me with, wait to know their true feeling[s] about me first.” After the participant engaged in a casual sexual relationship she was still uncertain and decided to no longer participate in these types of relationships in order to reduce the uncertainty involved.

Uncertainty while seemingly fun for a while can have negative consequences within the relationship, especially if that uncertainty continues (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). For some people these uncertain casual relationships just do not work. Many people are struggling with the hurt of casual sexual relationships which leaves them feeling empty and leads them nowhere (Morse, 2006). As P19 put it, “I am learning from my bad decisions and trying to make my sexuality something that doesn’t make me feel awful the next day.” Ultimately, the participants in this outcome engaged in casual sex but felt it was too confusing or full of uncertainty to make them engage in casual sex again.

*Leaves the casual sexual relationship*

In this outcome, the participant engaged in the casual sexual relationship but does not like the uncertainty still felt in the relationship so they end the relationship. They may engage in other casual sexual relationships in the future. This seems to be a very typical outcome of the casual sexual relationship. We know that casual sexual relationships can vary in length from perhaps one encounter to several (Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006). URT has already analyzed the exit stage in which the individual explores the want or need to further the relationship. While the exit stage does not mean the relationship must end it is the end of the uncertainty within the relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). As already stated, uncertainty is a major contributor to the dissolution of a relationship (Harvey, Wells & Alvarez, 1978). P 17 wrote “[I] would not have sex, etc. with the same person again” while P15 commented “If they feel uncertain they should...end the relationship. Casual sex affects females more negatively than [it] affects males.” Both of these participants agree that being uncertain should bring about the exit phase and in this case should actually exit the relationship

Most importantly, it should be noted that these females were concerned with how they felt emotionally. Their decisions, it seems, have nothing to do with being uncertain about their physical health within these relationships. Rather, the individual might have feelings of “horror and bewilderment,” as one female student at Cornell described after her first encounter in a casual sexual relationship (B J., 2007). Grello, Welsh and Harper (2006) echo this thought with their findings that emotionally the uncertainty of casual sex can have devastating effects. P17 would agree. She wrote “I have been uncertain. I felt

gross and dirty, like I was doing something I shouldn't. [I had] horrible feelings once the sex was over. I decided to stop. It was hard but I felt much better after it was over." This last outcome leaves the participants with good feelings about their decision to leave this casual sexual relationship but also with the freedom to pursue another one if they so choose.

Overall, the model explores the stages of the participant's behavioral uncertainty. They must begin with the decision to engage in casual sex. They attempt several uncertainty reduction techniques and which end in four separate outcomes. The outcome of participating in casual sex but not communicating with the partner ends with the participants still experiencing uncertainty. Therefore, the participants engage in a second round of uncertainty reduction techniques, which lead to three more outcomes. It is not definite that their uncertainty is entirely reduced but only that they have done something to try and reduce it.

Notwithstanding the insights obtained from these findings, there were some limitations in this study. First, there were only eleven participants who completed the study. If more participants had finished the study, there would have been even richer results and data that could have been more substantial or that could have further suggested the patterns in the model. The sample could have been more diverse if I had more participants. Also, I believe that the journal was the best way to gather these data because of the private nature of the study. The participants were not made to talk about these intimate details to an actual researcher. However, I also believe it became a

limitation in that many of the participants just stopped sending the journal prompts. If this had been a face-to-face interview, there could have been more completed prompts.

Also this study took place in West Texas which historically is a more conservative area as published by Bay Area Center for Voting Research. Most of the participants claimed a religious affiliation and it is possible the idea of casual sex being talked about was still a bit too taboo for some of the respondents. I believe another limitation was the small amount of compensation given to the participants. They each received a \$10 gift card for completing the survey. I might have had better results if I could have provided a larger gift card.

The findings from this study could have a major impact on future research in the area of uncertainty reduction and in the area of casual sex. The model may also create a different view of URT. Perhaps uncertainty reduction is a much more fluid and circular process than originally thought. Future studies could implement the model to examine the cycle of uncertainty reduction techniques used by those contemplating or engaging casual sex. Future studies could also look at the same areas of uncertainty reduction to explore whether there could be any additions to the model's uncertainty reduction techniques or outcomes.

The model presented could perhaps be applied to several different situations where women feel uncertain. For example, this model might show how women in general deal with uncertainty, especially in this age of modern technology, where information is so accessible. Perhaps the passive and active strategies of uncertainty reduction are much more used than the interactive strategies now that there are so many

forms of social networking. Another study could be done that uses the types of uncertainties found in the casual sexual relationship and specifically links those uncertainties to the outcomes. I think that this could have great implications when talking about how to communicate safe sex with college students. My study simply did not have the data to create these specific links. This study would also be easily reworked to find empirical evidence that suggests uncertainty reduction techniques are applied to casual sexual relationships. I think this could be an easy switch to a quantitative study regarding the amount of times a person engages in uncertainty reduction techniques while considering and/or participating in a casual sexual relationship.

I believe that casual sex is an important aspect of the communication world because of its use of ambiguous terms and meanings. It will be extremely hard to increase communication efficacy in college students when dealing with their sexual health if this term remains vague. Perhaps future studies could be done on the causes and outcomes of casual sex in order to better inform college students of its benefits and harms, specifically the emotional harms. College students might benefit from information that frankly discusses casual sex and all of its physical and emotional consequences.

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## APPENDIX A

### MEMO

To: Texas Tech Females between the ages of 18-24  
From: Kelley Finley, Grad Student Texas Tech University  
Date:  
Subject: Participating in a research study

Please consider participating in a study that takes a closer look at college relationships. I plan to study how college age females talk about and think about their experiences with casual sexual relationships. I will investigate the communication practices and the uncertainty reduction techniques used when talking about or participating in a casual sexual relationship.

If you participate in this study your obligations will be as follows:

- You must attend one meeting (30-45 minutes) to begin the study.
- You must spend one month journaling prompts that will be given you (this is the equivalent of 4 prompts a week for 4 weeks).

The journals will be kept on the computer. No written material is required. After the first meeting you will not be required to see me again as you will simply email me your journals each week. All data that I collect will be confidential. When I report results I will include direct quotations but I will not use your name nor used any characteristics that might identify you.

If you would like to participate, please send me a response including your name, telephone number and email. This would be a great help to me. Thank you.

For more information feel free to contact me at:

Kelley Finley  
4417 28<sup>th</sup> st.  
Lubbock, Tx 79410  
806-549-6136  
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## **APPENDIX B**

### **SCRIPT**

Good evening. Thank you for being here tonight. I would like to take this opportunity to explain what this research project is and what your roles are in it if you choose to participate.

This research project is for completion of credit for a Master's Degree in communication studies. I have chosen the topic of casual sexual relationships because they are extremely common and I feel as though they are understudied in the realm of communication. Casual Sexual relationships are defined as "hooking up," "bed buddies," "booty call" and can be a one night stand or may last longer if the participants so choose. You will be my informants so to speak on the topic of casual sexual relationships. I want to know how these relationships are talked about in your circles. What are your experiences and their thoughts regarding these relationships?. I want to know your thoughts and feelings, your perceptions and your ideas about casual sexual relationships. You do not need to be sexually active to participate. Your only requirements are that you are heterosexual, between the ages of 18 and 24 and that you attend Texas Tech.

For this project you will be keeping a journal. My research will be based on what you write in a series of journal prompts. Your journal will be kept online. If you choose, you may keep it in a word file or you may simply answer the questions in an email to me. I encourage you all to be very honest and detailed when answering your questions. Do not feel as though you can only answer the questions I ask. Ask your own questions or simply tell me your thoughts and feelings on any subject, specifically those dealing with relationships.

As you walked in the door, you were each given a number. This will be your identity for the course of this study. I will never ask your name. You may give it to me if you choose to do so. I will request that you email me your journal prompts each week. You will be emailed the prompts for the next week using a secure email address that will only be used for this study. At any time in the course of the week I will send you one more prompt. I would ask that you respond to this extra prompt as quickly as possible. I want to know your gut reaction. If you want to respond briefly and then respond again you may do so but please note the time and date of both responses. Remember that your responses are completely anonymous and will only be used for research purposes. After this project is finished I will destroy your responses and I will delete my email account.

This project will last one month. While that may seem like a lot of time that you will invest, remember that you are only answering 3-5 questions a week. Do not think that this study will be extremely time consuming although I do urge you to contemplate these questions and write thoroughly on each topic. I would also encourage you to let this

project be useful to you in examining your thoughts and behaviors. You are never obligated to finish this study. If for any reason you want to drop out of the study, I only ask that you let me know. If you complete the study you will receive a \$10 gift card for your participation.

Now I will hand out a consent form. Please read it carefully and sign your name at the bottom of the page. If after reading this form you do not want to continue the project you may leave.

HAND OUT CONSENT FORM  
AFTER THEY HAVE ALL BEEN SIGNED I WILL CONTINUE

Now that you have signed your consent form does anyone have any questions about the nature of this study or what you will be asked to do?

ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS

If there are no more questions please fill out this demographic survey. Where it says name please put your number. When you complete the survey you will handed your first set of journal prompts with my email address at the bottom. When you receive these you may leave. Please email me these prompts within the week. I will email you your next set of prompts on Sunday night.

HAND OUT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

HAND OUT PROMPTS

## APPENDIX C

### CONSENT FORM

Texas Tech University  
Department of Communication Studies  
Lubbock, TX 79409-3080  
Thesis Project: Uncertainty in casual sexual relationships

#### CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

You have been asked to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have more questions later, Kelley Finley, the person mainly responsible for this study, 806-549-6136, will discuss them with you. You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

*Description of the project:*

You have been asked to take part in the study that will be assessing the “sex talk” that occurs in college females ages 18-24. This study will be using a communication theory to analyze the knowledge and understanding as well as the communication processes used in sexual activities among college women.

*What will be done:*

If you decide to take part in this study here is what will happen: You will be given a set questions or prompts that you will be asked to answer. You have five questions to answer each week. The journal is really an extension of what you think and feel. Please write down any and every idea or thought that comes to mind when writing about the questions or the subject of sex or health care in general. Each week you will receive an email from with your journal prompts for that week. You may do these whenever you like as long as I receive them within the week

You will also receive an additional prompt each week asking you to write your thoughts about a question or statement. These prompts will arrive at random times throughout the week. I ask that you do this as soon as possible after receiving the email. You are free to write more on a subject later if you wish but make sure that you are clear about the time and date of each writing. You will keep this journal for a month. Weekly you will email your journals to me and I will email you a new set of prompts for the following week.

*Risks or discomfort:*

You may find it difficult or embarrassing to write on certain topics. Please know that this study is strictly for informational purposes only and nothing that is written or

said can be used in any other way than for research. If you simply cannot write on a topic then please write why you cannot write about it. Do you find it distasteful, immoral, against your beliefs? There are no wrong answers and every answer provided lends itself to more research.

*Benefits of this study:*

The benefits of this study are two-fold. First, it will allow communication scholars to take an in-depth look at the communication that is happening among college age women in the areas of sex and sexual health. Secondly, it will allow research to expand or disprove certain communication theories or phenomenon. Although there will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study, the researcher may learn more about ways in which effective communication can be taught to students about their sexual health and sexual practices.

*Confidentiality:*

Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify you by name. If something you say or write is quoted in the study your name will be changed to protect your identity. All records will be handled only by Kelley, the primary researcher and her graduate committee. Once the data is analyzed all of your writings and interviews will be destroyed. Your privacy will be protected.

*Decision to quit at any time:*

The decision to take part in this study is up to you. You do not have to participate. If you decide to take part in the study, you may quit at any time. Whatever you decide will in no way affect your grades, status as a student, or your character, etc. If at any time you wish to quit, please just simply inform Kelley, 806-549-6136 of your decision.

*Rights and Complaints:*

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Kelley or with her thesis chair, Dr. Julianne Scholl, anonymously, if you choose. For further questions about your rights as a subject or about injuries caused by this research, contact the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Office of Research Services, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409. Or you can call (806) 742-3884

You have read the Consent Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you understand the information and you agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed Name

Kelley Finley  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please sign both consent forms, keeping one for yourself.

## APPENDIX D

### DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Name:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

Classification: Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior    Other

Sexual Orientation: Straight            Gay            Bisexual

Other, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Current relationship status:

Single      In an exclusive relationship            Engaged      Married      Divorced

Other, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### JOURNAL PROMPTS

#### Week 1 Prompts

1. What behaviors do you think constitute sex and which do not?
2. How do you define “sexual health”? How did you come up with this definition?
3. What does “sexual health” mean to you?
4. How does sex factor into your life? How would you describe your sex life if you consider yourself to have one?

#### Week 2 Prompts

1. How would you define a “casual sexual relationship”? How did you come up with this definition?
2. Have you ever been involved in a “casual sexual relationship?” Why or why not?
3. Are you currently in a “casual sexual relationship?” Describe how the relationship came about and where it is now.
4. Have you ever been uncertain about a sexual relationship? What did that uncertainty feel like? How did you handle it?

#### Week 3 Prompts

1. A) What is your definition of a “bad sexual experience?”  
B) What is your definition of a “good sexual experience?”
2. A) If you yourself were involved in a “bad sexual experience” who would you talk to and what would you do, how would you deal with it?  
B) If you were involved in a “good sexual experience” who would you talk to and what would you do, how would you deal with it?
3. How often do you think your friends are involved in “casual sexual experiences?”
4. Do you think that “casual sex” is healthy? Why or why not?

#### Week 4 Prompts

1. Write about a time that you had a sexual experience and it left you feeling good about yourself. Why do you think you felt this way?
2. Write about a time that you had a sexual experience and it left you feeling bad about yourself. Why do you think you felt this way?
3. Write about the things you talk about with your peers. Focus especially on things that you consider taboo or things you would not want others to know.
4. Do you think that you gain understanding and certainty about relationships from your friends? Why or why not?

Prompts to be given at random times during the study

1. Please describe your last intimate experience. This can be anything from kissing, hand-holding to oral sex or intercourse. In addition to the physicality of the experience how did it make you feel emotionally? What did you think about the experience and yourself when it was over?
2. Describe the amount of knowledge you felt you had about sex and sexual health at the beginning of you college career?
3. Do you regret any of the decisions you have made regarding you sexuality or sexual health? If so, why and what would you have done differently?
4. Where do you feel like you got the most information about sex and sexual health, could be sex education, parents, friends, the internet? How accurate did you perceive this information to be, at that time did you think the information you were given was correct and true?