LET'S TALK ABOUT (SELLING) SEX, BABY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HOW ROMANTIC COUPLE COMMUNICATION IS IMPACTED BY SEXUALIZED ADVERTISING

A Thesis by

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Bachelor of Arts, Wichita State University, 2011

Submitted to the Elliott School of Communication and the faculty of the Graduate School of Wichita State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication.

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ABSTRACT

Sexualized advertising invokes gender-sensitive responses. While it has been proven to be an effective sales strategy, research indicates that it can have detrimental effects for women’s body image and self-esteem, and it can lead men to objectify and sexualize the female body.

This phenomenological study aims to address how this discrepancy in women and men’s responses affects communication in romantic heterosexual relationships. Five couples took part in this study. First, each partner assessed their relationship using Welch and Rubin’s (2002) Relationship Stage Descriptions; next partners watched a sexualized advertising video with together; finally, each partner was interviewed individually about reactions to watching the video. Through thematic analysis, this study found that individuals experienced discomfort and hyper-awareness of their partners’ reactions to the video. This led participants to experience a short-term break in communication with their partners, which then added more discomfort, which the author termed “The Discomfort Cycle Effect.” Joking and laughter were used to release tension and re-connect with partners. Using Knapp’s (1978) Stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart, findings of this study indicated that participants experienced a momentary de-escalation in their relationship due to an awareness of their differing gender-sensitive responses to the video, which caused tension in communication. These reactions motivated participants to re-escalate the relationship by improving the experience through jokes and laughter, which diminished the tension. This dynamic is termed “The Equilibrium Effect”. Implications of findings are discussed as well as opportunities for future research.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a response to a time of conflicting cultural values, Salt-N-Pepa released the song “Let’s Talk About Sex” in 1991 (Azor, 1991, track 10). Besides addressing sex as an intimate topic that needs to be discussed more fluidly and openly in relationships and in society, “Let’s Talk About Sex” makes note that due to the ubiquity of sexualized information to which we are exposed daily (especially transmitted through the media), sex cannot be avoided. The song relates: “Don't decoy, avoid, or make void the topic, cause that ain't gonna stop it, now we talk about sex on the radio and video shows, many will know, anything goes, let's tell it like it is, and how it could be, how it was, and of course, how it should be” (Azor, 1991, track 10).

The song lyrics still resonate in many ways with our current society. Twenty-six years later, sex continues to be a sensitive topic in relationships and in the media, which often perpetuates the objectification and sexualization of the female body. Because sex is the second largest psychological drive after self-preservation, and because women and men have fundamentally different sexual motivations, numerous studies have concluded that women and men respond differently to sexualized information in the media--women tend to be offended by it, while men tend to be attracted to it (Tafflinger, 1996; Reichert, 2002, Liu, Cheng & Li, 2009). Sexualized advertising especially invokes these gender-sensitive responses. Sex appeal advertising is a marketing technique used to drive sales by leading consumers to respond with excitement, arousal and lust, which are ultimately interpreted as a desire to purchase or
obtain a product (Reichert, 2002). While it has been proven to be an effective sales strategy, research indicates that it can have detrimental effects on women's body image and self-esteem (Harper & Tiggeman, 2008), and it can lead men to objectify and sexualize the female body, even influencing partner-objectification (Zurbriggen, Ramsey & Jaworski, 2011).

This thesis is grounded in the findings of an unobtrusive fieldwork observation study of couples walking by a Victoria’s Secret storefront in an outdoor upscale shopping mall in a midsized, Midwestern city in the United States (Gimenez, 2015). The study aimed to observe couples' individual and collective reactions to the sexualized advertising images of women outside of the Victoria’s Secret store. Through a thematic analysis of the observations, three themes emerged:

1) **Silence/breaks in conversations**: As couples approached and noticed the advertising images, the majority of the couples stopped or paused their conversations while walking by them, and resumed their conversations after passing by them. Some stayed quiet, even after they walked by.

2) **Verbal and non-verbal reactions**: Upon noticing the images, individuals had different kinds of verbal and non-verbal reactions, some communicated to their partners, others more individual.

3) **Distraction from one another**: Many couples became visibly disengaged from one another as one or both noticed the advertising images. Some individuals physically distanced themselves from their partners.
Based on the themes identified in this grounded study, the researcher concluded that as one or both partners noticed the advertising images, their dynamics and interactions momentarily changed (Gimenez, 2015).

Currently, there is a gap in research regarding how the discrepancy in gender-sensitive responses to sexualized advertising impacts relationship and communication dynamics in romantic heterosexual relationships. This understudied area of research deserves attention, as this apparent discrepancy in women and men’s responses has the potential to impact a common, intimate social domain where women and men interact closely and often—heterosexual romantic relationships. Building off a previous study which relied on unobtrusive observations, the current study explores participants’ experiences through a focus on their patterns of communication, framed with Knapp’s (1978) Stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart, during and after exposure to a sexualized advertising video. “Super Sexy CPR” is as an advertising campaign video for Fortnight, a Canadian-based lingerie company. It entails a short clip of two female models wearing lingerie, with one performing CPR on the other, as a narrator instructs on basic CPR procedures. When the video was released in 2010, it instantly became an internet sensation, gathering 2 million views within the first 5 days it launched, and being shared over 100 thousand times on Facebook and Twitter within the month (Fortnight, 2010). It in fact became so popular that in 2014, a police academy in Jaca, Spain had to publicly apologize for using the “highly erotic” video to teach CPR in a training course (Mills, 2014). Due to a gap in research regarding sexualized advertising effects on romantic couples’ interactions, this exploratory study describes the
phenomenological experiences of 5 heterosexual romantic couples in their 20s during and after watching “Super Sexy CPR” (Fortnight, 2010).

Besides finding the same themes from the 2015 observation study, several findings emerged. Participants felt discomfort due to the sexualized nature of the video and a hyper-awareness of their partners' reactions while watching the video, as most participants wondered what their partners were thinking. These two effects happened simultaneously and caused a break of silence in couples' communication, which added more discomfort, identified in this study as “The Discomfort Cycle Effect”. Participants noted that another factor that added discomfort was the realization that their partner was experiencing the video differently, reinforcing the notion of gender-sensitive responses to sexualized information. The pause in communication added tension to the moment, which participants released through laughing and joking.

This study also used Knapp’s (1978) Relationship Development Model to frame any possible fluctuation in the escalation and de-escalation of couples before and after watching the video. By using Knapp’s (1978) Stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart, the researcher concluded that while participants identified their relationships as Integrating or Bonding (the two highest stages of Coming Together), exposure to the Fortnight video resulted in “The Discomfort Cycle Effect,” leading to momentary de-escalation to the Differentiation Stage of Coming Apart (Knapp, 1978) based on how partners experienced the moment as women or men, and based on their perceptions of each other’s experiences as different. After releasing the tension with jokes and laughter, participants re-calibrated the relationship by improving the experience and minimizing any perceived negative effects by continuing to joke and laugh together,
resulting in “The Equilibrium Effect”. This reach for equilibrium signified a movement back to an escalating stage of Coming Together, which led most participants to assess the experience as either positive or neutral-negative, despite their initial discomfort and tension. This exploratory study contributes to the literature on sexualized media and romantic relationships by demonstrating that for couples in this study, there was a significant tension-inducing effect of sexualized advertising on their dyadic experience and communication.

The following literature review will cover sexualized media* impacts on women and men, and characteristics of relationship dynamics and communication patterns in Knapp’s (1978) Relationship Development Model. Prior to the literature review of the topics mentioned above, I offer a table of term and concept definitions to ground the reader.
**TABLE 1**

**TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Term</th>
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<td><strong>Sexualized media:</strong> Mass media outlets that contain sexual and erotic material information. Specifically, this literature review covers advertising and television.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sexual information</em></td>
<td>“Content with ascribed sexual meaning” (Reichert, 2002, p. 243).</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Erotic information</em></td>
<td>Content with information that arouses and excites through sexual thoughts and feelings (Reichert, 2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Objectifying representations of female bodies</em></td>
<td>Depictions of women as objects, focused on their bodies and appearance (Harper &amp; Tiggeman, 2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Agentic sexually-objectifying representations</em></td>
<td>Representations of women “portrayed as actively choosing to display themselves sexually in order to demonstrate their independence and liberation” (Halliwell, Malson &amp; Tischner, 2011, p.39)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Sex appeal</strong></td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sexualized advertising:</em></td>
<td>Mediated promotional messages with perceived sexual and erotic information (Reichert, 2002)</td>
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<td><strong>Sex appeal advertising</strong></td>
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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sexualized Media

2.1.1 Sex Appeal Advertising

Advertising is a popular and ubiquitous form of media that permeates our surroundings. It can be materialized in many forms and can be found in many places, such as magazines, billboards, posters, television, and the Internet, among other sources. Sexualized advertising* in particular has become very common. In a traditional sense, sexualized advertisements refers to “provocative images of well-defined women (and men) in revealing outfits and postures selling clothing, alcohol, beauty products, and fragrances” (Reichert, 2002, p. 242) However, sexualized advertising can be considered as any mediated message (such as a magazine print advertisement, collateral material or a television commercial) that contains sexual and erotic information* used to sell or promote a branded product (Reichert et al., 2001). Sex is expressed in advertising through a marketing technique called sex appeal (Reichert, 2002). Sex appeal* is an advertising tool that entails the use of sexual and erotic information* to convey and promote a message or product, and images are the most common type of sexual information found in sex appeal advertising (Reichert, 2002).

Sex appeal advertising is meant to evoke sexual thoughts and feelings. Reichert (2002), who first coined the term, argues that sexual information in sex appeal advertising is not always explicit, and does not always entail the use of full or partial nudity. Reichert (2002) states, “common forms of sexual content include the following:
nudity (dress), physical attractiveness, suggestive behavior, interaction, innuendo, and other factors such as setting, context and camera effects” (Reichert, 2002, p. 244)

Though sex in advertising usually entails using full or partial nudity, sex appeal can also be conveyed in less-direct ways, such as using subliminal visual and verbal cues (See Appendix A, Figure 1), the angle of the camera, reflecting a male gaze (See Appendix A, Figure 2) and by subtle, suggestive representations of sexuality (See Appendix A, Figure 3) (Reichert et al., 2001; Reichert, 2002). While sex in advertising is generally perceived as promotional messages with semi-nude, attractive women in bikinis, and/or shirtless men (See Appendix A, Figure 4). Reichert (2002) argues that what people consider sex in advertising differs, as the definition of sexual information is not fixed. Sexual information in advertising can be considered nudity, sexual imagery, innuendos, double entendre messages, among others (Reichert, 2002). Reichert states, “Some consider sexual content to be promotional messages about feminine hygiene products…others describe imperceptible sexual images inserted into ads…for some individuals, fetished objects and parts of the body come to mind” (Reichert, 2002, p. 243). There are no clear parameters to define sex appeal advertising other than perceived sexual content in a promotional message used to sell a product. However, the sexual information depends on the advertiser’s persuasive appeal. Sexual content can be used to simply draw attention to the product by low association, such as a semi-nude model holding a Coca Cola bottle (See Appendix A, Figure 5), or it can be an essential component of the message, such as Tom Ford’s cologne advertisements (See Appendix A, Figure 6), which imply, by high association, that sex will be an outcome of the product (Reichert, 2002).
Due to the attention-grabbing power of sex appeal, it is known to be an effective sales strategy (Reichert, 2002; Lombardot, 2007). Sex in advertising evokes arousal and excitement, and it targets primal biological instincts in the viewer, as sex is the second strongest physiological drive after self-preservation (Tafflinger, 1996). The use of sexualized overtures is meant to lead to arousal, excitement and lust for the sexual connotation of the advertisements and a desire to purchase the marketed product (Tafflinger, 1996; Dahl, Vohs & Sengupta, 2011). In a study in which participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of marketing material with sexual appeal and non-sexual appeal, Reichert et al. (2001) found that sexual appeal was more persuasive for selling products and invoked more favorable responses. Participants reported that sexual appeal was more attention grabbing, likeable and exciting than non-sexual appeal marketing techniques (Reichert et al., 2001). These findings can be attributed to the argument that sex appeal advertising is memorable and easy to relate to because of the sexual content it entails (Reichert, 2002). The reactions people have to sex appeal advertising vary and are closely intertwined with emotional responses (Reichert, 2002). In fact, reactions to the presence of sexual information in advertisements have been found to occur as an innate emotional response first, prior to any cognitive processing (Lombardot, 2007). Because women and men are presumed to have different biological sexual motivations and desires (women tend to focus on men’s personality and intellect, while men tend to focus on women’s appearance and attractiveness), and because the female body has been more culturally objectified and sexualized in society, (including depictions of sexual information in advertising), sex appeal advertising invokes opposing gender-sensitive responses (Liu et al., 2009). On average, women have
reported negative reactions to sexual content in advertising (especially if the content is explicit), while men have reported positive attitudes (Reichert, 2002; Dahl, Sengupta & Vohs, 2009; Liu et al., 2009; Dahl et al., 2011).

2.1.2 Gender-Based Responses to Sex Appeal Advertising

Emotional responses to sexual information in advertising vary greatly, especially by gender (Lombardot, 2007; Pinto & Crane, 2010). For women, the effects of sexualized advertising can be negative, leading women to self-objectify and feel pressure to align with cultural expectations of beauty ideals (Harper & Tiggeman, 2008). This, in turn, has been shown to affect women’s self-esteem and self-worth (Dens, Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2009), as it has also been shown to influence men into sexually objectifying the female body (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008; Zurbriggen, Ramsey & Jaworski, 2011). As a consequence, men’s sexual objectification of women has been shown to have damaging, effects on women’s self-esteem, self-worth and self-consciousness (Wyllie, Carlson & Rosenberger, 2014; Ward et al., 2016).

2.1.3 Sex Appeal Advertising Impacts on Women

Exposure to sexualized advertising images of females can have detrimental effects on women (Harper & Tiggeman, 2008; Dens et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2016). Sexualized advertising in print advertisements both objectifies women and leads them to objectify themselves, often resulting in women experiencing self-consciousness, lower self-esteem and negative self-worth (Dens et al., 2009). Ward et al. (2016) conducted a study that measured participants’ levels of sexualization after being exposed to different genres of sexualized media*, and found that women experienced higher levels of body surveillance and sexual self-worth after being exposed to different
genres of sexualized media (Ward et al., 2016). Ward et al.’s (2016) findings suggest that the sexual content in the media can influence women to experience more objectification and sexualization (Ward et al., 2016). Similarly, Harper and Tiggeman (2008) found that female participants who were exposed to advertisements “idealized” female models (deemed as thin and attractive by the participants) reported greater levels of self-objectification, anxiety about weight and appearance, negative mood and body dissatisfaction. Harper and Tiggeman (2008) argue that the objectification of women in advertising not only influences the way women perceive their own bodies, but how they can determine their levels of worth and self-esteem, based on how closely they perceive their bodies as resembling what is considered attractive and ideal.

Harper and Tiggeman (2008) also argue that it is difficult for women to extricate themselves from feeling objectified by objectifying representations* of female bodies, as it occurs on so many micro and macro societal levels through the media. Harper and Tiggeman (2008) found that viewing advertisements with ultrathin models considered attractive led women to experience an increase in self-objectification. Even agentic sexually-objectifying representations* of women empowered by and in control of their bodies and their sexuality (as opposed to portrayals of women as passive, objectifying sexual objects for male desire) (See Appendix A, Figure 7), which aim to empower women, can be equally problematic for women, as the female body is still being objectified and physical appearance is still given significance, whether a female is shown to be empowered by her sexuality or not (Halliwell et al., 2011). In a study in which female participants were exposed to sexualized advertising images showing agentic women in control of their sexuality and bodies, participants reported higher
levels of weight-related anxiety and more self-objectification than after being exposed to representations of women as passive sexual objects (Halliwell et al., 2011). According to Halliwell et al. (2011), these findings can be attributed to the idea that while contemporary sex appeal advertisements are attempting to portray women in an egalitarian way by showing them in control (Halliwell et al., 2011), they are ultimately prioritizing specific aspects of a woman’s appearance and body, as “women appear to actively court the male gaze, and yet, at the same time, they also appear to have internalized the perspective of this male gaze as their own” (Halliwell et al., 2011, p. 40). It makes sense, then, that sex appeal in advertising, which is predominantly characterized by the sexual objectification of female bodies, whether passive or agentic, can have serious effects on women’s wellbeing.

While it is common for women to experience negative effects from sex appeal advertising, it is important to note that some women can have positive reactions depending on how they perceive and experience their own sexuality. Andersen and Cyranowski (1994) defined sexual self-schemas as cognitive generalizations about the self as a sexual being. Usually derived from past and current experiences, sexual self-schemas define how one perceives aspects about one’s sexuality (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994). Women who have positive sexual self-schemas have positive self-esteem, more willingness to engage in sexual relationships and higher levels of sexual arousal, and they also tend to have more positive attitudes towards sex appeal advertising (Reichert, LaTour & Ford 2011; Cheung et al., 2013). On the other hand, those who have low self-sexual schemas tend to have negative perceptions towards sex and sex appeal in advertising (Reichert, 2011; Cheung et al., 2013). Though it is
It is possible for women who may have more esteem about themselves as sexual beings to not have negative reactions to sex appeal advertising, sexual objectification of the female body is so embedded into our visual culture that it may lead the majority of women to objectify themselves, as they compare themselves to the objectified representation of female bodies (Dahl et al., 2009; Wyllie et al., 2014).

### 2.1.4 Sex Appeal Advertising Impacts on Men

For the most part, men tend to respond to sex appeal advertising with arousal and positive affect, especially if the sexual and erotic information* is visual and blunt (Reichert et al., 2011; Wyllie et al., 2014). It is important to note that men process visual information faster and more effectively than women, as information-processing in men occurs mainly in their right hemisphere, making them rely primarily on heuristics and visuals to process information (Goodrich, 2014). In fact, women respond better to advertising with analytical and verbal cues, while men respond better to visual advertisements with little text (Goodrich, 2014). Because men value physical attractiveness and vitality when it comes to sexual desire (Tafflinger, 1996), they tend to especially respond well to visual sexual stimuli.

Because men experience more arousal and have more favorable attitudes towards sexual stimuli, they tend to respond positively and be attracted to the presence of sex in advertising (Dahl et al., 2009; 2011), usually deeming an advertisement effective because of the presence of sexual content (Wyllie et al, 2014). On that note, it has been found that men tend to especially respond well to sexual advertisements that show sex as an end in itself—and if for some reason, the advertisements contains cues that are related to relationship commitment or spending money for a relationship, men
tend to feel less favorable towards the advertisement, despite the fact that it may contain nude or semi-nude models (Dahl et al., 2009; 2011). Sexualized advertising may not always work for men—men are especially sensitive to visual sexual stimuli, therefore, if there is too much of it at once, they can easily experience cognitive overload due to too much information present for the brain to process (Reichert et al., 2011). Cognitive overload in men not only hinders the effectiveness of an advertisement but it also hinders other cognitive processes occurring at the moment (Reichert et al., 2011). This means that it is possible for men to get too aroused from sex appeal advertising, causing them to forget information or be distracted.

While studies suggest that men tend to enjoy sexual information in the media, depending on the type of sexual stimuli, men can also report more awareness of their bodies, and more self-objectification. Zurbriggen, Ramsey and Jaworski (2011) argue that the consumption of objectifying media (including advertising) can have detrimental effects on both women and men, especially regarding objectification of the self and others. If a model in a sexually suggestive image is deemed highly attractive, men tend to experience higher levels of self-objectification (Zurbriggen et al., 2011). This suggests that regardless of the fact that men get aroused by watching a sexualized image, internalizing the sexual objectification of a female body also can have a first-person effect on men as well, leading men to experience a heightened awareness of their own body appearance (Zurbriggen et al., 2011).

2.1.5 Relationship Effects of Sexualized Media

While there are limited studies on sexualized media consumption and relationship effects, a few studies have mentioned the effect of objectifying sexual
media on couples’ dynamics and perceptions of one another. Estroff Marano (2016) reports that sexual media consumption is an increasing disruptor of time spent together in relationships, especially because of the availability of sexual media through technological devices such as computers and smartphones. Certain kinds of sexualized media—such as pornography—can especially have troubling effects on relationships. Because pornography is usually kept a personal activity that is viewed in secret, it can augment the disrupting effects on relationships (Estroff Marano, 2016).

The consumption of pornography, in particular, directly relates to relationship satisfaction in couples. In other words, the more couples use it, the less satisfaction the relationship yields. Several studies have made the connection between pornography use and relationship satisfaction, showing that it can in fact have a damaging effect on couples, causing disruptions and distance from one another (Bridges, Bergner & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Estroff Marano, 2016). Pornography, however, can have positive impacts on relationships. When both partners use pornography as part of their lovemaking, it has been shown to lead to higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). In fact, women who consume pornography have reported using it primarily for bonding with their partners (Estroff Marano, 2016). That being said, male consumption of pornography has been shown to be especially damaging to women, as it drives women to feel like they are inadequate, unattractive and sexually undesirable when they compare themselves with the women in pornography (Bridges et al., 2003). Because pornography is primarily consumed by men for masturbation, and it is kept a secret, private activity (Estroff Marano, 2016), and because women tend to see pornography as a reflection of themselves and as an
emotionally and sexually involving activity for their partners (Estroff Marano, 2016), it has been shown to generally degrade relationship satisfaction (Bridges et al, 2003; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Estroff-Marano, 2016).

Aside from pornography, several other types of sexually objectifying media consumption, such as television, film, and magazines, have been shown to have detrimental effects on individuals (especially women) and relationships. While the consumption of sexualized media leads most women and some men to experience some level of self-objectification (Harper & Tiggeman, 2008; Zurbriggen et al., 2011), in the scope of relationships, it can lead to the objectification of the self and the partner, therefore reflecting a positive correlation between sexual media consumption and partner-objectification (Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Partner-objectification due to sexual media consumption especially happens in men, leading them to report perceiving their partners’ bodies as sexual objects, which in turn leads to a decrease in their relationship satisfaction (Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Partner-objectification can in fact have serious consequences for relationships, as it leads women to survey their own bodies more, and it leads men to objectify their partner’s bodies and even feel more shame about their partners’ appearance (Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015).

Partner-objectification due to sexualized media consumption may not always have negative effects on couples. Depending on a couple’s relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, objectifying a partner may either improve or diminish individual’s perceptions of their partner’s physical and relational qualities (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008; Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Van Nostrum & Van de Laar (2008) performed a study that found that after being exposed to sexualized material on television,
individuals who reported more sexual and relationship satisfaction in their relationship also reported less discrepancy between their perceptions of their actual partners, and their conceptions of what their “ideal” partner should look like (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008). On the contrary, those individuals who reported less satisfaction in their relationship reported more discrepancy between actual and ideal partner qualities (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008). These findings resonate with Ramsey and Hoyt’s (2015) argument that there are constant cognitive adjustments that occur within romantic relationships regarding the perception of the partner. Van Nostrum and Van de Laar’s (2008) study suggests that when exposing couples to sexual material, those who are more satisfied in their relationship will see less differences between their perception of their partner and their ideals, while those who are not as satisfied will see more differences (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008).

Sexually objectifying media appears to have a strong influence on the formation of relationship standards partners hold for their significant other, especially regarding physical attractiveness. The exposure to sexual media has been shown to lead couples to make cognitive adjustments about their perceptions of their partners (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008; Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Because sex appeal advertising has been shown to elicit opposing and polarizing gender responses (Harper & Tiggeman, 2008; Dahl et al., 2009; Dens et al., 2009; Dahl et al, 2009; 2011; Wyllie, et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2016), and because of previously observed relationship dynamics and communication reactions to sex appeal advertising (Gimenez, 2015), within the domain of relationships, sex appeal advertising is an unexplored domain worthy of attention.
2.2 Relationship Dynamics

The themes of the pilot observation study mentioned in the introduction (silence/breaks in conversation, verbal and non-verbal reactions and distraction from one another) suggest that as couples noticed the sexualized advertising images, their communication and their dynamics shifted from what they were before observing the images (Gimenez, 2015). Because relationships are ongoing, fluctuating, and evolving social phenomena (Knapp, 1978; 2004), and because there can be moments of bonding and closeness, and moments of disintegration and distance, Knapp’s relational development model (1978) frames how couples move through stages of openness and bonding and closedness and distancing, known as the stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart. This relationship model is based on the idea that “whether relationships are actively sought or develop out of shared circumstances, each of them reveals fluctuations in closeness and intimacy” (Knapp, 2004, p.34), and these fluctuations are closely revealed through communication patterns.

2.2.1 Knapp’s Relationship Development Model: Coming Together and Coming Apart

Knapp’s Relationship Development Model conceptualizes what occurs in terms of intimacy and communication from the moment a relationship starts to the moment it ends, highlighting that the changes in communication and intimacy are not sequential or fixed, though movement through the stages do tend to be systematic (Knapp, 2004). Knapp’s model conceptualizes stages building and escalating closeness in relationships (known as the stages of Coming Together) and stages in which intimacy and closeness decrease (known as Coming Apart).
Though the stages of Coming Together signify a growing relationship, and the stages of Coming Apart may suggest a decaying relationship, Knapp (2004) emphasizes that neither one is inherently “good” or bad,” as individuals in relationships move through both interchangeably. Further, ending a relationship is not necessarily a bad thing, nor is it necessarily good to become intimate with somebody. While this relationship development model applies to any kind of interpersonal relationship, it especially resonates with the unfolding of romantic relationships, as they tend to get more intimate over time (Knapp, 1978; 2004; Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004; Neary Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009; Fox, Warber & Makstaller, 2013; Hall et al., 2013).

2.2.2 Stages of Coming Together

There are five stages of Coming Together that tend to happen sequentially as relationships develop: Initiating, Experimenting, Intensifying, Integrating and Bonding (Knapp, 1978). Initiating begins as a person takes interest in another and demonstrates that interest—it is as if one is saying “I see you. I am friendly, and I want to open channels of communication to take place” (Knapp, 2004, p.35) This stage can be considered either a short greeting that leads to more conversation, a text message or e-mail, or a constant attempt at interacting with someone verbally, time-after-time. Knapp (1978) states, “typically, communicators at this stage are simply trying to display themselves as a person who is pleasant, likeable, understanding and socially adept” (Knapp, 1978, p. 19) This stage is short, and communication is shaped by little breadth, as communicators first engage in an exchange that is superficial, but inviting. The messages used in this stage are meant to establish contact and test whether there could or could not be a possible relationship formed (Knapp, 1978). Initiating is
characterized by messages such as “Hi. Nice to meet you” or “Hi there. What is your name?,” which facilitate the movement in communication that leads into the next stage.

The second stage is experimenting, which begins once communication is established during the Initiating phase. During this phase, individuals explore each other with caution, with the purpose of seeing whether or not they are interested in further intimacy (Knapp, 2004). It entails information gathering, some self-disclosure, and a search for commonalities—it is a search for the discovery of the unknown, and a way to begin disclosing with caution (Knapp, 1978; Welch & Ruben, 2002). Knapp (1978) argues that this stage is especially characterized by small talk, as it serves an instrumental purpose of directing a communication between individuals toward openness and self-disclosure. Essentially, experimenting entails an ongoing exchange of information between two people, as both seek possible similarities and more information about each other (Knapp, 1978). Communication at this stage is characterized by a search for an integrating topic, and common experiences and interests. In new relationships, for example, both parties may ask each other demographic questions (“Where are you from?” “Where do you work?” “What are your hobbies?” etc.) with the hopes of finding common ground and interests. While Experimenting is a typical stage of new relationships and friendships, Knapp (1978) argues that it also occurs in already established relationships from time-to-time, as “it may be an effort to seek greater breadth, to pass the time, or to avoid some uncomfortable vibrations obtained at a more intense level of dialogue” (Knapp, 1978, p. 19). Those in established relationships that re-enter the Experimenting phase may ask each other questions to intensify the depth and breadth of the relationship (Knapp,
1978). Whether it is a new relationship or an already established relationship, the Experimenting phase functions to find out more information about the other person to achieve more breadth and depth in conversation.

After Experimenting, couples enter the Intensifying stage. During this stage, self-disclosure increases, after cautionary probes during the Experimenting phase (Knapp, 2004). Verbal and nonverbal communication becomes more adapted and customized to the couple, and individuals may begin to use nicknames and private terms with each other (Knapp, 1978; Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004; Neary-Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009). In regards to communication, Knapp (1978) states that individuals begin to address each more informally (such as by a first name, or term of endearment), and saying “we” instead of “you” or “I” becomes more common. Also, individuals begin to express more commitment and dependence on one another, such as saying “What we have is great,” or “I really like you.” Individuals also start becoming more perceptive of each other’s nonverbal messages, as a touch may mean, “It’s ok” or a smile may say, “You mean a lot to me” (Knapp, 1978). During this stage, communication is also characterized by more depth, especially as the relationship intensifies and individuals uncover each other’s values and unique identities, blending them with their own (Knapp, 1978).

The Intensifying stage then leads to Integrating, which is a phase in which the relationship reaches a point “where the two individual personalities almost seem to fuse or coalesce” (Knapp, 2004, p. 41). During this phase, couples start behaving and talking similarly, as they begin to integrate their attitudes, opinions and interests. For example, a couple may converse about their shared attitudes, opinions, interests and tastes, as
they distinguish themselves from other people (such as saying, “We are unique” or “They think so differently than us”). It is also common for individuals to begin showing similarities in verbal behavior and mannerisms as their individualities fuse together (Knapp, 1978). For example, a couple may begin using the same verbal and nonverbal expressions, and dress or act in similar ways. During this stage, couples show solidarity and empathy for one another (Knapp, 1978, 2004), and use more shared idioms of love and commitment with each other (Neary-Dunleavey and Booth-Butterfield 2009).

The final stage of Coming Together is Bonding. During the Bonding stage, couples assert a public commitment to one another by declaring their relationship as “official” through some form of social contract (Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004; Fox et al., 2013). Public rituals to announce the beginning of a long-term commitment, such as an engagement or marriage, normally characterize this stage. Couples enact their collective identity, communicate based on their execution and perception of the relational “contract” they are in (Knapp, 2004). Communication in the Bonding stage is based on the established contract, as “the contract becomes, either explicitly or implicitly, a frequent topic of conversation” (Knapp, 1978, p.22). It is common for Bonding couples to begin making plans for the future and having visions on building families, having children, and financial and career prospects (Avtgis, Anderson & West, 1998; Welch & Rubin, 2002). This last stage of Coming Together is especially characterized by ongoing reciprocal communication and self-disclosure (Knapp, 2004). It is common for couples to constantly communicate about the state of their relationship, including benign instrumental complaints to improve or change the relationship in some way or another (Knapp, 2004; Hall et al., 2013).
2.2.3 Stages of Coming Apart

On the other end of the spectrum, the stages of Coming Apart emphasize de-escalation and the reduction of commitment and intimacy. The five de-escalation stages of Coming Apart encompass Differentiating, Circumscribing, Stagnating, Avoiding and Terminating (Knapp, 1978). While instrumental complaining may serve the purpose of helping couples work through certain issues to enhance a relationship during the Bonding stage, it may also lead individuals to realize differences in their values and perceptions of their relationship (Hall et al., 2013). This kind of realization may lead to Differentiating, the first stage of Coming Apart (Knapp, 2004; Hall et al., 2013). Differentiating happens when individuals in couples start seeing their individual differences and identities contrast with their collective identity. Essentially, communication during Differentiating becomes based on perceived differences (Knapp, 2004), and conflict arises as individuals begin to disagree on their perspectives (Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004). Differences regarding attitudes, interests, personality, or specific behaviors are communicated within the relationship. Because individuals at this stage communicate about differences, those who persist in this stage start to perceive the differences as basic core values (Knapp, 1978). This, then, makes conversations about each other’s personalities less frequent (Knapp, 1978). Differentiating is also a common stage that couples move in and out of, and individuals who do so begin to develop a history of expectations for the manner in which differences and difficulties are settled (Knapp, 1978). For this reason, couples may agree to avoid addressing certain differences as a way to seal off potential conflict. Conflict, however, also arises during Differentiating, especially as one person tests the tolerance of the other regarding a
certain topic that may threaten the relationship (Knapp, 1978). Conflict communication during Differentiating conveys a message along the lines of “Accept me for who I am, or leave me” (Knapp, 1978).

Differentiating then leads to Circumscribing, when differences become more pronounced. During Circumscribing, couples begin to feel anxious about the relationship, and communication becomes less reciprocal and more constricted (Knapp, 1978; Knapp, Ellis & Williams, 1980; Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004). Overall, there is less depth and breadth in communication. Knapp states, “as the number of touchy topics increases, almost any topic becomes dangerous” (Knapp, 1978, p. 24). Because there is uncertainty regarding whether or not a new topic may be related to already established frictions in communication, individuals begin to restrain their conversations, and converse less about their core values (Knapp, 1978). Statements such as “Let’s not talk about that” or “Don’t tell me what to think” are common during this stage. Conversations become superficial, and couples communicate fewer expressions of commitment and more expressions of avoidance. This occurs because the already established differences make dyadic communication more uneasy and tense (Knapp, 1978; 2004).

After Circumscribing, the next stage of Coming Apart is Stagnating. Stagnating occurs when the uneasiness of communicating increases, making already static, decreasing communication patterns even more scarce. This phase is characterized by a strong decrease in overt verbal and non-verbal exchanges, and an increase in internal covert dialogues (such as thinking “I wish I could tell him this, but I know how he will react, so I choose not to”) (Knapp, 1978; Knapp et al., 1980; Avtgis et al., 1998; Welch
Couples begin showing discomfort with one another nonverbally, and communication becomes constrained as partners assume that bringing up a touchy subject will lead the other one to respond negatively. When there is communication between parties, the messages and language used in interactions are similar to those used with strangers (Knapp, 1978). In this stage, communication often becomes awkward, stagnant, difficult and hesitant. Furthermore, this stage is characterized by the avoidance of communication regarding the relationship, as the relationship in itself nearly becomes a taboo topic (Knapp, 1978; Knapp, 2004; Neary Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009).

Circumscribing leads to Avoiding, which is an extension of the avoidance communication that occurs in the previous stage. Communication in this stage “is specifically designed to avoid the possibility of face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction” (Knapp, 1978, p. 26). Interactions during this stage are characterized by blunt expressions of disinterest and disengagement, such as saying, “Don’t talk to me” or “I don’t want to spend time with you” or “Please don’t call me anymore” (Knapp, 1978; 2004). In fact, interactions during the Avoiding stage are not so much characterized by a dislike for one another, but a disinterest in spending time with one another (Knapp, 1978). During this stage, couples begin to physically and emotionally distance from one another, and they begin to feel nervous about the relationship. Couples stop or avoid communicating with each other, and start disassociating from each other without actually achieving physical separation (Knapp, 1978; Knapp et al., 1980; Avtgis et al., 1998; Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004).
The last stage of Coming Apart is terminating. Terminating is technically an absolute, and may happen for several reasons, such as a deteriorating relationship that sequentially moves through the stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart, or the death of a significant other (Knapp, 1978). Terminating can essentially occur at any time during a relationship, as it can happen “after a greeting or after twenty years of intimacy” (Knapp, 2004, p. 41). This last stage of a relationship is often characterized by messages of distance and disassociation, and often involves breaking-up or divorce (Knapp, 1978; Knapp, 2004). Messages such as saying, “I never want to see you again” or “We are better off without each other” are common during this stage, as are interactions about what went wrong in the relationship (Atvgis et al., 1998; Welch & Rubin, 2002). Dialogue in the Terminating stage depends on the kind of relationship, the time in which it is done and the physical distance or channels of communication, therefore it may have breadth and length, or it may entail little interaction before ending a relationship (Knapp, 1978; 2004). For the most part, however, dialogue during the Terminating stage is narrow, difficult, awkward and hesitant—more so than in any other stage of Coming Apart (Knapp, 1978).

2.2.4 Movement Within and Between Stages

Although Knapp (1978) emphasizes that the Stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart can portray a sequential explanation for how relationships begin, grow and end, couples may move through the stages at any rate of speed and forward and backward between stages. Depending on the circumstances, couples may move in between escalating and de-escalating stages either in a forward direction (enter escalation stages of Coming Together) or backward (experience de-escalation stages of
Coming Apart. Relationships are fluid, and the process of experiencing the stages of Coming Together or Coming Apart are neither sequential not fixed (Knapp, 1978; 2004).

Sometimes movement through and between escalating and de-escalating stages can cause couples to skip steps in a forward direction, such as experimenting leading directly to integrating when two individuals feel an intense connection, or in a backward, direction such as a couple who is in Intensifying stage taking it back to Experimenting by saying “Let’s take it a little slower” (Knapp, 2004). Movement within escalation and de-escalation can also occur because of a desire to reach equilibrium so that the relationship does not disintegrate. A desire for equilibrium motivates changes between stages, as couples who may wish to save their relationship move back to a stage in Coming Together, or a couple that senses the relationship is moving too fast, may move to a stage in Coming Apart to differentiate (Knapp, 2004).

Though movement through stages may be interchangeably forward and backward, it is always to a new place, as interactions between individuals evolve and can never go back to the same exact state in which it was before (Knapp, 2004). Knapp highlights that movement through stages “may be facilitated by certain situational features” (Knapp, 2004, p. 51), which may lead the interactions between couples to fluctuate at any time, depending on any social or environmental influence that motivate relational movement. In other words, movement within and between the stages can also be motivated by certain situations or conversations that trigger change. For example, a couple in the Integrating stage may engage in a conversation regarding a touchy topic that causes one party to reconsider their emotional investment in the relationship, therefore quickly expressing a need to “think things through,” going back to
Differentiating as core values appear to differ. Similarly, a couple in the Circumscribing stage, who are starting to avoid speaking about subject matters in fear of conflict, may find themselves watching a romantic movie that inspires one party to attempt a romantic re-connection, therefore moving back to Experimenting by expressing love and romantic feelings to the partner, waiting to see if the partner will reciprocate. If the partner reciprocates, the couple may then enter into the Intensifying stage, as they begin to feel closer to one another. Moments of closeness and distance, as they relate to Coming Together and Coming Apart can especially occur fast and fluidly when there is an outside influence that motivates a reconsideration of the rewards and costs in the relationship (Knapp, 1978). Outside influences—whether a situational conversation, or some specific stimuli (such as a romantic film) frame the communication patterns that occur as individuals move between and within stages.

2.3 Rationale

Based on Knapp’s relational development model (1978), romantic couples have the potential to move through the escalating stages of Coming Together and de-escalating stages of Coming Apart. Communication patterns based on intimacy and closeness frame the relationship development, maintenance, and disintegration of relationship. Stages of Coming Together (Initiating, Experimenting, Intensifying, Integrating and Bonding) are characterized by self-disclosure, solidarity and empathy, while the stages of Coming Apart (Differentiating, Circumscribing, Stagnating, Avoiding and Terminating) are characterized by conflict, avoidance, and sometimes distributive communication tactics, such as instrumental complaints (Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004; Neary Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009; Hall et al., 2013). Knapp (2004)
emphasizes that the movement through the stages or in between stages is not always fixed or sequential, and may be facilitated by certain situational features, as a relationship is a “phenomenon that is never at rest, continually moving and in flux” (Knapp, 2004, p. 48).

The movement through the stages can be influenced by internal influences, such as a disagreement on perspectives or a realization that individuals hold different values, or external influences, such as situations outside of the relationship that lead couples to re-evaluate their individual and shared values (Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004). Certain situations lead couples to move through different stages of Coming Together or Coming Apart, which motivate different kinds of relational adjustments and communication patterns. Couples, then experience ongoing fluctuations of closeness and distancing within the relationship (Knapp, 2004). Sometimes, couples may also notice that there may be undesired distance, and to stabilize the relationship, they communicate to move back to a stage of togetherness (Knapp, 2004). Depending on the situation, these moments of movement through stages of Coming Together or Coming Apart can impact the communication between couples in terms of closeness and distancing (Knapp et al., 1980; Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004; Neary Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009; Hall et al., 2013).

The stages of Coming Together are characterized by self-disclosure and fluid open-communication that lead to deeper and more intimate levels of communication and connection, more trust, solidarity and assurance in the relationship as couples move forward from Initiating through Bonding (Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004). On the other hand, as couples start differentiating from one another, the stages of Coming
Apart lead couples to engage in communication avoidance, mutual withholding, relational distance, disruptions in communication, communication apprehension, relationship distress, and decreased intimacy (Welch & Rubin, 2002; Knapp, 2004; Neary Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009).

Sex appeal advertising may influence relational movements in Knapp’s (1978) stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart, triggering fluctuations in the closedness and distancing of couples’ communication. Though research regarding how sexualized media affects couples’ satisfaction is limited, extant studies show that the objectifying aspect of sexualized media can have detrimental effects on relationships, driving romantic partners to feel a disruption in their relationship question their sense of being in a loving relationship, and leading to a decline in relationship satisfaction (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Kerkhoff et al., 2011; Estroff Marano, 2016). Sex appeal advertising has been shown to lead women to feel self-objectified, dissatisfied, and self-conscious with their body image (Harper & Tiggeman, 2008; Dens et al., 2009), while causing men to experience more objectification of their partners and more discrepancies and misalignment in their perceptions of their “ideal” partners and their actual partners (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008; Dens et al., 2009; Zurbriggen et al.; 2011).

To my knowledge, the effects of sex appeal advertising on romantic couples’ communication have not yet been studied. Because of its ability to engage consumers’ perceptions and trigger primal, emotional gendered responses regarding sex and evoking sexual thoughts and feelings (Tafflinger, 1996; Reichert, 2002, Lombardot, 2007; Dahl et al., 2009; 2011), and because of its profound cognitive effects on objectification and sexualization of the female body, women tend to feel offended by it,
while men tend to feel attracted to it (Tafflinger, 1996; Reichert, 2002; Liu et al., 2009; Dahl et. al, 2009; 2011), obviously causing a general misalignment in women and men's perceptions and responses of it. This, therefore, has a potential impact on communication in heterosexual romantic relationships.

Based on the aforementioned observational study in which couples who walked by a Victoria’s Secret store reacted to the sexualized advertising images by silencing their conversation, having verbal and non-verbal reactions, and distracting and distancing themselves from one another (Gimenez, 2015), and grounded in this review of literature, there exists a lack of research regarding how sexualized media impacts couple communication. By framing fluctuations in couple communication with Knapp’s (1978) Relationship Development Model, this thesis aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1) How do participants in this study perceive sexualized media in general?
RQ2) How do individuals describe the experience of being in the presence of sexualized advertising with their partners?
RQ3) How, if at all, do individuals perceive sexualized advertising affecting communication with their partner?
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the philosophical study of subjective experience (Husserl & Gibson, 1931). The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) first coined the term as a philosophy that posits that the social world is not ready-made, nor is reality separate from our lived experience—instead, the world is constructed and deconstructed by inhabitants' internalizations of their relative existence (Husserl & Gibson, 1931; Eberle, 2014). In other words, phenomenology focuses on describing and analyzing how people synthesize their daily lives and consciousness in terms of their understanding of subjective experience, or “phenomenological reductions” (Husserl & Gibson, 1931; Husserl, 1964). Because this thesis aims to describe how individuals experience sexualized advertising in the presence of their partners, phenomenology is an appropriate theoretical framework.

When it comes to qualitative research, phenomenology aims to understand human phenomena as they are lived and experienced, grounded in the subjective experiences of people (Schwandt, 2000; Creswell, 2007). As a methodology, phenomenological inquiry provides a reflexive synthesis of the essence of a lived phenomenon through a deep focus on participants’ understanding of said subjective experience (Creswell, 2007; Eberle, 2014). The researcher, therefore, is to grasp the “meaning structure,” or the webs of meanings regarding a phenomenon, as they are
constituted by participants (Creswell, 2007; Aspers, 2009; Eberle, 2014). To fully understand the studied phenomenon, the researcher should “start with the life-world, where the person acts within the natural attitude, which the actor takes for granted” (Aspers, 2009, p. 3). The researcher must reflect participants’ experiences as they are lived by participants (known as “first-order constructs”) by channelizing an understanding of the underlying order and coherence of their experiences through a secondary analysis, or “second-order constructs” (Schütz, 1967; Aspers, 2009).

3.1.2 Empirical Phenomenology

Aspers (2009) argues that aside from the descriptive aspect of phenomenology, empirical phenomenology, as a social science method, moves beyond descriptions of states of minds to connect the “why” and “how” phenomena occur and how people think about phenomena. Empirical phenomenology aims to integrate descriptions of participants’ first-order constructs with the research questions, the literature and the theoretical direction the researcher uses to guide the findings (Aspers, 2009). Aspers (2009) advances that empirical phenomenology generally follows sequential steps of social science research, such as defining a research question, conducting a pre-study and choosing a theory as a frame of reference before delving into studying first-order constructs and consequently building second-order constructs. Empirical phenomenology differs from other phenomenological methods because the analysis yielded from the study relates the evidence back to literature and the field of study (Aspers, 2009). By suspending one’s beliefs and pre-conceived notions about participants’ “natural world” (also known as “bracketing”) and by focusing on explanation and comprehensive understanding, empirical phenomenology allows the researcher to
weave participants’ experiences into a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Aspers, 2009). Consequently, the researcher’s reflexive analysis connects to a larger, overarching conceptual framework. Based on the findings of the observation study performed in the fall of 2015, and by using Knapp’s (1978) Stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart as a conceptual framework, this phenomenological study aims to describe how individuals experience sexualized advertising in the presence of their partners. Furthermore, this study aims to find how, if at all, this phenomenon influences fluctuations in intimacy and communication, which are theoretically framed through Knapp’s (1978) Relationship Development model.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants

The target demographic group for this study was heterosexual romantic couples in their twenties or thirties who do not live together and who have been romantically involved for at least six months to four years. The goal was to gain a perspective on how sexualized advertising impacted couple communication dynamics. The study aimed to find this through the experience of romantic couples who consider their relationship as a serious and integral part of their lives. A romantic couple who has been together for at least six months to 4 years would most likely have gone through some of the escalating stages of Coming Together- Initiation, Experimentation, Intensifying, Integration, and/or Bonding (Knapp, 1978). While the stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart often occur sequentially, individuals can move in and out of them simultaneously, as shifts between them and within them can be motivated by outside stimuli or activating events (Knapp, 1978). Rauer et al. (2013) argue that romantic
relationships in young adults' lives are considered an integral part of entering and experiencing adulthood. Achieving intimacy and stability through a steady romantic relationship plays a critical role in the development of adult relationships (Rauer et al., 2013). Due to the importance given to intimacy and stability of romantic relationships, young adults in established romantic relationships are the ideal target demographic group for assessing the impact of sexualized advertising on romantic couples' communication dynamics.

3.2.2 Recruitment

After submitting paperwork to the Institutional Review Board in February 2017, IRB approval #3867 was received on 03/13/2017. Due to a shortage of participants in heterosexual dating relationships lasting 6 months to 1 year (the initial maximum dating period), an amendment was requested to widen participants' dating period to a maximum of 4 years. IRB amendment # 3867 was approved on 3/23/2017.

Five couples (10 participants) were recruited through class announcements at the Elliott School of Communication, Wichita State University. Elliott School professors and instructors announced the study to their students by sharing flyers and word-of-mouth information. Additionally, flyers were posted around the Elliott School. All participants were in their twenties—the oldest participant was 27 years old, and the youngest 21 years old, with an average age of 23.9 years. Couples 1 and 2 indicated they had been together for 11 months, Couple 3 indicated they have been together for 2 years, Couple 4 noted their dating period as 3 years and 11 months, and Couple 5 had been together for 1 year and 4 months. The average dating period was 1 year and 8.6
months. Nine participants indicated their race/ethnicity as White or European and 1 as Latino or Hispanic. For anonymity, all participants’ names have been changed.

3.2.3 Demographic Information, Relationship Assessment and Exposure to Sexualized Advertising

A twofold methodology was used to collect data. The first part entailed collecting participants’ demographic information mentioned above (age, biological sex, race/ethnicity and duration of relationship) and assessing participants’ relationship stage using a nominal scale measure developed by Welch and Rubin (2002), which assesses Knapp’s (1978) stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart. The measure entails ten paragraphs that describe the five escalating stages of Coming Together, and five stages of Coming Apart (Welch & Rubin, 2002). Welch and Rubin’s (2002) scale has been used in previous studies to assess different aspects of Knapp’s (1978) escalating and deescalating stages. Neary Dunleavy and Booth-Butterfield (2009) used this 10-item nominal scale when exploring the breadth and frequency of idioms used by romantic couples whose relationships were escalating and/or deescalating. The study revealed that romantic couples in the stages of Coming Together used more idioms than those couples who identified their relationship as in one of the stages of Coming Apart (Neary Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009). In this study, Welch and Rubin’s (2002) nominal scale assessed the relationship stage each partner in the participating couples perceived they were in at the beginning of the study. To avoid skewed results, the sequence of the paragraphs was re-organized so that participants would not be influenced by paragraph order.
Based on Knapp’s (1978) model for the stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart, and because participating romantic couples were asked to have been together for six months to four years, it was anticipated that most individuals would assess their relationship as escalating, specifically the Integrating and Bonding stages of Coming Together (Knapp, 1878; Welch & Rubin, 2002). Knapp (1978) argues that it is common for relationships to have a sequential nature. While Initiating and Experimenting happen at the beginning of a new relationship, Intensifying and Integrating and Bonding occur as the relationship gets more serious, and as couples share more disclosure, achieve more intimacy, and find more depth and breadth in their communication (Knapp, 1978). While the information collected from the demographic forms gave an idea of the general demographic information of the participants, the relationship assessments were utilized for reference and comparison with the data in the Results and Discussion sections below.

Once they completed the demographic form and identified their individual perceptions of their relationship stage, couples were instructed to watch an advertising video titled “Super Sexy CPR” (Fortnight, 2010) together. As aforementioned, “Super Sexy CPR” is an advertising campaign video by Fortnight, a Canada-based Lingerie company (Fortnight, 2010).

Researchers left the room as the couple viewed the video to offer them privacy and to decrease the potential impact observers might have on their experience watching the video with their partners. After the couple watched the video, participants were given 5 minutes for interaction before researchers returned to the room.
3.2.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

The second part of the method entailed semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews collect data with open-ended questions in a less structured and more dynamic and conversational fashion than traditional interviews (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). As opposed to structured or unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews are most appropriate “when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided” (Harrell & Bradley, 2009, p. 35). The objective of semi-structured interviews is to understand the participants’ experiences through open-ended questions about a specific subject (Whiting, 2008). Semi-structured interviews offer high validity to research findings as they allow for an intense, in-depth focus on the participants’ responses without constant interruption from the interviewer (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Semi-structured interviews also allow the interviewer to establish rapport with the interviewees as questions are prepared ahead of time in order to allow the participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Because this study took an empirical phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences in detail, as “meaning is primarily transmitted by words, for which interviews are most suitable” (Aspers, 2009, p. 9).

After watching the video, partners were separated and interviewed individually; interviewees and interviewers were of the same sex to minimize discomfort or reluctance participants might have felt discussing their feelings about the video with a stranger of the opposite sex. Patrick Clough, an aerospace engineering graduate from the Wichita State University School Engineering, assisted as Co-Investigator to
interview male participants. Mr. Clough completed CITI training in February 2017. He then obtained interviewing practice in a preliminary study with a practice couple, moderated by the Principal Investigator, Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch. After the pilot study, Dr. Ballard-Reisch deemed Mr. Clough as trained for semi-structured interviewing.

The interview questions were designed to address the three phenomenological research questions. Through 16 open-ended questions found in Appendix B, participants shared descriptive details about their experiences watching the sexualized advertising video with their partner. Each session was audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to 25 minutes. The average interview was 20 minutes long.

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Boyatzis (1998), a thematic analysis goes further than identifying themes, as it entails analyzing and interpreting the themes in extensive detail, tying the themes back to the original research topic. Moreover, a thematic analysis interprets the phenomenon that the themes represent (Boyatzis, 1998). This interpretation is a comprehensive analysis of the data that connects the content to the original research questions (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analyses reflect the process used to get to the themes, describing the themes by faithful empirical connection to the data. Thomas and Harden (2008) argue that a thematic analysis is a translation of the data which, “through the development of descriptive and
analytical themes, can be carried out in a rigorous way that facilitates the transparency of reporting (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The thematic analysis was carried out through a simultaneous process of analytic memo-writing and coding. Analytic memos served as a descriptive method of recalling participants' experiences, and as a tool to structure and connect the emerging ideas and patterns from the data. Coding allowed for themes, sub-themes and categories to be conceptualized and re-structured. These two processes were performed together until 7 main themes were identified.

3.3.2 Analytic Memos

The first attempt at understanding participants’ experience was writing analytic memos, which are the researcher’s personal reflections on the study, the research process, the data collected and the findings (Saldaña, 2016). This writing is a way of asking oneself what the data means and making sense of the data, reflecting on how the data analysis process represents lived phenomena (Saldaña, 2016). Analytic memos also give clarity to the empirical phenomenological method of comparing the participants’ first-world constructs with the researcher’s second-world constructs (Aspers, 2009).

Analytic memo writing was done as part of the thematic analysis process to capture and reflect upon the participants’ experiences, and to analyze the emerging results of the study. These writings, which were organized as journal entries by date and subject, served to identify patterns of participants’ experiences that emerged during data analysis, and allowed for a way of reflecting on and summarizing participants’ experiences immediately after each interview. While first Co-Investigator (Marcela Gimenez Clough) performed the data analysis (including writing the memos), she and
the 2nd Co-Investigator (Patrick Clough) shared their perceptions of participants’ experiences as part of the initial memo-writing process. After interviews with each couple, the Co-Investigators shared notes with one another, and de-briefed about impressions of their interviewees’ experiences and discussed interviewees’ responses to each of the interview questions. Then, for each couple, three descriptive analytic memos (one for each individual, and another one for each couple) were written as a way to recall the interviewees’ responses to the interview questions, their individual experiences, and their collective couple experiences. This resulted in fifteen initial memos, three for each couple. The Co-Investigators then transcribed their respective interviews, and then de-briefed a second time about new and/or more elaborated perceptions of their interviewees’ experiences, leading to refinement of the analytic memos. Saldaña (2016) states that analytic memo writing “serves as an additional code and category-generating method” (p. 54). After the first cycle of coding, analytic memos were continued as a complementary method to conceptualize the emerging patterns in participants’ experiences and record the researcher’s thoughts on the emerging codes and categories. These writings also served as initial attempts to answer the research questions. A total of seventeen analytic memos were written while collecting data and during the coding process, contributing to the inductive conceptualization of seven main themes.

3.3.3 Coding

Coding is a methodical procedure used to organize qualitative data; it represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized and put back together in new ways (Saldaña, 2016). Ultimately, codes yield categories, and categories then lead
to themes (Saldaña, 2016). This thesis employed multiple coding cycles, including: Initial (or Open), In Vivo, Axial and Theoretical Coding. According to Saldaña (2016), Initial and In Vivo Coding are performed to begin dividing the data into patterns by commonality, while Axial and Theoretical Coding are used for comparison, reorganization and connection among initial codes.

3.3.3.1 First Coding Cycle: Initial and In Vivo Coding

Through questioning and comparing, Initial Coding divided the data into preliminary groups and identified concepts that lead to codes (Saldaña, 2016). Essentially, the goal for Initial Coding is to start organizing the data files, remaining open to all possible theoretical directions for interpretation (Saldaña, 2016). In Vivo Coding entails selecting literal, verbatim data extracted as codes. Saldaña (2016) argues that In Vivo coding allows researchers to better capture the meanings from people’s experiences, focusing on their own language and expressions. Initial and In Vivo Coding were done at the same time, during the first round of coding. After reading all ten transcripts and writing the first fifteen analytic memos (Initial Coding), the last phase of Initial Coding and the In Vivo Coding began. The transcripts were read again and key words, phrases and sentences about apparent concepts that were identified through the analytic memos and that emerged within the language of the transcripts themselves were highlighted. No efforts were made to categorize at this point. Each highlighted section in each transcript was given a sequential number, so that code #1 began with the first highlighted section in transcript #1, and the last code (code #664) was the last highlighted section from transcript #10. Each number was referenced in the margin of each page by assigning a word or phrase that described each highlighted
section in the data (Initial Coding) or by using the participants’ language (In Vivo Coding). In this round, the transcripts were labeled with codes such as “Communication before experiment: positive,” “Does not feel uncomfortable by lingerie,” “Oh! I don’t like that very much!” or “Eh, whatever’ feeling about the video.” This coding cycle was an initial attempt at describing participants’ experiences and identifying their first-order constructs. The codes were then manually entered into an Excel Spreadsheet. In Excel, the codes referenced each participant and couple number in a separate column (So that code #1 referenced M1 for the male participant in Couple 1 and code #664 referenced F5 for female participant in Couple 5).

3.3.3.2 Second Coding Cycle: Sub-categories with Axial Coding in Excel

Axial coding is considered the “transitional cycle between the Initial and Theoretical Coding processes” (Saldaña, 2016, p.244). The goal of Axial Coding is to “strategically reassemble data that were ‘split’ or ‘fractured’ during the Initial Coding process” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 244). In other words, Axial Coding is performed to begin the data grouping process and determine categories and sub-categories that lead to themes. After finishing the first coding cycle of the transcripts and re-reading through all 664 codes in Excel, another analytic memo was written as a first attempt to answer the research questions at the individual level, referencing the researcher’s impressions regarding the apparent conceptual connections of the 664 codes from the first coding cycle (Containing both Initial and In Vivo codes) to the research questions. This was done to frame the Axial coding process. With these concepts in mind, the Excel spreadsheet was filtered to show the codes that referenced Couple 1 (Participants 1 and 2, referenced as M1 and F1). After reading through Couple 1’s codes to look for
concepts identified in the last analytic memo, common codes were grouped together by content. Then, for each group of codes the researcher selected one descriptive term that described the content and became a potential sub-category. Emergent codes not identified in the analytic memos were examined to look for conceptual similarities in word usage and meaning. Similar codes were grouped together and given one descriptive name. The sub-categories for Couple 1 were then copied and pasted into a Word document. This document was printed to use for reference for Couples 2-5. For Couples 2 through 5, each code was assigned a sub-category from the list (identified in Couple 1) that best described it conceptually. Emergent codes that did not fit into any previously used sub-category were once again, filtered and compared for commonalities in word usage and conceptual meaning. Where there was a commonality in meaning or concept, emergent codes were grouped and given a descriptive sub-category. Because new emerging sub-categories were not previously identified in Couple 1, they were hand-written on the reference list to use for the next couple. This process was repeated for all 5 couples (the 664 codes), assigning the same sub-categories for codes that were similar. This allowed for a process to stay connected to the research questions (by sub-categorizing based on concepts identified in the last analytic memo), while remaining open to new concepts (by grouping the codes that did not fit into any previously identified sub-category). This was an iterative process between and among all ten participant transcripts. This process resulted in reducing the 664 codes into 107 sub-categories, such as “Self-presentation,” “Thinks partner felt ok about experience,” “Superficial communication after video and “Tension got better.” All sub-categories were then organized into categories through Q-sort.
3.3.3.3  Third Coding Cycle: Axial Coding Using Q-sort

The sorting and organization of a 2nd round of Axial coding was done using a Q-Sort method. Q-Sort entails a systematic procedure of cutting and sorting content (in this case, the second-level coding), or writing out notes onto cards to further re-arrange or come up with categories and themes (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Q-sort stems from “Q Methodology,” an adaptation of quantitative factor analysis (known as “R methodology”) that is also applicable to qualitative research (Watts & Stenner, 2005). In qualitative research, whether done manually or through software, Q-sort allows a clear and organized evaluation of the data, referencing the information given by participants (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

Q-sorting facilitated a fixed method for further organization of Axial codes. The 107 sub-categories were hand-written on note cards, which were arranged and sorted into piles by conceptual commonalities. After five Q-sort rounds, 31 categories emerged. Each category was assigned a descriptive name, such as: “Laughing during the video,” “Female body objectified” and “Curious about what partner felt.” The 31 categories were then sorted by research question.

3.3.3.4  Fourth Coding Cycle: Theoretical Coding

Theoretical Coding is the last round of coding, and it “functions like an umbrella that covers and accounts for all other codes and categories formulated thus far” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 250), integrating the Initial, In Vivo, and Axial codes into themes (Saldaña, 2016). The last analytic memo was written to reflect on the connections among literature, theory, categories and sub-categories of data by research question, conceptualizing the content themes addressing each research question. Within each
group, categories were once again clustered into piles by conceptual commonalities. Each pile was given a name that described an overarching topic in each cluster of categories, leading to the conceptualization of seven main themes. Content within themes were then sorted one more time to identify sub-themes. Ultimately, seven themes and four sub-themes were identified. To graphically represent the connections among categories, sub-themes, themes and research questions, Cmap, a software that facilitates the construction of concept mapping, was used (See Appendix G).
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As expected, all participants assessed their relationship as characterized by an escalating stage of Coming Together (Knapp, 1978). Couple 1 (Anna and Adam), Couple 4 (Denise and David) and Couple 5 (Emma and Edward) assessed their relationship as Bonding. Couple 3 (Camilla and Charlie) indicated their relationship was in the Integrating stage, while Couple 2 (Bailey and Brandon) saw their relationship as Bonding and Integrating, respectively.

Research Question # 1 (How do participants in this study perceive sexualized media in general?) is addressed by the following themes and subthemes: 1) Perceived Normalization of Sexualized Media and 2) Perceived Biological Sex-Based Effects of Sexualized Media, which contained two subthemes a) Perceived Effects of Sexualized Media on Females and b) Perceived Effects of Sexualized Media on Males.

Three themes focus discussion of Research Question # 2 (How do individuals describe the experience of being in the presence of sexualized advertising with their partners?): 1) Discomfort and Shock, 2) Hyper-Awareness of Partner Reaction, and 3) Anticipated Difference in Experiencing the Video Alone and/or with Others.

Finally, Research Question #3 (How, if at all, do individuals perceive sexualized advertising affecting communication with their partners?) is framed through the following themes: 1) Pause in Communication and 2) Functions of Joking and Laughter, which covers two subthemes: a) Joking and laughter: Managing Tension and b) Joking and laughter: Re-framing the Experience.
4.1 RQ 1) How do participants in this study perceive sexualized media in general?

Nine out of 10 participants had strong opinions about sexualized media and showed an awareness of how it affects themselves and others. Most participants rooted their opinions and perspectives in their own experiences with sexualized media seen on television and the internet. Two themes emerged in relation to this research question: 1) Perceived Normalization of Sexualized Media and 2) Perceived Biological Sex-Based Effects of Sexualized Media, covering two sub-themes: a) Perceived Effects of Sexualized Media on females and b) Perceived Effects of Sexualized Media on Males.

4.1.1 Theme #1: Perceived Normalization of Sexualized Media

Four participants mentioned they had noticed a normalization of sexualized media over time, making it common content on media platforms. Brandon did not appear surprised about sexualized content in the study video, as he mentioned that it is not uncommon for him to see sexuality expressed in the media, whether on television or the internet. He noted, “[Bailey and I] are used to all of this stuff. I can’t even get on the internet without titties being slapped on my face.” In fact, Brandon mentioned that they have even witnessed sexualized content on Cartoon Network, as they spend a lot of time watching children’s TV shows with Bailey’s children. Brandon said, “We’ve seen so much more sexualized stuff together just watching Cartoon Network…I mean on Cartoon Network they were talking about going ‘full sausage’ the other day,” indicating that he and his partner interpreted the phrase as sexual innuendo. Similarly, Adam related the normalization of sexualized media to his experiences growing up and consuming the media. He noted, “That kind of stuff is on TV ads all the time…You start
seeing that, you know, when you’re 5 or 6, and you start watching TV and reading magazines or whatever…I think it’s just really become normalized.”

Charlie also expressed that he has noticed a normalization of sexualized media content. This type of advertisement, according to Charlie, “is just something that you see so much nowadays that you really don’t think about it anymore…it is just a lot more common now than it used to be…so, it’s getting to the point where it’s just normal to see stuff like this.” His partner, Camilla, expressed a similar sentiment, “I feel like I’m so used to sexualized commercials, movies, TV shows…It didn’t really incite any kind of reaction from me.”

Because of the frequency of exposure to sexualized media content (especially on television and the internet), some participants perceived that sexuality in the media has been normalized and therefore, the video did was not surprising to them.

4.1.2 Theme #2: Perceived Biological Sex-Based Effects of Sexualized Media

Most participants were aware of certain biological sex-based responses to sexualized media. Both female and male participants commented on perceived sexualized media effects on their own and the opposite sex. Through these comments, participants demonstrated an awareness of unintended consequences of sexualized media on females and males.

4.1.2.1 Subtheme #1: Perceived Effects of Sexualized Media on Females

Anna noticed the video was a lingerie ad, and she realized that it was “trying to advertise lingerie in a fun sexy way,” but she felt conflicted about portrayals of females in the media because she is aware of the detrimental “manipulative” effect sexualized advertising can have on women. According to Anna, sexualized advertising gives
women “the idea that if you buy whatever you buy you’ll be as beautiful as this, but right now, you’re not as beautiful.”

Camilla and Denise commented on the objectifying effect of sexualized media depicting the “perfect body” for women, which Denise deemed “harmful” for women because it normalizes the objectification of the female body. Similarly, Camilla said that this kind of portrayal of female bodies in the media “hurts the body image of women who don’t have a body like that.” This effect was also personal for Camilla, who noted, “It definitely does not make me feel good about my body…Like Victoria’s Secret…The sexualized ones…My immediate reaction is to feel a little bit insecure about myself.” When Camilla sees these ads, she mentioned she immediately compares her body to the bodies portrayed in the ads, as she thinks to herself, “Wow! Look at her legs, look at her calves, look at her abs! That’s definitely not me.”

Adam was the only male who commented on the detrimental effects of sexualized media on women, which according to him, drives women to compare themselves, in the same way Camilla noted she tends to do. He stated, “A lot of women compare themselves to ads they see…I think it’s human nature to do that.” He concluded, “I think women have a lot to live up to in the way the media portrays them…So it’s a battle to begin with when you are bombarded with how you should look and act.”

Four out of the 5 female participants referred to the media objectification and sexualization of the female body as negative; Bailey called it “unnecessary” and “ridiculous.” Furthermore, 3 out of the 5 female participants seemed to be aware of how the female body is objectified in the media, often leading to negative effects that can be
“harmful” and “detrimental” for women because it leads them to see their own bodies as objects and drive them to compare themselves to seemingly unattainable standards.

4.1.2.2 Subtheme #2: Perceived Effects of Sexualized Media on Males

Participants were also aware of the effects of sexualized media on males, specifically how it can influence men to have certain standards for women, and how it affects their attention. While Adam expressed some dissatisfaction with the video, he realized that there was a visual attraction effect, although he could not verbalize it. Adam noted, “Maybe knowing how a guy’s brain works…seeing those women…They’re perfect physically…Blond hair, stereotypical, you know, super attractive women.” According to Adam, this portrayal of women leads men to have “unrealistic expectations” about how their partners should look and act, which can be “disruptive to relationships” and are “unattainable.”

Edward described the video as “soft porn.” Like Adam, he mentioned the video drew his attention, but he could not define what that effect was because he couldn’t recall if he was able to pay attention to the CPR narrative of the video. His partner, Emma, perceived that he felt an attraction to the video, which she perceived to be “targeting men.” When asked about this perspective, Emma said, “I am not interested in women, so, it’s nothing bad if I look at another woman, just because I am not interested in them. For him, he might have felt different because it’s two women…And he’s interested in women.” Similarly, David, who called the video “sexually provocative” mentioned that the video caught his attention. David stated, “I wasn’t thinking about learning CPR when I was watching, if that helps…I was not so much interested in the CPR part of it. I was more distracted, more than anything.”
Three out of 5 male participants commented on the visual attraction effect of sexualized media. The video seemed to have a particularly captivating effect on David and Edward’s attention, which according to them, led them to not be able to process the CPR instructions in the video. While Adam did not mention this, he did report being confused about how CPR was connected to the sexualization in the video.

Almost all participants appeared to be aware of the effects of sexualized media on themselves and others, especially making note of how common and frequent sexualized media appears to be, and how easy it is to be exposed to it through television and the internet. Additionally, participants expressed opinions about the impact of sexualized media and women and men.

4.2 RQ2) How do individuals describe the experience of being in the presence of sexualized advertising with their partners?

Every individual experienced watching the video with her/his partner slightly differently, yet general reactions were characterized in three themes: 1) Discomfort and Shock, 2) a Hyper-Awareness of Partner Reaction, and 3) an Anticipated Difference in Experiencing the Video Alone and/or with Others.

4.2.1 Theme #1: Discomfort and Shock

Eight out of 10 participants (Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5) expressed that they felt some type of discomfort and/or shock as they experienced watching the video with their partners. This sensation was sometimes described with similar words such as “awkward,” “uncomfortable,” “strange” and “weird.” Adam thought the video was “odd” he felt “slightly uncomfortable,” yet “it wasn’t super awkward” because he is used to seeing that kind of sexualized content on television. Adam also attributed the feeling of
discomfort to an awareness that this video, as an advertisement, is easily available.

Adam noted, “I also feel a little uncomfortable knowing that a ton of people are going to watch or see the advertisement.” Like Adam, Anna mentioned that watching the video felt “a little uncomfortable,” because the video “crossed the line a little bit” for her. Anna stated, “I tend to be a pretty conservative person, personally…That kind of…Embracing of the sexuality…When I see it, it’s like ‘Oh! That’s not normal for people to see!’ I look at it, and I’m like ‘Oh! That’s a little uncomfortable!’…That’s weird.”

Camilla, who said the video was “interesting” and “kind of strange” said that she felt discomfort and shock watching the video with Charlie.” She noted, “It made me feel kind of uncomfortable, but not so much that it was a strong emotion…Maybe a little bit of a shock, surprised, I guess…Seeing two women together was…A little bit weird to me.” When asked what he thought about the video, Charlie said, “It is very, very strange…I just feel like obviously, it’s way over-sexualized…I think it’s very silly how they’re trying to sell a product with so much sexualization like that…It made me raise my eyebrows because it’s just so weird.”

Denise and David also felt discomfort and shock watching the video with one another. When asked how he felt, especially at the beginning of the video, when David reported an “initial uncomfortableness.” He noted, “I guess…Kind of surprised…By the ad…It was so…I don’t know how you’d say it…Sexual…You know, half-naked women…It was very sexually provocative, so that would be the surprising piece…You wouldn’t expect to see something so…Out there.” Denise, who described the video as “awkward and unnecessary” also mentioned a similar sensation. She noted, “It was just awkward to watch…You know, normally, when you see something that seems so sexual
or intimate, it seems like something that is personal or private…So you shouldn’t be watching.” Additionally, Denise felt discomfort because the video was “something that brings pleasure to [David].”

Despite assessing the relationship experience as positive, Edward stated that at first “it was a little uncomfortable…it was a little awkward.” Emma noticed Edward’s discomfort. She noted, “It probably made him a little uncomfortable…He was probably like ‘What is going on?’…I don’t think he felt bad for watching it, but I think it made him a little uncomfortable.”

Aside from Emma, Bailey and Brandon, participants reported feeling uncomfortable, shocked or both at least once while watching the video with their partners. This sensation of discomfort was attributed mainly to the sexualized content of the video, but also to feeling uneasy about being aware of their partner’s reaction (such as Denise, who felt discomfort because she knew the video was visually stimulating for David). While Emma did not mention she felt discomfort, she noticed her partner felt uncomfortable, which she indicated also became part of her experience.

4.2.2 Theme #2: Hyper-Awareness of Partner Reaction

Just like Emma sensed that Edward felt uncomfortable, most participants were vigilant of their partners’ reactions during the video, either by trying to sense what they were thinking or feeling, or being very conscious of what they did during the video. This awareness and attention given to partners’ reactions were part of the relationship experience for Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5.

When asked how he thought his partner felt while watching the video with him, Adam mentioned, “Maybe a little annoyed…Seeing the women.” He then elaborated,
saying that he sensed that she was comparing herself to the women in the video and
that she would think he found the models attractive. He stated, “I guess…one
reason…Knowing how a guy’s brain works…So thoughts of knowing how guys think but
then also thoughts of how she feels towards seeing those women and comparing
herself to them, even if, you know, it’s not even a…Long thought or really deep
thought.” Regarding Adam’s reaction to the video, Anna said, “He’s a very visual
person…I know, like most men, he struggled watching porn…That’s not something he
tries to watch anymore, especially being in a relationship…I would absolutely say he
would have been visually stimulated by it.” Anna mentioned that at first, she didn’t want
to see what his reaction was because she felt so uncomfortable. She said, “The
moment where the girl is tracing her fingers on the girl’s chest…That part made me so
uncomfortable, so I didn’t want to say anything or look at Adam, so I made a comment
about the hair extensions.”

Camilla was also attentive to Charlie’s reaction, and like Anna, she thought he
could have been visually stimulated by the video. Additionally, she wondered if Charlie
could have felt discomfort because she thought he could sense her own. Camilla stated,
“I’m sure he was also a little shocked…But at the same time, it made me wonder…If he
enjoyed it? Or was stimulated by it. That’s always in the back of my mind…when [we]
see the sexualized things on TV…Probably some of his discomfort [sic] came from…Him
wondering what I was thinking.” Similarly, David commented, “When it first popped
up…A woman in lingerie…I immediately thought about Denise in the room…I don’t
know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing…Then, after five seconds of thinking what
she’s thinking about…I was focused and tuned on the rest of the advertisement piece…I
wasn’t necessarily conscious of her being next to me.” Denise felt confident she knew exactly what David was thinking. When describing how she felt David reacted to the video, Denise commented, “Oh…he was probably turned on! I mean, let’s just keep it real…afterwards, he turned to me and said, ‘makes you want to learn CPR’…It definitely enticed him, I would say.”

Emma and Edward were also observant of each other’s reactions. Regarding her ability to notice that Edward felt uncomfortable, Emma commented, “I could tell that there was…something.” When asked how she assessed this, she mentioned, “I looked at him once to see…He was just watching it, I looked at him…Just to see what…He had a worried face, kind of, like, confused.” She mentioned that she sensed that part of his discomfort was her own presence. “I feel like if he would have saw [sic] a commercial or something by himself, he wouldn’t think anything about it…But now that I’m sitting there, it might have been different.” Edward also commented that he tried to gauge what Emma felt during the video based on her expressions. He noted, “I was kind of like, you know, doing glances at her, seeing if like, what her facial reaction was, just because I was curious.”

Overall, participants seemed to be conscious of their partner’s reactions because of discomfort and self-consciousness about how their partners interpreted their reactions. Some participants, like Anna, Emma, Denise and Adam, could sense how their partners felt and what their partners were thinking, which seemed to create additional discomfort. This, for example, led Adam to feel “worried” that his partner would think he found the models attractive.
4.2.3 Theme #3: Anticipated Difference in Experiencing the Video Alone and/or with Others

Another theme mentioned by interviewees about their experiences (which better defined what their relationship experience was like) was how differently they would have experienced the video had they been alone and/or with other people. Eight out of 10 participants stated that they would have a different experience watching the video without their partners.

Both Anna and Adam noted that they would not have the same experience watching the video alone. Anna mentioned, “It wouldn’t have been near as uncomfortable...I don’t know, honestly, that lingerie didn’t even look very comfortable to wear, so it would have been more like, “Come on!” …But yeah…I think I would have had either no reaction to it, or very little reaction to it.” Adam mentioned that if he were to watch this video without Anna, he would feel less awkward “because then [he would] not [be] worried about what she’s thinking.” Similarly, Camilla stated, “I think the discomfort [sic] would come from…the fact that it was two women, I don’t think the wondering of how he felt would have felt a part in it. I would have still felt kind of slightly uncomfortable and kind of slightly weird…But I wonder if I would have felt less uncomfortable, less…like, watching it with him almost makes me blush? You know…It’s kind of like, ‘Oh! That’s really weird!'”

Denise and David also mentioned that they would have experienced the video differently if they would have seen it alone, as opposed to with others and/or each other. Denise stated, “I think, if, like, I stumbled on the video on my own, like, I would probably be like ‘Oh my gosh, this is ridiculous!'…I don’t know if I would have watched the whole
thing, like, it wasn’t super long, but it’s not like something that, like, made me want to keep watching…I would still be kind of, just…I don’t know…Taken aback by how different and kind of weird and awkward [it was], but probably not to the same extent as if I was watching it with other people.” David noted that he would not feel the “initial uncomfortableness” he felt while watching it with Denise. He stated, “I wouldn’t have directed it towards my partner being there…I probably would have been like, ‘Ohh!’ you know, my initial reaction would have been…Kind of like amazement…Like, ‘Why am I seeing this on TV?’”

Despite assessing the relationship experience as positive, Edward and Brandon believed they would experience the video differently without their partner. Edward said he would have felt “definitely less uncomfortable” watching the video by himself, as watching it with Bailey made him curious about what she was thinking. “I kind of would have been, you know, like, if it would have just come up on TV or on the computer, or whatever, if I was on it…Kind of like a double take, like ‘What the heck is going on?’, but then I would probably just start laughing.” On the other hand, even though Brandon did not feel any tension while watching the video with his partner, he mentioned, “You know…I would just be… Maybe focus more on the boobs…if I’m being 100% honest.”

Excluding Emma and Bailey (both who assessed the relationship experience with their partners as positive and mentioned they would not experience the video differently if they were alone), participants mentioned that they would experience watching the video differently without their partner. Aside from Brandon, who mentioned he would focus more on the models’ bodies had he been alone, participants commented that if they watched the video alone, they would experience minimal to no discomfort and a
lack of concern for what their partner was thinking. Through these assessments, participants suggested that the discomfort and hyper-awareness of their partners during the video (themes 1 and 2) were specific to their dyadic couple experiences.

Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5 experienced watching the video by feeling uncomfortable and/or shocked, and by being aware of their partners’ responses or reactions to the video. While most participants mentioned they felt discomfort due to the content of the video, some participants (like Camilla and Adam) mentioned that the concern about what their partners were thinking made the experience more uncomfortable. Participants mentioned that these two sensations would be minimal to nonexistent if they would have seen the video alone, which suggests that the first two themes found are specific to the dyadic couple experience, and are the most dominant and common experiences for study couples.

4.3 RQ 3) How, if at all, do individuals perceive sexualized advertising affecting communication with their partners?

Most participants reported perceiving a shift in communication with their partner while watching the video and after watching the video. These changes in communication were mainly reactions to the discomfort and hyper-awareness of the partner. The communication effects are addressed through two themes: 1) Pause in Communication, and 2) Functions of Joking and Laughter, which entails two subthemes: a) Joking and laughter: Managing Tension and b) Joking and laughing: Re-framing the Experience.
4.3.1 Theme #1: Pause in Communication

Four out of 5 couples (Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5) experienced a break or pause in their communication while watching the video. This break led them to either feel discomfort, or was perceived as caused by the discomfort they felt in the moment. Additionally, this pause in communication led to silence. Adam sensed that Anna was uncomfortable and he noticed that there was no communication during the video until Anna made a comment about hair extensions. Anna related, “I would say the first 20 seconds, maybe 15 seconds were dead silent. Part of that was gauging what...Seeing what we were watching.” Charlie also noted that there was a lack of communication, as he mentioned that Camilla did not speak during the video. Charlie stated, “We didn’t really say anything...I said, ‘This is really weird’ and she just kind of nodded her head and stuff like that but she didn’t say much...There wasn’t much communication...We didn’t really look at each other.” Regarding this experience, Camilla noted “We honestly...I don’t think we looked at each other once...I think we just watched the video...I don’t think we made eye contact.”

The presence of silence was also dominant in Denise and David’s experience. Denise mentioned, “We didn’t talk at all during the video, we both just kept our distance and just watched without saying anything...He didn’t really, like, move, like have any non-verbal communication that I saw, and I don’t feel like I did either. We were pretty just, like, still...And watched it.” Additionally, Denise commented that if there would have been conversation, she would have felt less awkwardness in the moment. She concluded, “I feel like...It would probably be less awkward if...we were talking throughout it, and, like, I could know what he was thinking about it...We didn’t
really…look at each other…I don’t know, I mean…I think we were both, like, surprised by what we were seeing.” Like Denise, David also made note of the lack of communication during the video. He stated, “We didn’t say anything…we just watched the video.”

Emma and Edward were conscious of their initial silence while watching the video, though it did not last long. Emma stated, “We weren’t touching or anything…We didn’t say anything…I just giggled…I looked at him once but he didn’t look at me.” Before Emma started giggling, Edward, who described the experience as “a little uncomfortable,” did look at Emma because he was curious what she was thinking. “I was kind of, like, doing glances at her, seeing if, like, what her facial reaction was…but…I didn’t want to be sitting over here, like, gaping at her or something.” Additionally, Edward noted that he pretended to watch the video with minimal facial expressions because he was self-conscious about how Emma would interpret his reaction. He noted, “I’m just like, ‘I’m going to watch that with a straight face.’” Essentially, before Emma giggled, both looked at each other because they sensed awkwardness. Regarding this moment, Emma mentioned, “Maybe he was a little tense.”

Most couples who experienced a pause in their communication while watching the video related the effect to the presence of discomfort/shock and a concern for what the partner was thinking. This demonstrates that for Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5 watching the video, which triggered discomfort and/or shock, temporarily resulted in a halt of momentary silence their conversations. This pause in communication, which was mainly influenced by discomfort, led participants to experience brief moments of verbal and
nonverbal disconnection. For some, this suspension of communication lasted longer than for others.

4.3.2 Theme #2: Functions of Joking and Laughter

Most participants responded with joking and laughter at some point during the study, during or after being exposed to the video. Jokes and laughter were directed towards the partner, and usually regarded the content of the video and how each participant (or the partner) responded to it. This effect occurred after the initial sense of discomfort and pause in conversation that couples experienced. Two subthemes emerged with respect to the functions of joking and laughter for participants used in this study: 1) Joking and laughter: Managing tension, and 2) Joking and laughter: Reframing the experience.

4.3.2.1 Subtheme #1: Joking and laughter: Managing Tension

Those participants who experienced a pause in conversation experienced a moment of tension in communication due to feeling discomfort. This tension triggered participants to respond by laughing, joking or both.

After feeling uncomfortable and experiencing silence, Denise and David began interacting through jokes. David stated, “She looked at me, and just kind of said something along the lines of ’That was interesting’…You know, I made…I guess I made the joke of, you know that would make me want to learn CPR…But I was saying that as a joke.” Denise responded to David’s joke, laughing, “I don’t think that’s really going to teach you how to do CPR, ’cause you’re just, like, distracted watching it.” Camilla noted she felt uncomfortable. Charlie noted that Camilla was quiet and did not respond much, so he made a comment about the video which got them both to laugh. “I said ’This is
really weird’, Charlie stated. Camilla noted, “[Charlie] laughed and he was like ‘That’s weird!’ and I was like, “Yeah, no kidding.”

Emma and Edward laughed and joked during the video, after their initial feelings of discomfort and an exchange of looks to gauge what the other was thinking. Emma noticed Edward felt a little discomfort at the beginning, but she sensed that the discomfort vanished after they started laughing together. “I looked over at him once…He didn’t see me…I laughed…And then that’s when he kind of chuckled, after I did, and then afterwards I think we both laughed…I said something like, ‘You gotta make sure you find the nipples!’ And then he said, ‘Yeah, find the landmines!’” Edward mentioned, “We were laughing and I was making jokes…When they were talking about finding the landmarks, I was like, ‘Yep! Gotta find those landmarks, that’s important.’”

Anna also attributed the break in conversation to feeling uncomfortable, which she responded to by making jokes during the video. Besides making a joke about hair extensions, she noted, “I know that he has a celebrity crush on Carrie Underwood, so I did make a joke about what if it was Carrie Underwood? He would have enjoyed the video, and he did not appreciate that comment.” Adam was conscious of Anna’s jokes, which, according to him, he responded to as “kind of joking about stereotypes and…false expectations.” He described Anna’s jokes as “kind of eye-rolling and joking…Her asking if I liked it…Or if I thought [the models] were attractive.”

Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5 experienced a break of silence in their communication influenced by the discomfort they felt watching the video. These participants relieved the tension associated with silence and discomfort by joking and laughing with one another about the video and each other’s responses. While Emma and Edward’s reactions to
silence (exchanged expressions and laughter) were not voluntary, Denise and Anna mentioned that their initial reactions to silence were purposeful to “break the tension” or make the moment “less serious.”

4.3.2.2 Subtheme #2: Joking and laughter: Re-framing the Experience

Two out of three female participants who reported watching the video as a mostly neutral-negative relationship experience engaged in a voluntary effort to reestablish a connection with their partners through humor. Anna, who mentioned telling jokes during the video stated, “I think after that there was a lighter…It turned from that uncomfortable element to more of the eye-roll, like, that’s kind of where that shifted and our communication during it was almost just like making fun of it a little bit.” She continued, “It was pretty clear that we were both fine after watching it…We were able to make the most of it and not let the uncomfortableness later turn into something that could be negative…I hate uncomfortable silence… So, we changed the topic really quick.” While Anna assessed the experience watching the video with Adam as neutral-negative, Adam assessed it as positive because of “the conversation that came out of it.” Similarly, Denise stated she purposefully laughed at David’s joke to make the experience more comfortable. She mentioned, “I don’t know, I feel like when you laugh it makes it less serious, you’re just like, ‘This is ridiculous’…I think…I laughed at his comment…Kind of like ‘Of course you would say that’…Then, we kind of turned the conversation…he talked about how…he used to know [CPR].”

Edward mentioned that he felt that the laughing and jokes made the experience better. When describing this, he stated, “It’s awkward at first, but then just, when you both embrace it, it’s not anymore…I think we always just make it into a positive
[experience]...we rarely ever have negative conversations.” Regarding their ability to laugh together during the video, Emma mentioned, “I don’t think it did anything negative to our relationship...I think it’s more positive because it shows that we’re both open about it and are okay talking about it.” She concluded, “I think it was positive to see that...none of us were like ‘Oh, we shouldn’t be watching this…Because I laughed, and I don’t think he was like ‘Oh my God, I shouldn’t be watching this…She’s gonna kill me for watching this!’ or anything like that.” Additionally, Emma commented that after laughter and joking, they re-framed the conversation to talk about Edward’s experience with CPR working in the medical field. Although it seemed to be more natural for Emma and Edward to laugh, there was a distinct desire to re-frame the experience into something positive for both, which Edward referred to as a way to “embrace” a moment that “brings you closer” to your partner “because it opens up doors.”

Although he did not voluntarily make comments to his partner to neutralize any perceived negative effects, Camilla sensed that Charlie laughed and commented after the video as a way to shield them both from discomfort and make the situation better. She recalled, “We both went, ‘Oh?’; kind of like a surprise ‘Oh?’; so it was, I don’t know if that was like a defense mechanism...But [then] it was just more humorous for both of us.”

This last theme sequentially connects to the previous theme about communication: Those couples who sensed discomfort experienced a pause in communication, which added to the tension. Those individuals reacted to tension by breaking the silence mainly by joking and laughing about the video. Following the release of tension, most couples used laughing and joking as a way to re-frame the
experience into something less tense and more positive. For those couples that sensed tension, jokes and laughter led them to neutralize any perceived negative effects, or for Emma and Edward, it led to a positive experience. Lastly, it is important to note that Bailey and Brandon did not experience tension; they made their experience into a “bonding” one by joking and laughing from the beginning. Like Emma and Edward, they both assessed the relationship as positive due to their ability to “laugh throughout the whole thing.”

In terms of communication, 4 out of 5 couples experienced and noticed silence. Some participants reported that this happened due to discomfort, others mentioned it added more discomfort. This pause in communication (due to tension and/or followed by more tension) then triggered joking and laughter. This seemed to be the most prevalent communication effect couples experienced. Eight out of 10 participants experienced a sense of discomfort while watching the video with their partner. This discomfort created tension due to a concern for what one’s partner was feeling, other times due to a negative perception of the video, and sometimes both. Individuals who felt discomfort also experienced a shift in communication during the video as they felt tension in the form of silence caused by a pause in their communication. As previously mentioned, this triggered immediate verbal and non-verbal reactions centered around joking and laughing as a way to release the tension. Joking and laughter was also instrumentally maintained to re-frame the experience by lessening the discomfort and improving the experience (or as a way to maintain an already established positive experience).
While both partners in Couples 2 and 5 assessed the experience as positive (because they laughed and talked throughout the video with their partners, even if Couple 5 sensed tension), the rest of the 3 female participants assessed the experience as neutral-negative (Anna, Camilla, and Denise), while their male counterparts (Adam, Charlie and David) assessed the experience as positive-neutral, neutral, and neutral, respectively. All three of these male participants based their “neutral” relationship assessments on the fact that their partners did not appear to be upset after the experience was re-framed. This reflects that for those couples in which female participants felt at least some negativity from the experience (Couples 1, 3, and 4), their partners’ assessments of the experience differed. To conclude, every couple had a slightly different experience, but discomfort, a hyper-awareness of partner’s reaction, a pause/tension in communication released by laughing and joking (and consequently improving the experience by laughing and joking) seemed to be a reaction pattern. Couples 1, 3, 4, and 5 experienced all of these effects. While this was not part of the experience, it is worth re-mentioning that as addressed in RQ1, 9 out of 10 individuals also expressed an awareness of how sexualized media is perceived differently as a female and/or a male, and some acknowledged that their perceptions of sexualized media shaped part of their experience.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Participants’ Biological Sex-Based Responses to Sexualized Media

As mentioned in Chapter 2, multiple studies have suggested that women and men respond to sexualized media differently, often leading women to react negatively to and feel offended by it, while men tend to be attracted to it and react favorably (Tafflinger, 1996; Reichert, 2002; Liu et al., 2009). The findings in this study align with the literature, as 4 out of 5 female participants reported having negative perceptions of sexualized media, feeling offended and/or having had experienced negative effects. On that note, 3 out of those 4 female participants had a negative reaction to the study video because they were aware of the “detrimental” effects of sexualized media on women. On the other hand, 4 out of 5 male participants mentioned that the video had attracted them and/or grabbed their attention because of the sexualized content, which, to one male participant, resembled “soft porn.”

5.1.1.1 Sexualized Media Effects on Female Participants

Previous research indicates that exposure to sexualized media can lead women to experience self-consciousness and negative self-worth (Dens et al., 2009), and more body surveillance and self-objectification (Ward et al., 2016). Similarly, female participants commented on the “harmful” and “detrimental” effects of sexualized media on women. Four female participants reported having a negative perception of sexualized advertising. These perceptions were shared by referring to sexualized
advertising as “unnecessary” and “ridiculous,” and “harmful.” Female participants also commented on different concerns and experiences with sexualized media regarding the sexualization and objectification of the female body, and how portrayals of the “perfect body” can hinder women’s self-esteem and positive body image, often leading women to compare their bodies to those portrayed in the media, and feel self-conscious about their own bodies. Similarly, Harper and Tiggeman (2008) and Halliwell et al. (2011) conclude that exposure to advertising images that portray “idealized” female bodies (deemed as attractive by participants) lead women to self-objectify, compare themselves with other women’s bodies and experience anxiety about their physical appearance. As Camilla stated, sexualized advertising often makes her feel insecure. When she sees Victoria’s Secret advertisements, she thinks to herself, “Wow! Look at her legs, look at her calves, look at her abs! That’s definitely not me.”

5.1.1.2 Sexualized Media Effects on Male Participants

Several studies indicate that men respond to sexualized information in advertising positively with excitement, arousal and lust (Reichert, 2002, Dahl et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2009; Dahl et al., 2011). The conclusions from these studies align with the responses male participants had. All male participants mentioned that in some way or another, they were visually stimulated by the video, reflecting how it affected their attention. This led Brandon and Adam to experience some level of lust, as Brandon stated that he would “focus more on the boobs” if he saw the video alone, and Adam insinuated that being attracted to the “blonde…attractive” women in the advertisement is just “how a guy’s brain works.” Several participants reported feeling “surprised” or “shocked” by the video. This effect resonates with Reichert et al.’s (2001) study, which
concludes that sex appeal advertising works primarily through an attention-grabbing effect that primarily occurs as an emotional response before any cognitive processing occurs. Reichert (2002) states that this attention-grabbing power is especially powerful for men, often leading to arousal and lust. On that note, most male participants noticed that the video captured their visual attention to the point where they could not pay attention to the CPR procedures explained in the video, and Charlie deemed the video ineffective because it was “too over-sexualized.” David called the video “sexually provocative,” and stated that it caught his attention to the point where he could not focus on the CPR procedures explained at all. These reactions can be explained by the idea that sexualized media can sometimes trigger cognitive overload (Lombardot, 2007; Reichert et al., 2011), meaning that it can hinder cognitive processes due to too much visual sexualized stimuli.

5.1.1.3 Sexualized Media and Partner Objectification

A couple of studies suggest that exposure to sexualized media leads to partner-objectification (Van Nostrum & Van de Laar, 2008, Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Adam mentioned that showing attractive women in the media can lead men to have “unattainable” standards for future or current partners, Van Nostrum & Van de Laar’s (2008) study found that exposure to sexualized media led male participants to experience a higher discrepancy between “ideal” partner standards and current partner standards. Similarly, because Adam noted that watching sexualized commercials could lead men to compare their partners’ physical attractiveness to models in advertisements, his assessment would align with Zurbriggen et al.’s (2011) study that
concludes that exposure to sexualized media can lead men to objectify their partners, making cognitive adjustments about their physical appearance.

As mentioned in previous literature, most participants showed a strong awareness of sexualized media effects, especially noting how women and men respond differently. These perceptions of sexualized advertising influenced how participants experienced the video, and how they responded to it with their partners.

5.2 Findings: Connections to the 2015 Observation Study

The themes that emerged from this study align with the findings from the 2015 observation study, in which couples walking by a Victoria’s Secret storefront reacted by having breaks in their conversations, verbal and non-verbal reactions and distraction from one another (Gimenez, 2015). This study extends these findings through a phenomenological approach aiming to understand how couples experience sexualized advertising in the presence of their partners, as well as the communication effects from their experiences.

5.2.1 Breaks in Conversations

Just like the majority of the couples observed who had breaks in their conversation as they walked by Victoria’s Secret, 4 out of 5 couples in this study experienced a pause in their communication, leading to moments of silence and discomfort. While the observation study could not conclude why this occurred, participants in this study mentioned that they mostly experienced silence due to feeling discomfort and shock, which led to moments that felt “uncomfortable,” “awkward” or “weird.” The constant, in all these instances, was discomfort. For most participants, the sexualized information in the video triggered a sense of discomfort, which led to a break
in their communication with their partners. This, in some cases, added more discomfort for participants.

5.2.2 Verbal and Non-Verbal Reactions

In the observation study, couples had verbal and non-verbal reactions to one another, such as looking at each other while walking by the advertisements, changing their body language, or commenting something to the partner, sometimes with laughter. Similarly, in this study, as participants watched the video, they reported looking at their partner as they were wondering what they were thinking, making comments to one another as “jokes,” and reacting to the video by giggling and laughter and eye-rolls. Just like the observed couples, whose verbal and non-verbal reactions followed the breaks in conversations, participants were conscious that they reacted to tension by laughing and joking. According to most participants, because of the sexualized nature of the video, it felt especially “awkward to watch” in the presence of their partners. This also triggered a concern for what their partners were thinking.

5.2.3 Distraction

As couples walked by Victoria’s Secret, they became visually distracted from one another. Individuals turned around to look at the advertisements several times or distanced themselves from their partners to look at the images more intently. Not many interviewees (other than one male participant) mentioned they felt or acted distracted during this study. David, however, did mention that the video made him feel “distracted more than anything,” which caused his initial sense of discomfort and awareness of Denise to vanish due to an inability to focus on anything other than the video. It is possible that distraction was not a perceived effect for most participants because they
were instructed to watch the video together, sitting down in a controlled environment, as opposed to being in a natural setting where they could move, physically distance themselves from their partner, or look in another direction.

The themes that emerged from this study are an extension of the themes from the 2015 study. Through a focus on participants’ experiences, this study adds context to the observations, as participants described how they internalized the experience, and defined how they interacted with their partners. In both studies, silence and reactions to silence were dominant themes. Through a phenomenological focus, it was found that participants experienced a pause in communication that caused or were a result of silence and tension, which then led to reactions to tension, most commonly laughing and joking with one another. This, then led to a re-framing of the experience into something more positive.

5.3 Discomfort: A Cyclical Effect

As mentioned, participants noted that they experienced discomfort and a hyper-awareness of partner reaction. Nine out of 10 participants stated that they would experience the moment differently if they were alone or with others, making discomfort and partner awareness factors emerging from the relationship context.

Participants mentioned that discomfort and partner awareness happened simultaneously. Both discomfort and partner awareness were interconnected effects, as each triggered the other. For example, Camilla mentioned that she felt discomfort because of the sexualized content of the video, and that during the video, she wondered if her partner was visually stimulated by the video, which in turn, caused her to be self-conscious about how he perceived she was feeling. She also stated, “I think some of
the uncomfort [sic]…Came from him wondering what I was thinking.” David also felt simultaneous “initial uncomfortableness” as he recalled, “When it first popped up…A woman in lingerie…I immediately thought about Denise in the room.”

All participants who felt discomfort and experienced a hyper-awareness of their partners’ also reported a period of dyadic silence. This pause in communication was attributed to the discomfort and partner awareness (which triggered one another). For participants, silence added to the feelings of discomfort. Anna, who mentioned she felt discomfort also referred to this pause of communication as “uncomfortable silence.” Similarly, Denise mentioned that if there would have been communication during the video (and if she would have known what David was thinking), she would have felt “less awkward.”

5.3.1 The Discomfort Cycle Effect

Discomfort and partner awareness were activated by one another, triggering silence. Silence, then added more discomfort. This secondary discomfort then augmented the pause in communication, which was conceived as an “awkward silence.”

![Diagram of the Discomfort Cycle Effect]

**FIGURE 8**

THE DISCOMFORT CYCLE EFFECT
5.4 Framing the Experience using Knapp’s (1978) Relationship Development Model: Coming Apart, then Coming (Back) Together

As mentioned, three participants assessed their relationship as Integrating and seven as Bonding, the most intimate stages of escalation in Knapp’s (1978) Relationship Development Model. During the Integrating and Bonding stages, partners reach the deepest levels of intimacy, and the most breadth and depth in communication (Knapp, 1978). Couples in the Integrating stage have mutual self-disclosure in communication and a realization that they have the same values, interests, and opinions on things, often “fusing” their personalities together (Knapp, 1978; Knapp, 2004). The Bonding stage is characterized by enacting a social collective identity (such as getting engaged or announcing, “We are a couple”) based on a long-term commitment. In this last escalation stage, couples have continuous self-disclosure and continuous breadth and depth in communication, especially regarding the state of the relationship as partners constantly seek to maintain or improve the relationship (Knapp, 2004; Hall et al., 2013). Because individuals assessed their relationship as Integrating or Bonding, it meant that that they perceived their relationship to have mutual self-disclosure, intimacy, a collective social identity, and effective breadth and depth in communication prior to watching the video.

5.4.1 A Momentary De-escalation: Coming Apart

While the stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart tend to occur sequentially, Knapp states that movement between stages, between escalation and de-escalation, can occur at any given moment (Knapp, 1978; Knapp, 2004). This, for example, means that a couple at a Bonding stage can easily move to a Circumscribing...
stage after a fight. In a matter of days, the couple might move to an Avoiding stage, arresting their communication and purposefully avoiding being around one another. Based on the self-assessments and the interview data, 4 out of 5 couples experienced a brief de-escalation in their relationships.

5.4.2 Differentiation

Knapp states, “Movement [between and within stages] may be facilitated by certain situational features (Knapp, 2004, p. 51). Watching the video led couples to experience discomfort, and a pause in their conversations. Camilla, for example, mentioned that her immediate reaction while watching the video with Charlie was to feel insecure about her body, which she connected to her awareness of “detrimental” effects of sexualized media on women. This led Camilla to experience discomfort, which she also attributed to a concern that Charlie would find the models attractive. In this moment, Camilla, who assessed her relationship as Integrating, experienced Differentiation in that she perceived her experience of the video as different from Charlie’s. This led to a temporary moment of “uncomfortable” silence. Similarly, Adam differentiated how he, as a male, experienced the video from how he perceived Anna experienced it, noting that males are attracted to the stereotypically attractive women depicted in the video, while he knew and worried that Anna would feel “irritated” when comparing herself to the models in the video; this led to his discomfort watching the video. Like Camilla and Adam, most individuals who experienced the Discomfort Cycle Effect (Figure 8), noticed that their partners experienced the video differently.

Differentiating is the first de-escalating stage of Coming Apart, and it occurs as individuals notice that their partner’s character is distinct or different from their own as
they become conscious of different values, thoughts and opinions (Knapp, 1978). Knapp states, “Just as integrating is mainly a process of fusion, differentiating is mainly a process of disengaging or uncoupling (Knapp, 2004, p.43). Through feeling discomfort and partner awareness, most individuals realized that their partner experienced the video differently. For example, Denise, who did not enjoy watching the video and called it “unnecessary,” “awkward” and “ridiculous,” noticed that her partner was distracted and most likely “turned on” by the video. This made Denise feel more discomfort as she realized that the video “brings pleasure” to David, but not to her. Denise, like most participants, noticed that her partner experienced the video differently. Through an awareness of their partner’s reaction, the participants who experienced the Discomfort Cycle Effect realized that their experience was different than their partner’s, therefore moving to a momentary de-escalation in their relationship that is best described as the Differentiating Stage (Knapp, 1978).

5.4.2.1 Differentiation: An Awareness of Different Biological Sex-Based Responses to Sexualized Media

When describing their realization that their partner experienced the video differently, participants noted that they were aware that women and men respond to sexualized media differently. For example, while Adam mentioned that men tend to have different expectations from their partners due to the influence of sexualized media, he noted that he knew Anna was comparing herself to the models in the video because, according to Adam, “A lot of women compare themselves to ads they see…It’s human nature to do that.” Similarly, Emma noted that she sensed an initial sense of discomfort and differentiation in how she and Edward experienced the video as she noted, “I am
not interested in women, so, it’s nothing bad if I look at another woman…. For him, he might have felt different because it’s two women…and he’s interested in women.”

As mentioned, several studies have suggested that women and men respond to sexualized media differently, as men tend to be attracted to it, while women tend to be offended by it (Tafflinger, 1996; Reichert, 2002, Liu et al., 2009;2011). The temporary de-escalation that occurred as couples moved to the Differentiating Stage (Knapp, 1978) was due to the realization that as part of being in a heterosexual relationship, participants’ perceptions and experiences of the video differed from their partners’ due to their awareness of gender-sensitive responses to sexualized advertising.

As participants de-escalated to a momentary Differentiating Stage, they experienced tension due to the silence induced by the Discomfort Cycle Effect, which created a moment of constricted communication. As mentioned, it is important to note that this occurred in relation to individual’s perceptions of sexualized media, which appeared to have an influence on how they experienced the video with their partners, with participants often noting how the opposite sex perceived sexualized information differently. While this did not create conflict, it did trigger breaks in communication, causing more discomfort and tension.

5.4.3 Managing Tension and Re-Framing the Experience: A Desire for Equilibrium

Knapp argues that because relationships are fluid, they tend to fluctuate through moments in closeness and intimacy, leading to movement between and within stages to avoid a total disintegration of the relationship. This movement, whether forward or backward, is influenced by a desire to maintain a balance (Knapp, 1978). Knapp states,
“We constantly try to arrest possible disintegration by achieving some steady state of equilibrium. This might involve brief forays into communication more characteristic of other stages, while generally maintaining the interaction within a given stage” (Knapp, 1978, p. 34).

While couples who experienced the Discomfort Cycle Effect de-escalated for a moment, they adopted strategies for overcoming the discomfort by making jokes and laughing. Joking and laughter occurred primarily as a reaction to tension—Emma, for example, recalled sensing, as she experienced the Discomfort Cycle, that Edward was also uncomfortable when she looked at him. She then giggled, which caused him to giggle. Similarly, David noticed that Denise was quiet, so after the video he made a joke to her, “Makes you want to learn CPR.” She then giggled, which also caused him to giggle. This release of tension through joking and laughter led to a secondary reaction.

As a secondary reaction, joking and laughter were used as a strategy to re-frame the experience into a more positive moment. As Denise mentioned, she laughed at David’s comment because she thought that laughing made the moment “less serious.” Similarly, by releasing the tension by making jokes and changing the topic, Anna noted that she continued joking because she realized that it made the situation less uncomfortable. She recalled, “That’s kind of where that shifted and our communication during it was kind of just like making fun of it a little bit.”

Joking and laughing served as a strategy to move, once again, back to a stage of Coming Together, as participants reached for equilibrium as a purposeful desire to diminish tension and improve the experience. Although Adam experienced discomfort and tension watching the video with Anna, he assessed the experience as positive
“because of the conversation that came out of it.” Similarly, Edward said it was a positive experience, as he recalled, “I think we always make it into a positive [experience]...we rarely ever have negative conversations.” Like Adam and Edward, most participants felt tension, yet they re-framed the experience by laughing and joking, which led to reconnection and re-integration. Similarly, Anna, Camilla and Denise, who assessed the situation of viewing the video together as neutral-negative mentioned that what kept the situation from being completely negative was that they were able to feel comfortable with their partners again after feeling uncomfortable. Anna recalled, “It was pretty clear that we were both fine after watching it...We were able to make the most of it and not let the uncomfortableness later turn into something that could be negative.”

The diagram above (Figure 9) demonstrates the sequential movement of the Discomfort Cycle Effect (which led couples to experience the Differentiating stage), the

![Diagram](image-url)
release of tension through jokes and laughter, and the use of jokes and laughter to re-calibrate the relationship by re-framing the experience into a more positive one (termed “The Equilibrium Effect”). It is possible that this effect occurred due to couples already having had experienced the Integrating and Bonding stages, as the Bonding Stage is especially characterized by communication to improve or maintain the relationship; therefore, it is possible that individuals felt motivated to maintain or improve the relationship to avoid conflict, motivating a relational movement back to a stage of Coming Together.

Overall, the ways in which participants experienced watching the video with their partners seemed to be tainted by their experiences and perceptions of sexualized media, which fundamentally differed based on their biological sex. Four out of 5 couples experienced the Discomfort Cycle Effect (simultaneously reporting discomfort, an awareness of the partner in the moment, and silence), which led to general reactions of tension release through laughing and joking. Laughing and joking, as communication strategies, were then used to improve the experience by making the experience more positive, whether it was by making fun of the video, switching topics of conversations, or continuing laughing together. In terms of Knapp’s Relationship Development Model, most couples moved from an escalating stage of Coming Together before the video (Integrating and Bonding), to a de-escalating stage of Coming Apart as they went through the Discomfort Cycle Effect (Differentiating). This, then, motivated a desire for Equilibrium (The Equilibrium Effect) by neutralizing negative effects, and/or making the relationship experience positive through jokes and laughter, participants were able to move back to a moment of escalation.
5.5 Future Research

There are several areas for future research. To begin with, as this was an exploratory study, it could be followed up by replicating this study using homogenous groups of couples who had been together for different periods of time and who reported themselves at different stages of coming together. Similarly, future research could incorporate nonverbal reactions and communication by using observation through video recording of couples to complement couple self-reports. Also, because this was an unexpected finding, and because research has indicated that couples with high relationship satisfaction use laughter as a conflict management strategy (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008), future research could focus specifically on the strategies of joking and laughter used by romantic couples in escalating relationships when managing tension elicited from experiencing sexualized media together.

Even though this study was designed primarily as a communications study, it touched on a seemingly unexplored media effects research topic: relationship effects. Follow up studies could further explore the dyadic romantic relationship effects of consuming different kinds of sexualized media together, especially since discomfort appeared to be the most recurring effect in 4 out of 5 couples. Lastly, this study could be extended by doing a triangulation of methods to explore couples’ experiences with sexualized advertising through interviews and a comparison of their responses with measured levels of discomfort through post-experiment relationship assessments.

5.6 Conclusion

This thesis was inspired by results of an observation study that concluded that exposure to sexualized advertising leads to a change in romantic relationship dynamics
and communication. Observations indicated that breaks in communication, verbal and non-verbal reactions, and distraction were common reactions as couples walked by a Victoria’s Secret store (Gimenez, 2015). Through a phenomenological approach, the current study found that for participants in this study, there was, indeed, a romantic relationship effect from exposure to sexualized media involving discomfort, tension and reactions to tension. Through recalling their own experiences with sexualized media, participants expressed that they are aware that as women, or as men, they respond differently to sexualized information. The female participants reported having negative reactions to it, while the male participants noted that they were visually attracted. Female and male partners also noted these differing reactions in one another. It is also important to note that female participants reported they would experience some degree of discomfort whether viewing the video with their partners or alone. On the other hand, male participants acknowledged a visual attraction to the video, but their experiences with discomfort varied when reflecting on watching the video alone or with their partners.

This study begins to shed light into a gap in the existing research by illuminating the potential relationship between sexualized media effects and romantic relationships, specifically showing that there is a dyadic romantic relationship media effect that for the heterosexual couples in this study, triggered discomfort and tension followed by communication changes to reestablish connection. This understudied research area deserves further attention, because as sexualized advertising becomes more ubiquitous and normalized, negative impacts on relationships due to gender variances in interpretation have the potential to negatively impact intimacy and connection between
romantic partners. While the couples in this study were able to reestablish connection through humor and joking following initial tension and discomfort leading to the Differentiating stage of Coming Apart (Knapp, 1978), it is possible that less skilled couples might have experienced negative communication and relationship impacts of exposure to sexualized advertising. The findings from this study have various applications, not only for marketers and advertisers who focus on sex appeal advertising and sexualized media effects, but also for couples’ therapists and communication consultants who assist individuals and couples in building strong, healthy romantic relationships, as they demonstrate an understudied relationship phenomenon.

As most participants noted, exposure to sexualized media, especially advertising, has become normalized in U.S. culture. It is not uncommon to experience sexualized information while watching television shows or commercials, while surfing the internet or even just by taking a stroll at the mall. It is also not uncommon that at some point, romantic partners experience sexualized advertising together. Because the perceived normalization and effects of sexualized media influenced a sense of tension in participants’ experiences, the findings from this study integrates two areas of research, signifying both a media effect and a romantic relationship effect.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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APPENDIX A

ADVERTISING IMAGES USED IN LITERATURE REVIEW

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RECRUITMENT MATERIAL FOR INTERVIEWS

RQ1-How do participants in this study perceive sexualized media in general?
   - Please describe how you feel about sexualized media.

RQ2-How do individuals describe the experience of being in the presence of sexualized advertising with their partners?
   - What did you think about the video you just watched?
     o How did the video make you feel?
     o How do you think the video made your partner feel?
   - Please describe what it was like for you to watch the video with your partner.
   - How might you have experienced this video differently had you been alone?
   - If you had to describe the experience of watching the video with your partner as a positive, neutral or negative relationship experience, which description would you choose and why?

RQ3-How, if at all, do individuals perceive sexualized advertising affecting communication with their partner?
   - How would you describe your communication with your partner today prior to coming to this experiment?
   - What was your communication with your partner like while watching the video? (Probe: verbal and non-verbal)
   - What was your communication with your partner like immediately after viewing the video? (Probe: verbal and non-verbal)
   - What kind of comments, if any, did you and your partner make to each other while you were watching the video?
     o immediately after watching the video?
   - What kind of looks, if any, did you and your partner exchange while watching the video and after watching the video?
   - Do you feel like you can openly and honestly tell your partner your thoughts and feelings regarding the video?
     o Why or why not?
APPENDIX C

IRB RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

(Recruitment flyer and interview script)

Recruitment Flyer

ARE YOU IN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP?

ARE YOU CURIOUS ABOUT SEXUALIZED ADVERTISING EFFECTS?

We need your help!

We are conducting a research study about the impact of sexualized advertising on couple communication dynamics, a topic that has not been previously researched.

We hope to learn how heterosexual romantic couples communicate in the presence of sexualized advertising with one another, and how sexualized advertising affects couples’ relationship dynamics in the moment they collectively perceive an advertisement with sexualized content.

We are looking for couples in their twenties and thirties who do not live together and who have been in a relationship for 6 months to 4 years.

You and your partner will be asked to watch a brief sexualized advertising video together. Then, you will answer questions in separate, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. The interviews will take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour.

INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING?
CALL, TEXT OR E-MAIL
MARCELA GIMENEZ CLOUGH
MDGIMENEZ@SHOCKERS.WICHITA.EDU
(316)305-4399
Interview Script

Hello, my name is Marcela Gimenez Clough and I represent Wichita State University as a graduate student in the Master of Communication program from the Elliott School of Communication. I appreciate your willingness to participate in my research. This study will examine the effects of sexualized advertising on romantic couple communication. You were selected for participation in this study based on participant criteria, which entails being in a romantic relationship for 6 months to 4 years, and not living with your significant other.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our study. These procedures are also mentioned in the consent form. If you are receiving class credit, please write down your name in the sheet enclosed in the envelope, and place the sheet back in the envelope. I will ask you to read the consent form, ask questions if you have any, and sign them. Next, you will fill out a demographic form, which contains generic demographic information such as your age, ethnicity and biological sex. The demographic form also contains a relationship development assessment, entails indicating one out of ten descriptions that best describes your relationship. This will not take more than 5 minutes. Before beginning interviews, you will both be asked to watch a video together. The length of this video is 1 minute and 5 seconds. You will then be separated from your partner for individual interviews in separate rooms. I will conduct the interviews with the females, and Patrick Clough will conduct the interviews with the males. Patrick Clough is a graduate from the Wichita State University School of
Engineering, and he works as a Stress Engineer. With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded.

This interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

Please read and sign the consent form.

Do you have any questions about it before we begin?

Do we have your permission to audio record the interviews?
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a research study about the impact of sexualized advertising on romantic couple communication. We hope to learn how heterosexual romantic couples communicate in the presence of sexualized advertising with one another, and how sexualized advertising affects couples’ relationship dynamics in the moment they collectively perceive an advertisement with sexualized content.

**Participant Selection:** You were selected as a participant in this study because you meet the participant recruitment criteria. Participant criteria targeted heterosexual romantic couples in their twenties or thirties who do not live together and who have been in a romantic relationship for 6 months to 4 years. Approximately 30 participants (15 couples) will participate in this study.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you decide to participate, after signing this consent form, you will:

1) Be asked to fill out a demographic information form, which includes a relationship assessment. The relationship assessment contains 10 relationship descriptions. You will be asked to circle the description that best describes your relationship in this moment. This initial step will be used to complement the data collected from semi-structured interviews. Completing this step will not take more than 5 minutes.

2) Upon completion of the relationship assessment and demographic information, you and your partner will watch a sexualized advertising video. The video entails partially nude female models (with certain body parts covered in clothing) behaving in an eroticized manner to promote a branded product, hence the sexualized nature of the video. The purpose of showing this video will be for you to have exposure to sexualized advertising with your partner, as the interviewers will ask you questions about this experience. This step will take around 2 minutes.

3) You will be separated from your partner for an individual interview in a separate room with an interviewer of the same sex. The interview will entail a conversational discussion between you and the interviewer about the experience of watching the video with your partner. The interview will cover 16 questions and will take 30 minutes to 1 hour. With your permission, we would like to record the interview with an audio recorder. Here are some sample questions from the interview:
   a. What do you think about the video you just watched?
   b. Please describe what it was like for you to watch the video with your partner.

**Discomfort/Risks:** The risk involved in this study is minimal. However, there is a risk that the video may cause discomfort because of the sexualized content. Because you will be...
asked questions about your relationship and what it was like to watch the video with your partner, the interview questions may also cause discomfort. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you may skip it.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, in order to make sure the study is done properly and safely there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the research team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;

The researchers may publish the results of the study. If they do, they will only discuss study results. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

All audio recordings from interviews will be deleted from the recording devices after transcriptions are completed. Upon completion of the study, all electronic files of the audio recordings, including notes taken during interviews, will be deleted from the researcher’s computer. A copy of transcriptions will be kept in a secure, lockable filing cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s office for 5 years. By April of 2022, five years after the estimated completion of the study, the files will be securely destroyed.

Payment to Subjects (ONLY include if applicable):

If you are an Elliott School of Communication student, you may receive extra credit or class credit, as determined by your instructor. If you choose not to participate, your instructor may offer you an alternative activity for equivalent credit. Please consult with your instructor.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research study, you can contact us at:

Marcela Gimenez Clough
mdgimenez@shockers.wichita.edu
(316) 305-4399
Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch  
1845 Fairmount St., Wichita, KS 67260  
deborah.ballard-reisch@wichita.edu  
(316) 978-6066  

If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

• You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
• You are aware that this is a research study,
• You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
• You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

____________________________________________________  
Printed Name of Subject  

____________________________________________________  
Signature of Subject  

_______________________  
Date
In addition to agreeing to participate, your signature below indicates that you consent to having your interview audio recorded.

____________________________________________________
Printed Name of Subject

____________________________________________________
Signature of Subject

_______________________
Date

____________________________________________________
Printed Name of Witness

____________________________________________________
Witness Signature

_______________________
Date
APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT FORM

COUPLE # ________

What is your age? ____ years

How do you identify your biological sex? __________

What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)
___ African American
___ Asian or Pacific Islander
___ Latino or Hispanic
___ Native American or Alaska Native
___ White or European
___ Other (Please list): ______________________

How long have you and your partner been together?
Please circle 1 description that best describes your relationship with your partner:

Whatever communication exists involves language that increases the distance between us (e.g. changing to an unlisted phone number) as well as language that disassociates us from the other person (i.e. talk that focuses on how the other will survive without us). Our statements seem to include summaries or closures to the relationship indicating that we do not want to see this person again.

We are beginning the process of experimenting—trying to discover the unknown. We exchange demographic information and our conversation often seems controlled by a norm that says "If you tell me your hometown. I'll tell you mine." Small talk is the key means of communicating here. This relationship is generally pleasant, relaxed, uncritical, casual, and full of questions.

Communication is specifically designed to avoid the possibility of face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction. The overriding message seems to be: "I am not interested in seeing you; I am not interested in building a relationship; and I would like to close the communication channels between us."

We have a good amount of personal disclosure and we have begun to get a glimpse of some previously withheld secrets. We disclose about a lot of things, and often about how our relationship is developing. We have begun to speak more informally. We say "we" and express our commitment directly (such as saying, "I really like you" or "We work well together."). As we begin to get close, we do so with caution, waiting for confirmation before proceeding.

We now exchange less information overall and less personal information. We each try to control topics of discussion, restricting communication to safe areas (i.e., those that won't start fights). However, a theme underlying the relationship is: "In spite of our differences, I still like you."

We've just recently met (or I'd like to meet this person). As I scan him/her I am deciding whether he/she is "attractive" or "unattractive" and deciding whether to initiate communication. I am thinking: "I see you, I am friendly, and I want to open channels for communication to take place."

The major focus of the conversation is on how different we are from each other. We talk about these differences and how little we seem to have in common. These differences may be related to attitudes, interests, personality, relatives, or friends. Our conflict leads to fighting and disagreements.
Our two individual personalities are almost fused or blended. Our verbal and nonverbal communication shows that we are alike. We dress alike, have the same interests, and others begin to treat us as a "couple." When they invite us places, they invite us both. We're as close as family members often are.

Rather than communicate orally, we conduct covert (in the head) dialogues knowing how the conversation will end. The main theme is "There is little sense bringing anything up because I know what will happen, and it won't be particularly pleasant." Communication is guarded and the relationship is at a standstill.

In a public ritual, we have announced to the world that a commitment has been formally contracted. It is during this stage that we become engaged, get married, go into business together, or move in together. Communication is at its highest level and often we don't even have to talk because we know each other so well. Our families and friends are blended.
Table 3
Relationship Stage Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiating</td>
<td>We’ve just recently met (or I’d like to meet this person). As I scan him/her I am deciding whether he/she is “attractive” or “unattractive” and deciding whether to initiate communication. I am thinking: “I see you, I am friendly, and I want to open channels for communication to take place.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
<td>We are beginning the process of experimenting—trying to discover the unknown. We exchange demographic information and our conversation often seems controlled by a norm that says “If you tell me your hometown, I’ll tell you mine.” Small talk is the key means of communicating here. This relationship is generally pleasant, relaxed, uncritical, casual, and full of questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensifying</td>
<td>We have a good amount of personal disclosure and we have begun to get a glimpse of some previously withheld secrets. We disclose about a lot of things, and often about how our relationship is developing. We have begun to speak more informally. We say “we,” and express our commitment directly (such as saying “I really like you” or “We work well together.”) As we begin to get close, we do so with caution, waiting for confirmation before proceeding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating</td>
<td>Our two individual personalities are almost fused or blended. Our verbal and nonverbal communication shows that we are alike. We dress alike, have the same interests, and others begin to treat us as a “couple.” When they invite us places, they invite us both. We’re as close as family members often are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>In a public ritual, we have announced to the world that a commitment has been formally contracted. It is during this stage that we become engaged, get married, go into business together, or move in together. Communication is at its highest level and often we don’t even have to talk because we know each other so well. Our families and friends are blended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiating</td>
<td>The major focus of the conversation is on how different we are from each other. We talk about these differences and how little we seem to have in common. These differences may be related to attitudes, interests, personality, relatives, or friends. Our conflict leads to fighting and disagreements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumscribing</td>
<td>We now exchange less information overall and less personal information. We each try to control topics of discussion, restricting communication to safe areas (i.e., those that won’t start fights). However, a theme underlying the relationship is: “in spite of our differences, I still like you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stagnating</td>
<td>Rather than communicate orally, we conduct covert (in the head) dialogues knowing how the conversation will end. The main theme is “There is little sense bringing anything up because I know what will happen, and it won’t be particularly pleasant.” Communication is guarded and the relationship is at a standstill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>Communication is specifically designed to avoid the possibility of face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction. The overriding message seems to be: “I am not interested in seeing you; I am not interested in building a relationship; and I would like to close the communication channels between us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminating</td>
<td>Whatever communication exists involves language that increases the distance between us (e.g., changing to an unlisted phone number) as well as language that dissociates us from the other person (i.e., talk that focuses on how the other will survive without us). Our statements seem to include summaries or closures to the relationship indicating that we do not want to see this person again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX G

DIAGRAMS OF CATEGORIES, THEMES AND SUB-THEMES PER RESEARCH QUESTION
APPENDIX G (continued)