"IT'S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY…":

EXPLORING SEXUAL STORYTELLING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Thesis

by

ASHLEY SPINOZZI

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2011

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,   Barbara F. Sharf
Committee Members,   Michael T. Stephenson
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ABSTRACT

"It's Kind of a Funny Story…": Exploring Sexual Storytelling among College Students.

(August 2011)

Ashley Spinozzi, B.A., The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Barbara F. Sharf

Sexual health among college students is in jeopardy. College aged men and women face risks associated with sexuality because of college attendance and gender. Through storytelling, college students convey their sexual experiences to their friends and peers, though this process is predominantly focused on the narrator rather than the listener. I investigated how this storytelling influences those who listen to stories through focus groups, using the theory of Communication Privacy Management and grounded theory to understand focus group results. The results revealed themes regarding the context in which storytelling occurs, how storytelling affects listeners, and how listeners interpret the motivation of the narrator. Communication context and communication influence were similar for males and females while perception of narrator motivation differed based on gender. Participants perceived motivation to be highly related to reputation, truth, and relationship status. Additionally, participants reported being impacted by listening to their friends and non-friends share their stories.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Barbara Sharf, and my committee members, Dr. Michael Stephenson and Dr. Patricia Goodson, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research.

Thanks also go to my fellow graduate students and the department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M a wonderful experience. A big thank you goes to Eric James for serving as a fantastic moderator for the male focus groups. Without him, this study would not have been possible. To my fellow graduate students, thank you for your warm smiles, kind words, and companionship. A special thank you goes to Dr. Brian Quick for his mentorship and guidance. Thanks for always reminding me to see the big picture, Quick!

To my very close friends, thank you for all of your love and support from near and far. First, to my running partner, Andrea: Thank you for being an excellent sounding board and always staying positive, you are a great friend. To my best friend Jacque: thank you for answering your cell phone at all hours, and for always reminding me to breathe, I don't know what I'd do without you. And finally, to Maddie: You have been the greatest blessing over the past two years. Your warmth, brilliance, and love have truly touched my life, and I am so lucky to have found a lifelong friend.

To my amazing family, thank you for your unconditional love, support and patience. Mom, thank you for always taking the time to listen to me and provide much needed perspective, I love you. To my Aunt Linda and Uncle Gary: thank you for

always being there for me and for loving me as if I were your own. You are the best Aunt Mom and Uncle Dad a girl could ask for, and I am so blessed to be your "kid." Gram, I could never thank you enough for always taking the time to listen to me, for all of your wisdom, and for always supporting every decision, big or small, that I have made along the way.

Finally, to Ryan: Thank you for always standing by my side. Your faith, loyalty, and love never wavered and you always found a way to make me laugh. I look forward to all of our journeys to come.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

On a particularly gray Monday morning, one of my students walked into my office. She had missed three days of class, on one of which she was scheduled to give her first speech, and she looked more tired than I had remembered. As she sat down in my office, I prepared myself for the usual suspects in terms of excuses for missing her speech day: "I was really sick, but I don't have a doctor's note," or "I accidentally overslept," or "I completely forgot it was my speaking day," etc. Before I had read the fine print of her doctor's note, I set it aside and simply asked "are you okay?" She then informed me, pointedly, that she had had a miscarriage. She explained to me that she was relieved because she didn't want to have to tell her parents that she was pregnant.

I wish I could say I was shocked by this revelation, but this student wasn't the first to step into my office with a sexually-related excuse for missing his/her speech. In my short time as a graduate instructor at Texas A&M University, I have had students in my office telling me they were pregnant, celebrating a miscarriage, or crying over a positive sexually transmitted infection (STI) screening for gonorrhea. These were their excuses for missing a speech, not broken alarm clocks.

I'm hesitant to believe any student who tells me they contracted Chlamydia, but I remain impressed and a little amazed at the ease with which these students shared their

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This thesis follows the style of *Journal of Sex Research.*

sexual lives with me, their teacher. Of course, I start off the first day of each semester by telling my students I study how adolescents and college students communicate their sexual lives, leading some of my students to believe that it's okay to disclose their personal information. Whatever the reason, my students have shared many excerpts from their sexual lives with me, which led me to wonder: what else are college students talking about when it comes to sex? The answer came to me from an old friend I was out to dinner with, in the form of a movie quote.

The quote is from a pivotal scene in a movie called *American Pie*, in which one of the characters is recounting her summer. She starts every experience with "this one time, at band camp…" which has become a bit of a colloquialism among American youth. Notably, because the experiences she is recounting all have to do with boring stories, until she tells the last one, which is of a very explicit sexual nature. It might seem like a crass beginning, but this was the first "light bulb" moment of my research. I wasn't so much interested in what behaviors college students were engaging in, I was more interested in the *stories* they were hearing about other peoples' sexual encounters. After all, there's nothing like a good story.

Through conversations with friends and peers, both male and female, as well as the encounters with my students, I have come to find the sharing of sexual stories to be a very typical behavior, and can think of many instances when someone's story has influenced my life in a significant way. With these personal incidents in mind, it is my intention to understand the narratives of college students in regards to sexuality, including commonly shared and memorable stories of sexual behavior, the locations in

which sexual behavior is discussed, and how perceptions of these stories may influence those individuals listening to them.

In this study, a sexual story is defined as a person's account of his or her sexual experience, as shared with one and/or more people in a face-to-face setting. This study will further the understanding of the locations in which college students share stories, what stories are considered the most memorable, and how the process of sharing and the content shared impacts their lives. Through this investigation, I hope to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How and in what locations are stories surrounding sexual behaviors discussed?

RQ2: What are the most common themes among sexual narratives shared by college students?

RQ3: How does being told sexual stories impact the person(s) listening to them?

Rationale

There are several reasons to investigate the sexual stories of college students. . There is urgency in understanding the impact of sexual story-telling among young people; the studies below highlight the negative consequences of sexual behavior in this age group. Furthermore, the incidence of STIs and pregnancy among adolescent and college age students is provided to demonstrate the results of engaging in unprotected sexual activity. Next, incidence of sexual assault and the tendency for college students to engage in risky behavior is discussed. All of these reasons indicate a need to better understand the role of sexual stories in the lives of college students.

It is important to address the implications of college students engaging in sexual behaviors. Instances of STIs and pregnancy among people aged 15-24 increased over the past several years within the state of Texas (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; 2007; 2008). Interestingly, there are also more health education programs in Texas high schools that promote abstinence-only sexuality education than comprehensive sexuality education, which may prompt the question: If pregnancies and STIs are on the rise, is the education system working? The prevalence of abstinence-only sexuality education in Texas may influence adolescents and college students to seek out sexual information from other sources, specifically, their peers. Similarly, an increase in the prevalence of sexuality and sexual issues in the media has been found to influence beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of adolescents and college students who consume these media (Brown, 2007; Bryant & Rockwell, 1994; Greenberg & Smith, 2002; Hestroni, 2007; Zillman & Bryant, 1998). Sadly, instances of sexual assault on college campuses may also prompt such discussions. Finally, many college students are experiencing life away from their families or guardians for the first time, and are surrounded by their peers, thus, having the possibility of greater peer influence than before. These factors, or any combination thereof, may pique the interest of curious undergraduate college students and influence their decision to share and listen to stories regarding sexuality. Analyzing the communication between college students will aid in a broader understanding of how these stories affect the college students who listen to them.

Incidence of STIs and Pregnancy

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008), instances of Chlamydia increased by 10%, and instances of Primary and Secondary (P&S) Syphilis increased by 11% in the state of Texas among people aged 15-24 years old between 2007 and 2008 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). It is important to note that these numbers do not take into consideration the number of cases that have gone unreported. The Sexually Transmitted Infection Surveillance Report asserts that in comparison to adults over age 25, 15-24 year olds "are at a higher risk for acquiring STIs" and further claims that behaviors, biology, culture, and barriers to accessing prevention services are among the reasons this age group is more susceptible to contracting STIs" (Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, 2008, p. 1). The Report also explains why 15-24 year olds, while only a quarter of the sexually experienced population, also represent half of all new STI cases (CDC, 2008).

In the U.S., 2,386 (roughly 37% of all national pregnancies) pregnancies were to females aged 15-24 years old in 2005 (CDC, 2005). Typically, the average undergraduate student is 21.8 years old, putting him/her within this high risk group (IR Extract Files, 2008). In tandem, the increase in STIs, as well as a high percentage of total pregnancies, implies an increase in unprotected sexual behaviors occurring between 15-24 year olds, an implication for which I hope to gain insight during the focus groups.[1]

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[1]None of these statistical reports distinguish between those who are enrolled in school and those who are not. They also do not distinguish between those who did not pursue a college degree after completing high school.

Sexual Assault: Prevalence on Campus and in the Media

Sadly, sexual assault is also a very prevalent occurrence among college students on and off campus. According to the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime, with college age women being four times more likely to be assaulted (2010). Furthermore, 51% of sexual assault crimes are committed against women between 16 and 21 years old (Randall & Haskell, 1995), and in 2008, there were 203,830 instances of sexual assault, with 164, 240 of those instances against females and 39,590 against males (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). Given the depressing prevalence of sexual assault crimes, especially among college-aged women, numerous advocacy groups have become dedicated to further exploring the circumstances in which these tragic attacks occur and how they can be prevented (RAINN, 2010; United States Department of Defense, 2010). The commonality of these assaults also accounts for numerous news stories recounting the instances of the crime, as well as incorporating these stories in television dramas like *Law & Order SVU* and *Private Practice*.

Popular media, particularly television programs, are one way in which depictions of sexual assault are disseminated. Research has shown that heavy viewers of sexual behaviors may overestimate the instances of both violent and non-violent sexual behaviors (Greenberg & Smith, 2002) and may be more susceptible to the acceptance of rape myths such as women incite men to rape, one will return to "normal" after a definite period of time, and rape only occurs outside and at night (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994; Hamlin, 2001). Similarly, viewers may become desensitized to depictions of violence

being inflicted on women (Buchward, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Harris & Barlett, 2009; Russell, 1998). Overall, there has been an increased prevalence of sexualized content on television, which may influence viewers' perceptions of instances of sexual behavior, both violent and non-violent, and may aid in the telling of sexual assault stories. These perceptions may be reinforced and/or myths may be debunked through conversations and sharing of stories with peers.

Risky Behavior among College Students

Ultimately, college students are disposed to engaging in risky health behaviors, such as binge drinking, drug use, and risky sexual behavior. Goldstein, Barnett, Pedlow, and Murphy found an association between alcohol consumption and less discussion regarding safe sex practices (such as contraceptive use) during sexual encounters with new partners (2007). While Goldstein et al.'s (2007) study established the association between alcohol consumption and engaging in risky behavior, Lewis, Lee, and Patrick (2007) found that undergraduate students perceive their peers to be engaging in more risky sexual behaviors than they do, and that these perceptions had a positive association to the student's own behavior. In Workman's (2001) ethnographic study of fraternity students, he examined the drinking stories of college students within the culture of the fraternity, and found five meta-narratives of drunkenness: drunkenness as risk taking (performing risky behaviors), drunkenness as entertainment, drunkenness as physical exploration, drunkenness as a sexual trap, and drunkenness as contextual behavior. Taken on the whole, Workman's research demonstrates that the drunken narrative of these college men reinforces a culture of binge drinking and counteracts anti-drinking

messages (2001). In terms of the current study, it also indicates another parallel between alcohol consumption and engaging in sexual behavior.

Sensation seeking. Personality traits also contribute to engaging in risky behavior, such as sensation seeking. High sensation seekers are individuals who seek out stimulating activities or lifestyle choices (Zuckerman, 1979). Sensation seeking is associated with sexual risk taking, (Donohew, Helm, Lawrence, & Shatzer, 1990; Greene, Kromar, Rubin, Walters, & Hale, 2002; Noar, Zimmerman, Palmgreen, Lustria, & Horosewski, 2006; Sheer & Cline, 1995), illicit drug use (Donohew et al., 1990; Stephenson & Palmgreen, 2001), and tobacco use (Skara, Sussman, & Dent, 2001). Furthermore, sensation seeking is also predictive of intentions to participate in casual sex (Guiterrez-Martinez, 2007), not using protection during intercourse (Spitalnick, 2007), having multiple sexual partners (Spitalnick, 2007), and underestimating one's risk of STI/HIV infection (Guiterrez-Martinez, 2007).

Perception of sexual behavior among peers. Several studies have found that college students over-estimate sexual behavior among their peers (Adams & Rust, 2006; Martens, 2006; Myklestad & Rise, 2007; Rabon, 2006). Overall, students perceive their peers to be having unprotected sexual intercourse with many more partners than actual reported behavior indicates (American College Health Association, 2005; Martens, 2006; Rabon, 2006). However, due to inconsistent findings, it is hard to predict whether a person may overestimate or underestimate the occurrence of a behavior among social groups, as well as the valence (positive or negative) a person may place on a given behavior. By focusing on the commonality and prevalence of stories, a better

understanding of what is considered typical sexual behavior can be explored, along with identifying where these "typical" behaviors are originating from. Furthermore, research has also indicated a difference in male and female sexual goals in college, as males focus more on casual sexual relations, while females are more oriented toward relational sexual goals and their sexual reputation (Buchanan, 2009; Lindgren, Schacht, Pantalone, Blayney, & George, 2009).

Taken as a whole, these studies reinforce that college students in the U.S. engage in risky sexual behaviors, sometimes with or without alcohol, their perceptions of normal sexual behaviors influence their own behaviors, and males and females differ in their sexual goals. These discrepancies in behavior and goals must be considered in order to better understand how these stories are told and what influence they have over the listener.

Review of Relevant Literature

"Stories are necessary to weave a web of meaning within which we can live. We all live in story world," (Plummer, 1995, p. 1). It is this perspective, that stories provide meaning in our lives, that I bring to my analysis of the sexual stories of college students. As a sociologist of intimacy, Dr. Plummer states, the world seems to be obsessed with sexual stories, from those of abusive sexual childhoods; to "coming outs" of homosexuals; to identity, dysfunction, and media exploitation (1995). Sexual stories have turned into quite an obsession-of writers, researchers, and media consumers, as is evident in the body of research dedicated to this ever-evolving arena. After reviewing

the literature in this area, one thing is clear: stories influence and embody lived sexual experiences.

Defining Sexual Stories

As I sought out a uniform definition of what exactly a "sexual story" or "sexual narrative" is, I found myself intrigued rather than frustrated by the many different definitions. Plummer defines a sexual story as "narratives of the intimate life, focused especially around the erotic, the gendered, and the relational" (1995, p. 6). Others claim histories, strategies, and purposes play vital roles in narratives and their structure (Thompson, 1994). Risen (2010) claims sexual stories are comprised of identity and function. Identity is comprised of gender, orientation, and intention, while function is comprised of desire, arousal, and orgasm (Risen, 2010).

Though many other definitions exist, the commonalities point to a sexual story or narrative that includes intimacy, eroticism, identity, function, and a purpose, which is typically conveyed through either a chronological or other type of structure, depending on what story is being elicited. As mentioned in the introduction, in this study, a sexual story is defined as a person's account of his or her own sexual experience, as shared with one or more people in a face-to-face setting. Due to the intimate nature of these stories, and the wide availability of them in the media, the stories in this study will strictly focus on those shared in these face-to-face settings. Specifically, this study is concerned with the listener's retelling of the stories they have heard in these face to face settings.

The narratives that are most commonly researched in the area of sexuality focus on negative sexual experiences (such as assault and abuse) and issues with sexual

orientation and identification (Ciarlante, 2007, Dawson & Gifford, 2001; Roof, 1996). Unfortunately, one of the most common subject themes in regards to narrative analysis and sexuality concerns issues of sexual violence, abuse, and harassment. Though the subject matter can be very dark, and it is deeply disturbing that there are so many victims of such violence, the art of storytelling seems to provide comfort to women who experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Wood, 1992), those who experienced sexual assault, and adults who experienced sexual abuse as children. Furthermore, a large portion of the literature focuses on the empowerment of gay men and lesbian women through storytelling of their "coming out" experiences, as well as the stories of transsexual persons and their stories of gender identification and change (Ciarlante, 2007). The role of narratives is tightly interwoven and seen as cathartic to many of the people who participated and chose to share their stories in these studies.

The overwhelming majority of the research mentioned thus far has focused on adult storing and reflection of past sexual experiences, but the following research has focused more specifically on sexuality among adolescents and college students, and the stories they have shared. Although a plethora of research has been devoted to narrative analysis of sexual topics, few (if any) have focused on the circumstances in which these narratives are shared, nor what the listeners may learn from the stories. The following studies focus on emerging sexuality, sexual initiation, and differences between perceptions of males and females.

Gendered Differences in Sexual Development and Awareness

Numerous researchers have found themes of emerging sexuality within narratives, particularly those of teenage girls and their stories of sex and romance (Thompson, 1994). In a particular study conducted with adolescents, researchers found condom use to play a role in prevention of pregnancy, but not disease avoidance, in heterosexual relationships among adolescents who viewed their relationships within the story of romance (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Smith, 1998). Kirkman et al. (1998) also assert males to be more oriented toward sexual intercourse, whereas females remained more concerned about their reputation, results identical to those found by Lindgren et al (2008) among college students. Kirkman et al. (1998) also found that condom use was consistent with the romantic storyline in regards to planning for the future, but that there was no place for safe sex discourse within the structure of engaging in intercourse.

Females. Several compelling studies demonstrate notable differences between male and female sexual stories, expectations, and perspectives; which will be further explored among females in this section. Numerous factors, such as socialization and societal views on discussions of sex, may influence the willingness of females to become familiar with their own sexuality and/or hesitant to discuss it (Risen, 2010); however, several studies have yielded interesting results within this population. Concern for reputation among both adolescents and college females plays a large role in engaging in sexual activity (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Smith, 1998; Lindgren, Blayney, Schacht, George, & Pantalone, 2009).

Garner, Sterk, and Adams (1998) conducted a narrative analysis of sexual etiquette in popular magazines read by teens over the previous twenty years, and found that the advice has changed little, and that women's sexuality is narrowly defined within heterosexual norms and practices. These practices encourage teens to be sex objects, less expressive and "contained" in discussions of sex, and masters of interpersonal communication, as a way of subordinating themselves to others (Garner et al., 1998). This narrative analysis also reinforces the concern over reputation, as the magazines pushed for girls to be more innocent in hopes of appearing more appealing to the opposite sex; a feat accomplished by having a small number of sexual partners (or none), catering to the sexual needs of a male partner or interest, and guarding one's sexual reputation. This study occurred over 20 years ago, at a time when email was just emerging as a means of mass communication; Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg had not yet been admitted to Harvard, and text messaging, let alone sexting, did not exist. What is missing from this study, then, is the recognition of the role of technology in maintaining a reputation, as well as the management of private information in public spaces.

In her 1990 study on emergent female adolescent sexuality, Thompson conducted 100 interviews with adolescent girls and found numerous perspectives on sexual initiation. Her sample included 15% African Americans, 15% Hispanic, 25% teenage mothers, 10% identified as lesbian, and all hailed from different areas of the United States (Northeast, Midwest, Southwest) (Thompson, 1990). Thompson draws a line between the way the girls were socialized and educated toward sexuality and the two

stories she "heard" the most: those who describe their first sexual experience as painful or disappointing, and those who characterized it as pleasurable, and placed emphasis on curiosity and desire (1990). The first sample focused on the girls who experienced pain, boredom or disappointment. The first common story being that the girls all claimed to "not know" how it happened, when referring to their first sexual intercourse; some are referring to a cognitive gap and sincerely not understanding the biological mechanics of intercourse, some expressed fear and pain, and some coercion (Thompson, 1990). In this group, the narrators blamed themselves for not experiencing pleasure and for the experience being painful (making references to their anatomy) (Thompson, 1990).

A marked change in the stories is shown in the second group (about a quarter of the sample), who thematically described their experiences as pleasurable. Thompson notes that these girls believe in the pleasure of the body and hail from a position of positive sexual exploration and views of sexuality for girls, one that includes masturbation and curiosity (Thompson, 1990). As noted, these girls providing the pleasure narratives led Thompson to suggest encouraging exploratory sexuality among girls so their first encounter with intercourse is more thought out, and they are more physically prepared. This suggestion points to the lack of encouragement for young girls to explore their bodies, reinforcing cultural and societal expectations of women being sexual objects, rather than in control of their own sexual desires.

Males. Unlike the results of the studies on female sexuality, males seem to be less burdened by the constraints of society in terms of their sexuality and how they decide to express it. For example, while females are more concerned with their

reputation, males are more oriented toward engaging in sexual intercourse, both within a committed relationship, and casually (Kirkman et al., 1998; Lindgren et al., 2009; Seto, 1998). Garner et al. also note in their article that "guys" can just "be," because they already have power and status, which, in turn, allows them to be "wild" with less inhibitions or restrictions, because they are seeking to impress each other rather than girls (1998, p. 67). This belief, that males are more sexually powerful, among numerous other biological and sociological explanations, may contribute to their pursuit of intercourse. It is important to note the lack of research exploring the sexual stories of males (compared to females), specifically those that do not identify as heterosexual. One of the goals of the current study is to help fill this gap in narrative research.

Ultimately, these studies highlight the gendered differences in perceptions on sexuality, particularly among adolescents. The highlighted research provides a basis for future research by identifying reputational, gendered, and societal expectations in regards to young adult sexuality. However, scholars are still unaware of how listening to sexual stories told by a person's peers or friends may influence the person listening. Furthermore, researchers have yet to elucidate the commonly shared themes among the stories that are being told, or in what location storytelling is occurring. Narrative analysis has been employed as a means for understanding gendered differences, but lacks a more holistic understanding of the impact of listening to someone share his/her experience.

One reason for focusing on the sharing of sexual stories emerges from literature surrounding self-disclosure and reciprocal disclosure. Disclosure has been studied as a

concept inherent within Communication Privacy Management Theory, but there is also a large body of literature dedicated to disclosure that exists outside the umbrella of this theory, as discussed below.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Disclosure is one concept of Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM) developed by Petronio (2000). CPM explains the process a person engages in when he or she decides to share personal information. Disclosure, or the divulging of information, may result in liking and/or closeness between the person divulging and the person he or she divulges to (Collins & Miller, 1994; Petronio, 2000).   CPM provides a theoretical explanation for why people decide to disclose information, and elucidates why liking and closeness play a role in reciprocal disclosure or the tendency for the person who is disclosed to share information with the person sharing (Petronio, 2000). However, there is a large body of research surrounding disclosure as a phenomena existing outside of CPM. CPM is revisited in Chapter II as the conceptual framework for the study. Research surrounding disclosure of sexual information is described below.

Disclosure. Collins & Miller (1994) define disclosure as the "act of revealing personal information about oneself to another" (p. 457). In a meta-analysis investigating intimate disclosure and liking, Collins and Miller found that those who disclose personal information about themselves are more likable than those who do not, and the person who discloses tends to like the person(s) he/she disclose to (1994). Much of the research in the arena of disclosure of sexual information focuses on men disclosing to their sexual partners about their sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV (Frye, 2009; Poppen,

2005; Sullivan, 2009), as well as the current public-private dialect of online disclosure among adolescents and college students (Bane, 2010; Chiou, 2006; Mu-Li, 2010; Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Valkenburg, 2007). While disclosure of a sexually transmitted disease has been studied within an interpersonal setting, disclosure of information via the Internet lacks this personal element. Not surprisingly, disclosure has been correlated to satisfaction within relationships, particularly those among married couples (Dowd, 2005; MacNeil, 2005). Since I have defined a sexual story as pertaining to a person's telling of his/her sexual experience to another person(s) within a face to face setting, the research below focuses more exclusively on interpersonal disclosure within friendships.

Research shows that within same-sex friendships, self-disclosure and reciprocal disclosure is associated with pursuing intimacy in the friendship (Sanderson, 2005), and is strongest within same-sex friendships (Kito, 2005). Disclosure is expected to occur, especially within female friendships (Fehr, 2004), but is valued by both males and females as it was found to influence friendship satisfaction (Dindia, 1992). Though there are numerous studies surrounding self-disclosure and reciprocal disclosure within friendships, few research investigations have focus on disclosure of sexual information, particularly experiences, within friendships among college students.

MacNeil and Bayers found sexual self-disclosure to be indicative of sexual and relational satisfaction among heterosexual couples, which is the most studied area of sexual disclosure (2005). Unfortunately, the other most common sexual disclosure research focused on the disclosure of sexual abuse and assault (Bradley, 2008; Ciarlante, 2007; Priebe, 2008; Staller, 2005). A significant gap exists in current research

surrounding sexual disclosure among college students, an area that will be explored in this study.

Previous research demonstrates that college students engage in risky sexual behaviors, disclose their sexual experiences, and expressions of sexuality differ by gender. Sexual storytelling has predominantly been studied in terms of its cathartic affect on those who suffer from sexual trauma, but not on how stories are told by college students to other college students. Thus, there is urgency in understanding the role of the sexual story in the lives of college students.

The Significance of the Story

This section highlights the basic needs for understanding location, memorable stories, and the impact of sexual stories. A rationale is provided for why storytelling is emphasized in each research question.

First and foremost, understanding the *location* in which these stories are discussed relates to whether or not information surrounding one's sexuality is perceived as being private. If the location of the sexual story sharing does not matter, what does this imply about the personal nature of sharing sexual experiences? Similarly, if the location is of extreme importance, what locations are valued, and why? It is important to understand the role of location in storytelling because it helps to explain the nature of sharing and where it is conducted. This kind of information will help researchers to better understand how sexual information may be perceived, as this may be indicative of a shift in the cultural climate of sexuality, from sex being a "taboo" topic to a more acceptable subject of conversation. Similarly, it may also provide insight into how

college students specifically perceive the role of location in maintaining confidentiality of information. This leads to research question 1:

RQ1: How and in what locations are stories surrounding sexual behaviors discussed?

Furthermore, identifying the *common themes* among these stories serves several purposes. First, it will help us to better understand which stories may be repeated or told more than once. Similarly, the content of these narratives will also provide valuable information about the prevalence of certain sexual behaviors, for example, if the same person is hearing similar or the same stories from several of her friends, how is she to interpret the commonality of the behaviors featured in the stories she is hearing? The common themes among these stories may help us to better understand how the performance of the behaviors in the stories is perceived by the person listening to the story. Repeatedly hearing stories that feature the same behaviors may play a role in whether the listener deems the story (and by proxy, the performance of the behavior) to be true. The fidelity of the stories (Fisher, 1987) is an important consideration. It must be determined whether a) the listener believes the story to be true and b) if the truthfulness even matters. Answering these questions will help us to better appreciate the role of truth in sexual storytelling, and how that "truth" plays into the listener's concept of common sexual behaviors. These concepts will be further explored in question 2:

RQ2: What are the most common themes among sexual narratives shared by college students?

Most important to understand is how these stories are *impacting the people who are listening* to them. Sexual stories are being investigated because of the power of a story. Stories teach us about the history of our country, stories attempt to sell us automobiles and French fries, stories motivate us to lose weight, and stories bind us to the important people in our life. Everyone has a story, and a person's story usually involves his/her lived experience. Thus, it is not surprising that we learn from stories, or that we use stories to share our lived experience. By determining what is learned from a person's listening experience, greater insight is provided into how college students communicate about their lived (or imagined) sexual experiences, and how the experiences impact the people with whom they are sharing their narratives. This is of particular interest for women or men who may have little or no sexual experience, as they may be learning the "ropes" through the experiences of their friends. Furthermore, if students find that they are sharing and hearing the same sexual stories, they may be reinforcing an idea of typical sexual experience and behavior, which could have both positive and negative consequences on sexual health. Finally, sharing of these stories may serve as a way for college students who listen to sexual stories to express concern, gain insight, and develop their identity as sexual beings, all important factors in individual growth and the arena of sexual health.

Similarly, research in the area of sexuality and information sharing among college students has been studied using quantitative data collection methods. A quantitative study investigating communication with best friends surrounding sex-related topics concluded that studying this process using one-item measures failed to capture the

nuances and multidimensionality of sex-related communication (Lefkowitz, Boone, & Shearer, 2004). Furthermore, the college students who participated in this study rated their communication with best friends surrounding sex-related topics to be of good quality and frequent (Lefkowitz et al, 2004). These findings support both the need for a broader approach, allowing multiple voices to be heard and dimensions to be added to this communication process, and demonstrate that college students value these conversations.

Research question three takes all of these points into consideration:

RQ3: How does being told sexual stories impact the person(s) listening to them?

Review of relevant literature, rationale, and research questions have been provided in this chapter. The following Chapter II provides the theoretical framework and methods that guided data collection and analysis. Next, Chapter III highlights the results of the analysis. Finally, Chapter IV provides the conclusions drawn from the study, and implications for future research.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND

DATA COLLECTION

In this chapter, the conceptual framework and methods used to study the sexual stories of college students are discussed. First, a more in-depth understanding of the important concepts inherent within Communication Privacy Management Theory and grounded theory are explained, followed by a justification for integrating both theories as the conceptual framework for this study. Then, the data collection process, including recruitment and description of participants, rationale for using focus groups, and development of the focus group guide (Appendix A) is detailed.

Conceptual Framework

Communication Privacy Management Theory is discussed first, as this theory provides a sensitizing framework for this study. Grounded theory is explored next, as it will account for unanticipated themes, to emerge from the data. Lastly, an explanation for the integration of Communication Privacy Management and grounded theory as the conceptual framework for this study is discussed.

Communication Privacy Management (CPM)

Communication Privacy Management theory was developed by communication scholar Sandra Petronio in order to explain the tensions individuals experience when disclosing private information (Petronio, 2000). According the CPM, there is a dialectical tension surrounding the acts of revealing and concealing private information.

This process of revealing and concealing takes place through a rule based system

(Petronio, 2002). This theory argues that individuals believe that they own their private

information and must continually establish boundaries surrounding this personal

information. A person makes the decision to disclose information within a rule-based

process, which includes risk assessment of revealing private information, cultural

expectations, gender differences, personal motivation, and situational demands. Several

of these rules are explained in greater detail below.

CPM operates on the assumption that individuals have control over the

boundaries of their private information (who knows and who does not know), and are

aware of the flow of information. The dimensions of boundary structures are detailed in

the theory, and provide a basis for understanding how individuals move through the

process of revealing private information, and then maintaining boundaries, once the

information shared is no longer solely owned by the initiating person. Most important to

the current study is what motivates someone to reveal private information, and what may

result from this revelation. Information ownership, personal motivation, gendered

differences and disclosure are essential to this study. Each of these concepts is explored

in greater detail below, starting with information ownership.

Information ownership. When someone shares a sexual story, those to whom

he/she disclose become partial owners of the information. (Hoseck & Thompson, 2009;

Petronio, 2002). This information then becomes "co-owned" by both parties, and

usually contains an expectation of responsibility to manage this boundary (Hoseck &

Thompson, 2009; Petronio, 2002). When the responsibility of maintaining these

boundaries is violated, meaning the person who receives private information divulges that information to someone else, "boundary turbulence" occurs (Petronio, 2002). In a sense, college students are engaging in "boundary turbulence" whenever they retell a story that they have heard from another person regarding sexual experience, especially if information is considered private. Thus, participants have been asked to engage in "boundary turbulence" by sharing stories that they had heard from another person during the focus groups. However, participants will not be fully engaging in this turbulence, as they are asked to conceal the name of the person whose story they are recounting. Information ownership is necessary to consider, as one must make the decision to either a) manage the private information by not sharing it with others or b) share private information with others and violate the expectation.

This decision to reveal or conceal private information is decided through rules, which include assessing risks, being aware of cultural expectations, personal motivation and gendered differences. Furthermore, the level of closeness in the relationship may influence a person to reveal private information, which is further explored within the following discussion of disclosure. First, risk assessment, personal motivation, and gendered differences are explained, followed by the role of disclosure.

Risk assessment and personal motivation. An individual needs to consider risks inherent within revealing private information, such as the person he/she is divulging to, the relationship with the person he/she is divulging to, and the possibility that boundary turbulence may occur (Petronio, 2000). These are only a few of the risks inherent within revealing private information, but they are the most pertinent to this study because the

nature of the topic is considered risqué, and thus, risky to reveal because of its possible consequences. However, a person must also be motivated to share his/her private information, such as to build intimacy in romantic relationships (Petronio, 2002), or strengthen a friendship through interpersonal liking. While the motivation of the person revealing his or her private information has been studied, no one has considered how the listener perceives the sharer's motivation. This is important because the listener's perception of motivation may not align with the person who is revealing, which may result in boundary turbulence. Risks in revealing private information and personal motivation to share are also related to the gender of the person who is divulging the information and the gender of the person listening to it.

Gendered differences. Gender differences play a large role in managing private information. These differences have been studied in terms of which gender is more likely to reveal private information and what gender they are more likely to reveal to. Studies have found that females are more likely to disclose than males (Dindia & Mike, 1992; Stokes, Fuehrer & Childs, 1980) and the relationship between the discloser and disclosed influences how much information is shared (Petronio, 2000). Furthermore, in terms of CPM, gendered differences have been studied primarily in terms of the family and dyadic relationships (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006). Research in this area shows that both males and females are more likely to disclose to a person that is the same gender. However, all of these studies were conducted using quantitative methods, so an in depth understanding of why participants disclose to one gender is not as apparent. We do not know how the information shared impacts the person hearing it, such that he or she (the

listener) may reciprocate disclosure, or engage in boundary turbulence and share the private information with other people. The differences in the ways males and females perceive the information shared needs to be further explored. Research surrounding disclosure provides a way to understand males and females and how and why private information may be shared.

Disclosure. Literature surrounding disclosure does not point to a "theory" to explain why people share information with other people; rather, it provides a lens for understanding this process of sharing. Disclosure is highlighted as a process in CPM, but has also been studied as a separate concept by psychologists and therapists. As mentioned in Chapter I, disclosure is the process of divulging information, and there are two different types of disclosure a person may engage in, personalistic and non-personalistic disclosure.

Personalistic and non-personalistic disclosures. It is important to draw a distinction and relationship between personalistic and non-personalistic disclosure (Derlega & Berg, 1987) as these concepts play a role in the dyadic and group settings of disclosure. "Personalistic" self-disclosure occurs in a dyadic setting (divulging to one other person) whereas "nonpersonalistic" self-disclosure occurs in a group setting (divulging to many). Derlega and Berg found personalistic disclosure to increase liking because the person disclosed to felt he/she was the only recipient of private information, whereas non-personalistic disclosure did not elicit the same reaction, as the person who was disclosed to did not feel like the sole recipient of the private information. The differences between personalistic and non-personalistic disclosures are significant to this

study, as dyadic and group are both settings where sexual stories are told. Similarly, interpersonal liking may also influence self-disclosure, such that the person divulging information is more likely to do so to someone they like.

Liking and closeness. The motivation behind disclosure is of utmost importance, as the recipient of information could perceive the motivation of the discloser to be either a) interpersonal liking or b) a personality trait (Petronio, 2000). Petronio accounts for this distinction between interpersonal liking and personality traits as a part of personal motivation (2000). Interpersonal liking refers to the sharer viewing the listener as someone they are amenable to, and generally find agreeable and pleasant. However, if disclosing is viewed as a personality trait, the listener perceives the sharer as someone who frequently discloses (Petronio, 2000). If the listener interprets the sharer as disclosing because of liking rather than personality, the listener may feel closer to the sharer, and decide to reciprocate by disclosing as well. Closeness and liking play an important role in the process of disclosing, these phenomena are further discussed in the results section. It is important to note, that closeness and liking may influence one to disclose, but may also result from being disclosed to.

Overall, CPM provides explanations for why people choose to reveal private information, and how the revelations may affect a relationship. CPM tells us that individuals own their private information, and choose to reveal or conceal it through a rules based process, which includes risk assessment, personal motivation, and gendered differences. Furthermore, a person can share information, or disclose it, to one (personalistic) or many (non-personalistic) and disclosing information may lead to liking

and closeness. However, liking and closeness may also influence a reason one has for

disclosing. While the process of managing private information is detailed in CPM, there

is less known about how this process is affected by the content of the information being

shared or how the information being shared affects the person listening to the story being

told, thematic analysis is used to fill these gaps.

Thematic Analysis

Because so little is known about the sexual stories shared among college

students, thematic analysis will allow the themes found within the data to move toward a

greater understanding of the storytelling process. Thematic analysis will account for

elements of this process and its effects to emerge from the data, especially those that are

unanticipated. Thus, integration of thematic analysis with sensitizing concepts from

CPM serves as the conceptual framework for this research.

Integration of Communication Privacy Management and Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, in unison with concepts such as information ownership,

personal motivation, gendered differences, and disclosure from CPM, are utilized as the

conceptual frameworks in this study. I chose to use these sensitizing concepts because

they all play an important role in understanding what influences the listener to share, and

how that sharing may influence a relationship.   Liking and closeness may result from

disclosure and simultaneously influence someone to disclose, which may help to explain

why participants believe other people are motivated to share their stories. Closeness is

of particular interest here, as participants may discuss stories that they have heard from a

variety of people with whom they may or may not be close. The process of revealing

information, how motivation and gender influence that process, and the relational effects of sharing are highlighted in CPM, placing emphasis on the sharer and the relationship between sharer and listener. The listener's reaction to hearing private information is not as apparent in these concepts, which is why I have decided to incorporate thematic analysis as well.

Thematic analysis allows unexpected themes to arise from the data gathered from this specific college student population. It provides an inductive understanding of how listening to sexual stories impacts the listener's own opinions, attitudes, and personal motivation to share his/her (the listeners) sexual experiences. While CPM is heavily focused on the sharer's process of revealing information and the impact this sharing may have on a *relationship*, thematic analysis will account for the impact hearing the story has on the *listener*. Thematic analysis also accounts for gendered differences in terms of how a male or female storyteller may be perceived by like or different gendered listeners. Overall, both CPM and thematic analysis work together to create a holistic explanation of how and why college students share sexual stories and what affect this sharing has on them. The methods used to study the data are explained below.

Method

Data Collection

As previously stated, the goal of this study is to understand the role of location in the sharing of sexual stories, what themes in sexual stories are the most memorable, and what the impact is on the person(s) listening to someone's sexual story. I obtained IRB

approval and conducted focus group interviews in order to better understand college students' experiences with sexual stories. A focus-group interview lends itself to this study, as it aids in an in-depth understanding of the influence of sexual storytelling. Specifically, focus groups provide a method of understanding the dynamics within a small group of people of the same gender, as this is often a common setting for storytelling to take place, as confirmed by my focus group participants. Furthermore, a focus group lends itself to participant interaction when someone is telling a story, specifically in terms of feedback from those listening to the story. Observing feedback from more than one listener cannot be captured in a one-on-one interview setting. Similarly, the small group dynamic of a focus group allows for topics to naturally emerge, including things that I may not have considered when creating my focus group questions.

Ultimately, a focus group provides participants with a medium for in-depth conversation and allows multiple voices to be heard, mirroring the nuances that may organically occur in a storytelling experience. First I conducted formative interviews with two female undergraduate students to pilot test my interview guide and gain insight into the procedure. Then, I conducted 4 focus groups with female college students and a male graduate student conducted 2 focus groups with male college students. After the male graduate student conducted the male focus groups, he debriefed me on the highlights of the conversation, and what he found to be unique to each group. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes, the details of which are highlighted below.

Development of Focus Group Guide

The focus group guide (Appendix A) was developed with the particular goal of answering the research questions, as well as accounting for unexpected topic to arise out of focus group conversations. It was first tested during the pilot interviews to ensure the questions were accurately addressing research goals. Important concepts from Communication Privacy Management Theory, specifically personal motivation, and disclosure, informed the focus group guide. Related items include asking the participants what they believed the storyteller's purpose and personal motivation to share was (RQ2, items 4, 4a), as well as their relationship to the person who shared a memorable story (RQ2, item 3c). Liking and closeness informed question 1d, asking participants who is involved in the sharing of sexual stories, as well as subsequent probes (items 1dii, 1diii, 1diia) regarding how listening to a person's story affects the listener's perception of that person.

Though some of the questions were informed by theory, questions surrounding content and impact of listening based on gender were not. These questions were included to better understand the entire storytelling phenomenon, including what the listeners gained and how they incorporated that information into their own perspectives and practices. Questions regarding gender were added to the focus group guide after conducting the pilot interviews and are discussed below.

Formative Research

During the 2010 fall semester, I conducted two individual interviews with female undergraduates to elicit feedback on the interview questions guide and gather

preliminary data. Both Reese and Heather were helpful and insightful. Initially, I had planned to conduct one-on-one interviews with female students while a male graduate student conducted focus groups with males. The reasoning was twofold: my gender as the interviewer/moderator and the insight from Reese and Heather, who expressed that they would be uncomfortable with discussing the topic in a group, and preferred the one-on- one interview. However, my thesis committee noted the inconsistency with two different interviewing approaches, and how this discrepancy could potentially impact the assertions I made in my analysis. Ultimately, a focus group format was chosen for both genders to ensure consistency of data collection.

Reese and Heather asserted that two collection methods would be preferable; this reasoning was based on their perceptions of the fear of reputation of females by other females and males, which eventually paralleled the content in my focus groups. The two interviewees' responses were very similar to those of my female focus groups, specifically in terms of perceived reputational impact. For example, both Reese and Heather highlighted the differences between male and female storytellers, and the gendered influence storytelling may have on someone's reputation. Reese and Heather both shared stories with me that involved a male and a female story sharer, which led me to probe the differences they perceived between a male and female sharing a story. This probe later became a part of the final focus group guide (RQ3, item 5), and was the only significant change to it, with all other questions remaining the same.

Participant Characteristics and Recruitment

The focus group participants were undergraduate students at Texas A&M University, who were enrolled in a 300-level communication course. A total of 26 students participated, and confidentially provided information regarding age, biological sex, ethnicity, and their predicted graduation year. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a focus group setting, to encourage confidentiality, participants chose a pseudonym. Demographic information is provided in the tables below, which have been segmented by gender.

Recruitment. I visited the classrooms of several 300-level communication courses to recruit participants for my study. I made a brief announcement explaining the nature of the study; including that those interested would be participating in a small group interview discussion about the stories they had heard about people's sexual experiences. I emphasized that students would NOT be asked to provide information on their own sexual experiences, only those they had heard from other people. Information sheets were then passed around the room, as well as a sign up sheet for those students who were interested in participating to provide their name and most commonly checked email address. Students were offered extra credit for participating in a focus group, as well as given the option for an alternative extra credit assignment, which would last for approximately one and one half hours. I also emphasized that a male graduate student would be leading the discussion in the male focus groups. After collecting the sign-up sheet, I emailed interested participants with the date, time, and place the focus groups would occur, and asked them to confirm (via e-mail) their participation.

Table 1

Female Participant Information   (N=16)

Name	Age	Ethnicity[2]	Expected Graduation Year
Focus Group 1			
Kate Hudson	22	Caucasian	2012
Marilyn Monroe	21	Caucasian	2012
Julia Roberts	21	Caucasian	2012
The Pink Ranger	23	Caucasian	2011
Megatron	20	Caucasian	2012
Superman	20	Caucasian	2012
Focus Group 2			
Shirley Temple	20	Caucasian	2013
Punky Brewster	20	African American	2012
I Love Lucy	21	Caucasian	2012
Focus Group 3			
Carrie Underwood	22	Caucasian	2011
Reese Witherspoon	20	Caucasian	2013
Jennifer Lopez	22	Caucasian	2011
Taylor Swift	19	Caucasian	2013
Focus Group 4			
Megyn Kelly	22	Caucasian	2011
Martha Stewart	21	Caucasian	2012
Beautiful	22	African American	2011

On the day of each focus group, I obtained consent from each participant

(Appendix B), reviewed the purpose of my research, and collected demographic

information on a brief worksheet (provided in Tables 1 & 2). Focus groups were

conducted in a small meeting room inside a University building after five o'clock in the

evening. Upon arrival to the focus group, each person was provided with the following:

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[2] Participants used their own terminology to describe their ethnicity; Uniform ethnicities are provided here.

consent forms, demographic worksheet, and cardstock. Each person was asked to fill out a short demographic worksheet, as well as to choose a name (other than their own) to be called during the focus group. Each participant was asked to respect the privacy of all other participants by agreeing to not share information discussed during the focus group with people outside of the group.

Table 2

Male Participant Information   (N=10)

Name	Age	Ethnicity[3]	Expected Graduation Year
Focus Group 1			
Obama	20	Asian (Indian)	2013
Jackie Chan	21	Pacific Islander/ Caucasian	2012
Jason	20	Caucasian	2013
Mezzi	21	Hispanic	2012
Lil Jon	21	African American	2011
Focus Group 2			
Barry Allen	25	Caucasian	2012
Matt Foley	19	Caucasian	2013
Arry Ballen	21	Asian	2011
Steven	20	Caucasian	2012
Bruce Wayne	25	Caucasian	2013

After obtaining consent and collecting the demographic worksheets with the female participants, I reminded them that they could refuse to answer any questions and leave the group at any time without penalty. With the female groups, I then began

[3] Participants used their own terminology to describe their ethnicity; Uniform ethnicities are provided here.

asking them questions from my focus group guide. In the male groups, I thanked the participants for their time, and told them Eric, a male graduate student, would be moderating the discussion. I then excused myself from the room. The focus group guide used in the pilot interviews was used to guide the conversation in both of these focus groups, and elicited responses to the research questions.

In this chapter, the conceptual framework and methods used in the current study have been described. The conceptual framework involves the integration of concepts inherent within Communication Privacy Management Theory (information ownership, risk assessment, personal motivation, and gendered differences) with thematic analysis to account for unanticipated themes. The methods used to collect data, recruit participants, and develop the focus group guide have been detailed. The following chapter discusses data analysis and focus group findings.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS: CONTEXT, MOTIVATION, AND INFLUENCE

OF SEXUAL STORY SHARING

This chapter explicates both the methods and resulting analysis of the focus

group discussions. First, data analysis methods are described, followed by results of the

data analysis, which includes the major categories of communication context, perception

of narrator motivation, and communication influence. Communication context and

communication influence are similar between males and females, while perception of

narrator motivation is different. Together, context, motivation, and influence help to

explain how and why college students share sexual stories, as well as how this

storytelling affects the person listening to the stories.

Data Analysis

An analytic framework combining thematic analysis and components from

Communication Privacy Management theory was used to analyze the data. Thematic

analysis includes open and axial coding, comparison between codes and categories, and

memo-writing to organize codes and explain relationships (Charmaz, 2002; Glaser,

1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). I transcribed the recordings and then

analyzed the transcriptions using open and axial coding techniques. During the open

coding, I used line-by-line analysis for each transcript and defined emergent phenomena

in the data. Simultaneously, I reflected on the developing codes by memo-writing, which

aided in the organization and comparison of the codes. I employed constant comparison

to refine codes and identify connections between and among codes. After all transcripts had passed through open coding, I employed axial coding to cluster similar codes together resulting in a total of 32 codes, which I then grouped into the code families of context, motivation, and influence. Data saturation was achieved among the participants as a whole, as well as among males and females. As I listened to the recordings and read the transcripts, I noticed themes from the first focus groups where strongly reinforced in the second group, and no new themes emerged after the third focus group. Similarly, the themes were identical between the first and second male focus groups, and some themes overlapped with the female focus groups as well.

During analysis it became clear that certain codes extended beyond gender lines, such as communication context and communication influence. However, marked differences existed between genders, specifically in regards to how males and females perceived the motivation of the narrator of the stories. Thus, the analysis was divided by communication phenomena that is similar for males and females (context and influence), and communication phenomena that is specific to each gender (motivation). These results explain how, why, and with whom college students share their sexual stories. Furthermore, these three main themes also helped to explain the differences in how males and females interpret why a narrator is sharing his or her story.

In order to ensure terminology consistency, the following definitions will be assumed throughout the analysis: *Narrator* refers to the person sharing a story of personal sexual experiences, while *listener* refers to the person or persons to whom said stories are disclosed. Therefore, the reader should assume the focus group participants

are listeners. These terms are important when a participant recounts a story for the group. The person recounting a story is always designated by their chosen name from the focus group (i.e. Punky, Jason, Reese, etc); therefore the *narrator* is always the person being referred to in the story.

Results

After moderating the female focus groups and listening to the recordings of the male focus groups, I think it is apparent that college students frequently discuss sex. Discussions in both of these groups were humorous, thought-provoking, and demonstrate the insights both genders have regarding the culture of sexuality among college students. Given the nature of this study, I was impressed with the ease they had in sharing their perspectives with me. The themes that arose from the discussions explain contexts in which sexual storytelling occurs and the similarities and differences between how females and males interpret the narrators to be motivated to share. Several of these themes echo the concepts inherent within Communication Privacy Management theory, while others occurred unexpectedly and organically emerged from the data. This chapter explains emergent themes within the data, while Chapter IV focuses on the parallels between this study and CPM.

The results are organized in the following manner. First, the context in which communication occurs is described. Next, the differences between male and female perceptions of narrator motivation to communicate are explored. Lastly, the influence of the shared stories on the listener is discussed.

Communication Context

Two important elements comprise the communication context: physical location and relationship between narrator and listener(s). Physical location is explored first. The idea that conversations surrounding sexual experiences occur in any location common to students was echoed throughout all six focus groups. However, many participants drew a distinction between sexual storytelling in public versus private spaces. It is important to note that participants frequently contradicted one another when discussing the importance of physical location in sexual storytelling, as some participants placed emphasis on physical location, while others did not. Furthermore, while physical location and relationship between the narrator and listener are highlighted separately for purposes of analysis, both work together to influence the contexts in which sexual stories are shared.

Physical Location

While some participants claim that physical location, specifically public and private places are influential in the sharing process, others claimed physical location to be less important. One reason participants claimed physical location to not be of significance is because discussion surrounding sex has become culturally *accepted* and *expected* among college students. As Matt (FG5) said, "It's really just culturally accepted too. No one's too offended about it. . . . we talk about this all the time." Female participants agreed with this, as Lucy (FG2) noted, "Sex is everywhere, you could see somebody and [think] 'Whoa, what is she wearing?' and then automatically think of different stories . . . we're always surrounded by it, so we hear it everywhere."

However, other participants placed more emphasis on the role of physical location, specifically when making distinctions between public and private places.

Public v. private. Participants listed several public places where storytelling occurs, such as house parties, bars, classrooms, campus, the gym, and the campus bus route. Private settings described included one's apartment, a friend's apartment, or the bathroom, which could be in a home, a bar, or at a party. Participants emphasized that private spaces were typically behind closed doors, and only involved either one other person or a small group of people. Martha (FG4) pointed out one of the several implications of listening to a story in either a public or private setting when she said, "I'm a private person . . . I might deviate from [not participate in] that conversation if it's in a public setting, so the way that I would interpret the story would kind of be affected by where it's told." Martha claimed she would interpret the story, and possibly the motivation of the narrator sharing it, differently based on the physical location in which it's told. Megyn (FG4) gave an example of how receiving information in different locations influences how she understands the story. She said:

> . . . I've had friends who have told me, "You know, I think I may be pregnant" in an intimate setting, and then I've had friends tell me at a party or when we're getting ready to go out or something . . . and they casually said it to me . . . they said it in a funny way, but it was something serious 'cause that's the way they handle it . . . maybe to pretend like it didn't happen to make them more comfortable . . .

Her statement indicated the layers inherent within listening to a story in a public or private space. First, Megyn said that any content, no matter how serious or not serious, can be shared in any physical location. Since storytelling may occur in a variety of places, listeners must develop and use some skill to derive meaning from what a narrator

is sharing with them. Thus, location where the story is shared is one influence on how listeners make sense of what is shared. When Megyn's friend disclosed her pregnancy to Megyn at a party, Megyn interpreted her friend shared in order to "Pretend like it didn't happen to make them more comfortable," even though she was sharing something serious. Perhaps one of the reasons emphasis is placed on location is because when a narrator chooses to share a story in an intimate or private setting, he or she wants the content of the information he/she is sharing to be the focus of the interaction. However, when disclosing out in a public space, there may be constraints on the amount of time spent on storytelling. For example when someone discloses a pregnancy story at a party, the way a listener interprets the story will depend on the mannerisms the narrator uses to tell the story (do they seem casual? are they trying to make you laugh?), and how many other people are also being disclosed to.

Jennifer (FG3) drew a distinction between private and public locations when she said, "If you're on campus or something, like in a classroom, obviously someone's not going to tell you as much as they would in the privacy of a home." The distinction between public and private locations is echoed by Barry (FG6), who demonstrated that sharing in a public or private space relates to how much a person wishes to reveal. He said, "I guess it [sharing a story] just deals with privacy, if you're totally comfortable then I guess you're going to give the whole truth. . . . but most people if it's a more public setting might hold some minor or major details back." Both Jennifer and Barry indicated storytelling to be contingent on not only location, but on how comfortable the narrator is in a specific location. These statements point to two important

understandings in how physical location is concerned with the presence of others; the more public a setting, the more likely other people will be around, whereas a more private setting, the more likely *less* people will be around.   Private locations may be valued then, as they may give the narrator control over *who* is listening to his/her story. To complicate things further, it is also possible for a narrator to share in public without revealing to unwanted potential listeners, if he/she shares very quietly with only one other person. Thus, sharing in public or private spaces is nuanced and complicated by the presence of others. While participants distinguished public from private spaces, they also emphasized the "who" rather than the "where" when sharing sexual stories.

The participants differed in how they viewed the importance of a public or private space. Some participants expressed that physical location was not significant in sexual storytelling, while other participants emphasized the importance by drawing distinctions between private and public physical locations. As many expressed, church was the only physical location where sharing sexual stories was inappropriate, while all other locations were acceptable. Similarly, participants reported that they inferred the importance of the story shared by the reader based on how public or private a space the narrator shared in. However, it is evident that along with the public and private *locations* of the sharing, the number of *people* present during sexual story telling is influential as well. This is further explored in terms of the relationship between the narrator and listener.

Relationship between Narrator and Listener

Before explaining the "who" of the communication context, it is important to note who is *not* involved in sharing sexual stories. Similar to the lack of discussion in a church, all participants indicated parents do not engage in these discussions. None of the 26 participants indicated feeling comfortable partaking in any type of sexual discussion with their parents, as Jennifer (FG3) said, "I was just thinking about how awkward that would be." While participants asserted parents do not share stories, they also did not mention hearing stories from other family members who are not parents, or other adults who are not college aged. On the other hand, narrators that were identified as friends and who are the same gender as the listener were frequently mentioned as being a part of conversations in which sexual storytelling occurred. However, non-friends, such as acquaintances and strangers, also partake in sexual storytelling. Distinctions between "friend" and "non-friend" are explored in detail below.

Friends. Participants heavily emphasized the significance of their relationship with the narrator. As Arry (FG6) said, "The more serious it [the story] is, the more it depends on the relationship between the two. It's just kind of a comfort thing. . . . people are just more comfortable, the more serious it is, the closer the relationship." This statement indicates that listeners perceive closeness between the narrator and listener as playing an important role in the seriousness of the information shared. Matt (FG6) said, "How close you feel to the person you're talking to . . . how close you are to them, you might say more, go into more detail." Each participant explained that the level of seriousness of the story being shared was contingent on his or her relationship with the

person sharing, such that the more intimate the relationship, the more likely the sharer was to reveal more information than they would if the relationship was not as intimate.

The idea of closeness was strongly echoed by the females, who reported close friends and best friends were the most likely to share their stories. Megyn (FG4) observed, "The ones [stories that are told] that really hit home are in small groups," and later said that the most common people she hears stories from are "good friends." Bama (FG 5) agreed, when he said sharing with close friends, and "generally of the same gender," is the most common circumstance in which stories of a sexual nature are shared. Participants typically partake in communication with either one same-gendered friend, or a small group of same-gendered friends. In each of the female focus groups, several of the women claimed they enjoyed listening to their close woman friends share their stories because they, according to Jennifer (FG3), "care about their friend," and it improves their relationship. Female participants also said they would be more likely to share with a best friend or close group of friends who had previously shared with them.

In summary, participants prefer listening to stories told by people they identify as a friend of the same gender, and believe the closer the relationship they have with the narrator, the more likely the narrator will be to share serious information. Participants are also more likely to divulge their own experiences with a friend who had previously divulged to them. However, neither male nor female participants felt a desire to disclose their stories to acquaintances or strangers, who had disclosed their stories to them, which they claimed happens frequently. The assumption, then, is the more closeness in a relationship, the more serious the content shared. However, this assumption may be

violated by a non-friend, such as an acquaintance or stranger, who decides to disclose his/her experience.

Non-friends. In terms of relationships, a clear distinction was drawn between a *friend* who discusses his/her sexual experiences and a *non-friend* who discloses his/her sexual experiences. A friend is someone the participant is close to and has an established a relationship with, while a non-friend may be an acquaintance (someone they have either had brief and fleeting interaction with) or stranger (someone with whom a participant has never had any interaction). As Megyn (FG4) said "I've had random girls come up to me at parties or in the bathroom or we happen to be in the same room and they'll ask questions about what they did or what they're about to do…that happens all the time." Participants believed non-friend narrators to be apathetic about with whom they discussed their sexual experiences. Jennifer (FG3) pointed out, "You run across those occasional ones that you just meet and they don't care" [with whom they share their stories].   Furthermore, participants draw distinctions between the personality of a friend who discloses sexual information, and a non-friend who discloses sexual information.

These distinctions are such that a friend may be perceived as a high discloser (the tendency to talk in a self-revealing way as being a part of their personality), whereas non-friends are not perceived to be high disclosers, rather they are perceived as being apathetic about who knows about their sexual experiences. One of the reasons a stranger is perceived as being apathetic, rather than having the personality trait of high disclosure, is because they may be influenced to share because they are intoxicated.

Influence of alcohol on relationships and sharing. Participants indicated the tendency for non-friends to share is typically due to alcohol consumption, and therefore in more public places where consuming alcohol occurs. Participants did not identify use of any other drugs besides alcohol. Arry (FG 6) observed, "Alcohol is usually key when those [stories] are brought up,"; similarly, Martha (FG 4) stated, "Alcohol plays a big role in what you hear," while Megyn (FG4), responded, "You might hear stories [from a stranger who has been drinking] that only a friend will tell." Consequentially, because the listeners do not know the person who is sharing the story, that narrator is judged negatively.

Ultimately, communication context is comprised of the physical location where the sharing takes place and relationship between narrator and listener. Physical location and relationship are integral parts of this narrative process, and do not exist mutually exclusive of each other. For example, consumption of alcohol is considered a catalyst for sexual story telling. However, alcohol consumption is tied to the relationship between the narrator and listener, as participants claimed non-friend narrators who consume alcohol share their sexual experiences. Furthermore, this sharing may take place in very specific locations, such as a bar or party where alcohol is served and a person is likely to interact or be in proximity to people he/she may not know. Similarly, public spaces tend to contain more people with the potential to overhear, whereas private spaces are usually smaller, are behind closed doors and are only with one other person or a small group of people   Thus, physical location and relationship between the narrator

and listener are connected and work together to form the context in which sexual storytelling occurs.

Overall, how communication contexts of location and relationship were discussed is similar for males and females. Furthermore, males and females believe the narrator of the story is motivated to share his or her personal story, whether under the influence of alcohol or not. However, the men and women differ in how they interpret the motivation of the narrator. Before explicating the differences between how men and women perceive a narrator's motivation for sharing a story, it is important to note that both genders believe a narrator *is* motivated to share, and thus, that sexual storytelling is purposeful. Furthermore, the belief that narrators are motivated is true regardless of the content of the story they are telling.

Communication Content

The content of the stories shared during the focus groups spanned from provocative to pornographic, and participants identified memorable stories as being "atypical" or "out of the norm." Participants claimed that the abnormal nature of the stories is the precise reason they are remembered, as they are very entertaining to listen to. Thus, the lewd and violent are emphasized, rather than the ordinary, such as when someone first experienced sex. Several of the themes inherent within the stories the participants recounted include group intercourse, degrading sexual acts toward women, a significant age difference between the people who participated in a sexual act, and voyeurism. Participants noted that behaviors that are performed in memorable stories were more likely to occur when the narrator of the story was on vacation. Furthermore,

these stories were identified as memorable by the participants because they claimed the stories had an effect on how they perceived the narrator of the story, as well as on their own personal beliefs.

While the themes inherent within the content of the stories were consistent among males and females, the way the listener's *interpreted* the narrator's motivation for telling the stories was highly gendered. Thus, the content of the stories was not as influential on the listener. However, the reasons *why* the listener perceived a narrator to be sharing their story was influential. Furthermore, the perception of motivation to communicate varies based on the gender of the narrator and the gender of the listener. Thus, the differences in perception of motivation are explored below, and are divided into two sections: women and men.

Perception of Motivation to Communicate

Males and females differ on why they believe a narrator is motivated to share his or her story. Participants claimed they form their perception of narrator's motivation by considering the following criteria: their relationship with the narrator, if they believe the narrator is telling the truth, and if the narrator is in a committed romantic relationship. Though males and females interpret a narrator to be motivated based on the same criteria, there are differences in the emphasis each gender places on each criteria. In this section, a woman's perceptions of another woman's motivation to share her sexual stories are explored first, followed by women's perceptions of men's motivation to share. This is followed by the perceptions of men.

Women

The women who participated in the focus groups were witty, open, and very insightful, and they claimed women are motivated to share their stories. The listener's perception of motivation is influenced by several factors, a) the listener's relationship (or lack thereof) with the narrator b) whether or not the narrator is telling the truth, and c) the narrator's relationship status. Interestingly, truth was not as important in determining a *female narrator's* motivation to communicate as it is in determining a *male narrator's* motivation to communicate. Perceived motivation of other women is explored first.

As Superman (FG1) said, "people have different reasons for their sex stories, some tell it to be funny, some people tell it cause they need to know your opinion cause they have a problem, or some people are just bored, it depends. . . ." Superman indicates that each person may have a different reason or motivation for sharing his/her story. The way motivations are interpreted is based on the relationship the listener has with the narrator. Female participants identified relationships in which sexual experiences are shared as being with friends or with non-friends.

Motivation of friends. If the listener identified the narrator as a *friend* or someone they have established a prior relationship with, the listener perceived the narrator's motivation to share related to one of the following: responding to the listener, advice seeking/concern sharing, cautioning the listener, or building intimacy in the relationship. The narrator's motivation to 'respond to the listener' speaks specifically to the role the listener plays in the storytelling process. This is especially important to consider within

friendships, as the listener *only* elicits stories and seeks information from a narrator they deem a *friend*. Thus, the role of the listener is explored first, as it is concerned with the interaction between the listener and the narrator. The role of the listener differs from advice-seeking or building intimacy, as the participants believes narrators are motivated to respond to questions or inquiries that they (the participants) make, rather than for the narrator's own motives (advice-seeking and creating intimacy).

Role of the listener. The listener has an important role in sexual storytelling. One of the most significant aspects of a friendship is the listener's role in eliciting a story or information from the narrator. The female participants identified someone asking a question as a very common reason a person shares their story. However, they noted multiple reasons for eliciting questions as Power Ranger (FG1) said, "Girlfriends are shy about it and they don't want to talk about it as much, I'll have to ask the questions and they'll answer." This was echoed by Shirley (FG2), when she said, "girls just like to talk and so, or people ask . . . 'how was your night?' or 'what'd you do?' if you're good friends, it just comes up."

Thus, an important distinction of communication within friendships is the listener inquiring of the narrator about her experience, and the narrator being willing to share because of the questioning of the listener. One reason a narrator may be more willing to share is because she feels the listener is not only inquiring in order to obtain information, but also to demonstrate that the listener cares about the narrator.

Another important role of the listener is to seek information in a 'how to' sense. Information seeking differs from prompting a narrator to discuss her sexual experience

in that the listener seeks out information because she (the listener) lacks knowledge surrounding sexuality. Superman (FG1) said, "I have a friend who . . . she's still a virgin, and she asks questions because she wants to know." Here, the listener is less concerned with the narrator's story but more concerned with acquiring new knowledge. In friendships, the role of the listener is to elicit the story and sometimes, to seek information from the narrator. Again, the listener is explicitly asking the narrator for a story in these instances, and thus, the listener interprets the narrator's motivation differently than when the listener does *not* elicit the story.

Advice-seeking. One of the most common perceived motivations of the narrator is to seek advice**.** Participants noted that their friends are typically seeking advice or sharing their concerns when they experience uncertainty after a sexual act. As Lucy (FG2) said, "If they have a scare, I would understand if they would want to talk about it. . . . you would try to make them feel better." Taylor (FG3) reinforces advice-seeking as motivation. She said:

> if someone thinks that maybe something is wrong . . . with their body or something . . . they're probably telling them cause they want help . . .they want to get it off their chest because they need to tell someone what happened . . . they'll tell you cause they have a concern. . .they want you to know about it for a specific reason.

Megyn (FG4) offers her perception of what that reason is. She said:

> I think a lot of the time if its girls it's so they can be told not to do it … they kind of subconsciously want you to say 'you probably shouldn't be doing that' or you know, maybe to at least to give some advice to what they should do … I've had friends tell me stories about them having sex, and they…I can tell they want me to say something to them like 'maybe you shouldn't be having sex with him, maybe y'all should wait' or 'he's not treating you right' or 'that shouldn't happen during sex' or something like that, or I think a lot of girls want you to tell them not to.

Megyn's statement speaks more to the implicit nature of advice-seeking as perceived by the listener. She claims narrators seek advice intuitively or subconsciously, and thus, advice seeking is not always explicitly 'sought' by the narrator. Rather, the listener must interpret how the narrator wants her to react. The listener's reaction may be one of just listening to a narrator [to], "get it off her chest" as Taylor said. On the other hand, the listener may have a more vocal response, in which the listener expresses her concerns to the narrator, as Megyn indicated. Advice-seeking may contribute to building intimacy within a friendship, which is the final motivation for friends to communicate their sexual experience.

Creating closeness. Participants indicated that building closeness is motivation for a narrator to share. As Superman (FG1) said, "It can further your relationship with the person you're talking with." Jennifer (FG2) shared, "My best girlfriend she'll just…she has a serious boyfriend and sometimes … she just needs someone to talk to and like, tell what's going on…she wants someone to confide in." Jennifer later stated, "When my best friend (who has a serious boyfriend) tells me, I'm more interested to hear about it because I care about her." Superman and Jennifer indicated that a narrator is not always interested in a reaction from the listener; rather, the narrator may be interested in sharing her experience in order to build closeness and intimacy within her relationship with the listener.

Closeness and intimacy within dyadic or small group friendships is an important result of sharing sexual stories. Furthermore, participants claimed narrators that are their friends are motivated to share their experiences because they are a) elicited by the

listener b) seeking advice or c) building intimacy within the relationship. Perception of speaker motivation is unique within friendships, specifically because listeners do not judge their friends. However, judgment is frequently passed on non-friends who share their experiences. This marked difference is present when the narrator shares in a mixed group or shares to a stranger.

Motivation of non-friends. The nature of interpersonal relationships guides perception of a narrator's communication motivation. Thus, perception of friend motivation differs from perception of non-friend motivation. Listeners identified non-friends as an acquaintance or a stranger. The perception of narrator motivation of acquaintances and strangers is perceived to be similar to the goals of a narrator who shares in mixed company of friends and non-friends. Narrators sharing with non-friends were perceived to be motivated to share in order to bolster reputation and gain attention, or because of alcohol consumption. However, unlike a friend, the narrator's decision to share with the listener negatively affected the listener's perception of the narrator's reputation.

Bolstering reputation. In contrast to narrators who disclose within friendships, narrators who disclose to non-friends can negatively shade their reputation and may be viewed as desiring attention. Lucy (FG2) points out, "if you don't keep your circle really small, stuff's gonna spread and you're going to be known for certain things and there's no way of getting your reputation back." Lucy's statement indicates that the more people a narrator shares her story with, the more likely her reputation will be impacted. Marilyn (FG1) described an instance in which she felt her friend's reputation was

negatively impacted because she shared a story in a group of friends and non-friends. She said, "When my friend sits there telling a group of people, like all the things she's done, I mean, I just, I feel like people are looking at her differently." Both Lucy and Marilyn speak to the potential negative influence on a narrator's reputation that may result from sharing with non-friends.

Taylor (FG2) describes an instance when she perceived the narrator to be motivated to present herself in a certain way. She said, "We were in mixed company and we were in a group discussion and she just said it [that she had sex with ten people] and I was just kinda like, is she trying to impress the guys?" This idea that the narrator's motivation is to positively influence her reputation was echoed by Reese (FG3), who said she perceived the narrator was thinking, "This'll make me cool if I share my story that I did this." Jennifer (FG3) summed this perception up when she said, "When you're talking in a public setting, you want attention." Jennifer speaks to a particular nuance here, as the participants seemed to agree that if a woman shared her story with non-friends, she wished to receive positive attention, but her reputation would be tainted negatively. Thus, storytelling about morally questionable behavior has an opposite effect than what motivated the storytelling.

Beautiful (FG4) offered more insight into why she believed women share with non-friends when she said, "They think the more people they have sex with, the more guys will want them… I don't get that thinking, but I think its low self-esteem." Overall, participants emphasized non-friend narrators as being motivated to bolster reputation and gain attention. When the participants perceive the narrator's to be

motivated by gaining attention, or bolstering reputation, they claim that the narrator's reputation is actually impacted negatively. The influence on reputation is even more apparent when the narrator is a non-friend who has consumed alcohol.

Influence of alcohol. Finally, participants perceived alcohol consumption and apathetic orientation to sharing sexual experiences to motivate non-friends to communicate. Shirley (FG2), described a situation in which a non-friend shared her experience when she said, "Someone random at a party decides to tell you something and you're like…I don't know you!" Megyn (FG4) echoed this sentiment when she said:

> people that you don't even know … that could be the first impression that you get of the person…like at a party a drunk girl starts talking to me…I mean, you automatically can't help but be like, that's my first impression of this person, so you kind of judge them in a way from the beginning.

Furthermore, Megyn described these instances of an intoxicated non-friend sharing with her as happening "all the time" to which Martha (FG 4) responded with, "I've probably heard way more than they want me to hear." However Beautiful (FG 4) offered an explanation other than alcohol for what Megyn (FG4) and Martha (FG4) perceived as too much information when she said, "Some people don't even care about it," referring to the narrator being apathetic about sharing her experiences with the listener. Thus, the participants indicate that they hear stories from non-friends frequently, sometimes under the influence of alcohol, and that hearing these stories causes listeners to judge the narrator. Narrators who are perceived to be either drunk and or apathetic contribute to the negative assumptions listener's make about the narrator's reputation.

Carrie (FG3) points out that the narrator's relationship with the listener influences the perception of the narrator's reputation. She said:

> If you don't know the girl, others could be like 'oh she's a whore' or whatever but if you know her, it's a personality type thing to be pretty blunt…like say whatever comes to her mind and I mean, we all laugh cause we know her, but if you're an outsider you'd probably shy away from it.

Carrie indicates friends who share their sexual experiences are deemed to have a personality of a high discloser, whereas non-friends are judged as being promiscuous. This tendency to be more judgmental of the non-friend sharing her story was vehemently asserted by Taylor (FG3) who said:

> You don't need to tell me that, you're not respecting yourself or the other person that you had sex with by telling me, which is a third party outsider who has nothing to do with it, I don't need to know that, it's disrespectful for you to tell me someone else's business.

Taylor indicates that a non-friend sharing her story is a sign of disrespect to the narrator, the listener, and any other person involved in the narrator's story. Thus, as Megyn (FG4) stated very concisely, "If you don't know them [the narrator] it's going to change the way you view them."

Overall, the relationship between the narrator and listener influences how the listener perceives the narrator's motivation to communicate. Within friendships, the participants reported that a listener may play a role in eliciting a story from the narrator and inquiring to obtain information.   Among friends, participants perceive narrators to be motivated to communicate because they are seeking advice and building intimacy within the friendship. However, among non-friends, participants interpreted narrators to be motivated to communicate because they are less concerned with who is aware of their

sexual experiences due to alcohol consumption, and wish to garner attention in order to bolster their reputation. In summation, level of closeness between the narrator and listener plays a large role in the listener's perception of the narrator's motivations. Both truth and relationship status of the narrator also contribute to how the listener interprets the narrator's motivations.

Truth

The female participants reported truth, or their perception of the veracity of a story, to play a role in their perception of the narrator's motivation to communicate. While the female participants tend to assume the narrator is telling the truth, they also reported that there are several ways to "tell" if a person is being honest. The first way to establish truth is through another person who corroborates the story the narrator has shared. Another way to establish the accuracy of the message relies on the relationship between the narrator and listener, and the listener's personal knowledge of the narrator's personality and tendency to be honest. However, the participants also indicated that the truth of the stories is of significance because it may impact a friendship or relationship negatively if the narrator is being dishonest. Furthermore, the goals of the listener, or what the listener hopes to "get out" of the story, also influences whether or not the listener is concerned with the veracity of a story.

According to Beautiful (FG4), "there's 3 sides to every story… his side, her side, and the truth," a short assertion that brought a hearty chuckle to the women in the group. The participants reported two ways in which they sensed the female narrator to be telling the truth: corroboration and knowledge of the honesty of the narrator. Marilyn (FG4)

said one of the ways she knows her friends are telling her the truth is because "every story, she [her friend] had someone else that I knew that was with her like, backing it up, so that other person saw it too," indicating that a witness may play a large role in the perception of truth.

On the other hand, Carrie (FG3) focused on the relationship and personal knowledge of the narrator's honesty. She said, "I guess if you know the two people… say you've known the guy forever and the woman not so much, I guess you might second guess the woman cause you've known the guy for so long," indicating that the listener's relationship with the narrator plays a role in determining whether or not the listener believes the story is accurate. While both women identified two ways in which they could "tell" if a female listener was telling the truth, Martha (FG4) ultimately said, "You're quicker to judge or quick to assume a story is true, I don't remember myself questioning a lot of things." Thus, participants assume stories are true, and use personal knowledge and corroboration to establish truth when they are hearing a story from a friend. Interestingly, the listening goals of the participants relates to how concerned they are with the accuracy of the story.

Several of the participants claimed their listening goals played a role in whether or not they were concerned with the truth. Shirley (FG2) demonstrated the difference in listening goals, when she said, "If I'm listening, if it's just for entertainment it doesn't matter (if it's true) but I feel like if there are false stories that are going around hurting people, then that matters." Shirley distinguishes that when she is listening to be entertained, she is not concerned with whether or not a story is true. However, she also

points out that when stories are false, they have potentially negative consequences.
Megyn (FG 4) demonstrates this concern when she said, ". . . I worry about if it's true or
not, cause it does affect friendships, relationships, so um, I do take a lot of stories with a
grain of salt."

The participants indicated that stories that are false have the potential to harm the
reputation or relationships of the person in the story. However, though participants
previously claimed to have a method for "knowing" the truth, they have claimed that in
instances when they are unfamiliar with the narrator, there is no way to establish whether
or not someone is telling the truth. Even with the negative consequences, the women
still tend to believe the stories they hear from other females are true. A discussion
between Lucy (FG2) and Shirley (FG2) provides a better lens for understanding why
females are more likely to believe other females are telling the truth:

> Lucy (FG2) Girls' stories might be more true cause why would they just make up
> sexual stories cause it's still kind of that . . .
> Shirley (FG2) . . .Girls like, don't want to be perceived as a whore.

Here, the women share that a narrator is *less* likely to make up a story because of the

potential consequences to her reputation. This is furthered when Megyn (FG4) claimed:

> I'd believe a woman much more than a guy. . . if a guy's telling me a story and
> I'm around other guys especially, I won't believe the guy as much. . . its maybe
> half true. . . but if a girl's telling me a story, it's usually not around other girls . . .
> I'd believe a girl over a guy any day.

Megyn specifically calls attention to the role of gender in determining whether or not the

narrator is telling the truth.

Overall, the women in the focus groups reported a process for assessing whether
or not this story is true. This process includes a person corroborating a story and/or the

knowledge of the narrator's honesty. Furthermore, participants reported that though potentially negative consequences may result from false stories, there is a tendency to assume a story is true. This assumption of the veracity of the stories is based on the belief that no woman would *want* to negatively shade her reputation by sharing a story that is false and depicts her in an unladylike fashion. Up until this point, the relationship between the narrator and listener, and the influence the relationship has on the listener's perception of narrator's motivation has been discussed. Furthermore, the role of truth, how it is assessed, and why females tend to assume the veracity of a story has been explained. Last, the role of the romantic relationship status of the narrator will be discussed, as it is the final contributing factor in how listeners perceive the motivation of the narrators.

Romantic Relationship Status

The last factor that influences female perception of the narrator's motivation to communicate is the romantic relationship status of the narrator. Unlike the other factors, relationship status was perceived similarly for both females and males. Female participants believe neither males nor females within committed romantic relationships share their sexual stories. Female participants reported this to be true for both males and females, as participants consider sexual activity within a committed relationship typical. This is highlighted by Punky (FG2) and Lucy (FG2):

> Punky: No one cares about you and your boyfriend having sex every night. I feel like we assume that's happening
> Shirley: Yeah, that's normal.
> Punky: But if it's like 'I met this guy at Duke's last night, and I don't remember what he looked like, but he definitely spent the night' then of course that's juicy.

Taylor (FG3) echoed Punky and Shirley when she said, "If you have a long term boyfriend like that's something that y'all share together. . . people tell you more stories if they're just like, random." Based off of these participants, the assumption is that a male and female in a committed romantic relationship engage in sexual activity and choose not to discuss their sexual exploits with other people. Other participants reported that males who are in a committed relationship also actively decide not to share their information. In a conversation from FG4, Megyn speaks to her own perception of her boyfriend's decision not to share and (along with Beautiful) offers a reason for his concealment of this information:

> Megyn: I honestly don't' believe he talks about anything we do, or my close friends, or our close friends who are couples, I really don't believe their boyfriends say anything… because they're probably scared of their girlfriends and it's sort of a respect thing
> Beautiful: Guys, when they're in a relationship, they don't want other guys to know how good the girl is cause…
> Megyn: They don't want them to be fantasizing about it
> Beautiful: Yeah, they don't want them to be thinking about their girl.

Megyn and Beautiful indicate that one of the reasons males chose not to share is because of the respect they have for their significant other. The other reason is to prevent the people they share with from desiring their significant other. Furthermore, Megyn (FG 4) also feels narrators are disrespectful when they do decide to share that information. She said, "A few friends [of mine] are in serious relationships . . . and sometimes I don't want to hear their intimate details because [I] feel like it's not my place. . . . it's something special between them . . . I would almost respect them more if they kept it to themselves." Overall, females expect both females and males in committed relationships

to conceal the details of their sexual experiences, and in so doing, they are honoring the intimate relationship they have with him/her.

Thus, female participants reported the relationship between the listener and narrator, truth of the story, and narrator's romantic relationship status to influence how a listener interprets the motivation of another female narrator to share her sexual experiences. The next section highlights how females perceive males to be motivated to communicate their sexual experiences, which stands in contrast to the motivations of females.

Perceived Motivation for Men to Communicate

The females in the focus groups were very quick to point out the differences in female and male motivations for sharing sexual stories. Notably, females perceived males are motivated to share because it will positively influence their reputation. Superman (FG1) asserted, "[I] think girls are more shy cause there is that fear of what people think about you, cause society has made you feel like if a woman talks about sex you're gonna be judged for it. But if it's a guy and he talks about sex, he's a man." Thus, Superman indicates that men and women are judged differently for participating in sexual activities, and that this judgment is a result of societal assumptions about how men and women should act. Overall, female reputations are shaded negatively for participating in sexual acts, while male reputations are bolstered for participating in sexual acts. Therefore, women perceive men to be motivated to bolster their reputation through discussion of their sexual experiences.

Bolstering reputation. Shirley (FG2) pointed out that, "Guys do more of a bragging thing…guys, it's just bragging rights, not cause they want to have a deep conversation." Shirley draws the first distinction between male and female motivation here, claiming men brag in order to positively influence their reputation. However, what is considered a positive influence on a male's reputation could potentially be considered a negative influence on a female's reputation. This is echoed by Power Ranger (FG1), who said:

> I think it's different for boys than girls, I think girls probably try to tell each other so we can talk about it, but I think guys talk about it to one up each other, it's more of 'I did this' and maybe it's more like, them trying to show off. . . . guys are more interested in bragging about it, even if I don't want to know."

Although the females were quick to point out the boastful nature of males, they also listed several explanations for bragging. Taylor (FG3) said, "A guy would probably make it seem like . . . hardcore, dirty . . . all this stuff and whatever and they'll probably make stuff up too" to which Carrie (FG3) added, "Blow it out of proportion." Lack of depth in conversations between males was explained by Punky (FG2) who, in her conversation with Shirley (FG2) said:

> Punky: I don't think they're mature enough yet, even at this age to have a serious conversation I think even most guys I know at least, even if they're best friend came to them and was like 'I think I might have syphilis' I don't think a guy could sit there and have a serious conversation and be like 'you need to go to the doctor' whereas a girl would be like 'you need to go to the gyno, my mom knows this really good person . . .
> Shirley: A guy would be like 'that sucks . . . I told you not to bang that.'

Here, Punky points out the lack of maturity of males, which the female participants perceived to be one of the reasons males tend to focus on details and not be as open to

"talking" about what happened. Martha (FG4) and Megyn (FG4) asserted that males

emphasize the *sexual act*, while females emphasize the *experience*, they said:

> Martha (FG4) guys are prone to glorify it more than girls
> Megyn (FG4) yeah, a guy would never talk about it the same way a girl would…
> a girl would say "it was really sweet; it was a good time" a guy would always
> make it like "hit it and quit it."

Although the participants list maturity as one of the reasons males are more prone to

boast about their sexual encounters, they also implied that males boast in order to present

themselves in a very specific light. The female perception of males' storytelling

motivation focuses on the belief that males are motivated solely by bolstering their

reputation, and infer that the reason for this may be a lack of maturity. While the

perception females have of male goals is insightful, it does not, understandably, provide

the depth of perspective they were able to provide for female goals.

Overall, the female participants provided an excellent explanation for both the

goals of female and male narrators. Female participants recognized that the level of

closeness between the listener and narrator, truth, and relationship status of the narrator

are of utmost importance to how the female listener perceives the female narrator's

motivation to communicate. Similarly, the female participants distinguished important

differences between male and female narrator motivation, noting that males tend to be

more forthcoming with sexual experiences in order to positively influence their

reputation.

The following section focuses on males and their perception of male and female

narrators' motivations.

Men

While I did not moderate the focus groups, I found myself laughing, intrigued, and anticipating the responses of the men when I listened to the male focus group recordings. The tone of the conversation was very different in the male focus groups compared to the female focus groups, as the male perception of male motivation is different from female perception of female and male motivation. In this section, male perception of male motivation to communicate is explored, along with male perception of female motivation to communicate. Furthermore, truth and relationship status are explored, as the perception of the veracity of the story is very influential on how the male listener interprets the narrator's motivation to share.

Men and women utilize similar criteria to interpret the narrator's motivation. These criteria include the relationship between the narrator and listener, how true the story is, and the romantic relationship status of the narrator. While women emphasize the closeness of a relationship and tend to assume a story is true, men emphasize closeness in a relationship only when the content of the story is "serious." Furthermore, men reported bolstering reputation as the main motivation for sharing stories, which converges with the female's perception of male motivation. However, males also claimed narrators share stories to establish common ground with the listener. Because of the emphasis on reputation, men also take strides to establish how true a story is, and tend to be more skeptical of the narrator. The motivations of men differ from the motivations of women because of a double standard that influences the way reputations are influenced. The double standard is this: men are expected, and encouraged, to be

sexually promiscuous while women are expected to not be promiscuous and/or not discuss their sexual experiences to *appear* non-promiscuous.

Closeness of relationship. Several of the male participants noted that the closer the friendship is, the more serious the content of the story a narrator will share. A male narrator will only share serious content to another male that he feels close to. Participants emphasized closeness when sharing serious content because the purpose of sharing is interpreted *not* to bolster reputation. As Bruce (FG 6) said, "The more close the relationships is . . . the more serious (the content is)" in reference to what is shared. Unlike the female participants, the male participants did not report hearing a story from a narrator they had never met before. Instead, males drew distinctions between the personality of the person they would share with, as Bama (FG5) said "You've known them for awhile. [You wouldn't share with] someone that wouldn't be comfortable talking about it." Jason (FG5) echoed this when he said, "[It depends on] history with that person and the type of personality that person has." The males distinguish that the personality and history with the narrator is of the utmost importance when sharing serious content.

Specifically, males point out that the history between the narrator and listener leads the narrator to share serious sexual issues rather than attempting to impress the listener. The closeness between the narrator and listener, and the personality of the listener parallels what females reported feeling within friendships. Disclosing within a close relationship is the only instance in which reputation is not interpreted (by the listener) to be a motivator. However, males differ from females in that they reported

these instances to only be of significance when something is "serious," which differs

from the female motivations to respond to the listener, seek advice, caution the listener,

and build intimacy. Furthermore, outside of close relationships, the most significant

reason the men listed for sharing was to bolster reputation.

> *Bolstering reputation.* Reputation was identified by the males in the focus group

as the greatest motivator for a man to share his story. Reputation was conveyed in

several ways by the participants, by trying to "impress" the people the narrator is sharing

with, or by "showing off" in order to make the narrator appear more impressive. As

Bruce (FG 6) and Barry (FG 6) asserted:

> Bruce (FG 6) I mean, guys tell stories to show off and stuff. . . . not about how
> you had a lovely evening…most of the time these stories are just to tell
> somebody . . . it could be to have a better image
> Barry (FG6) yeah, increase your street cred.

Many of the other male participants also described the narrator's desire to positively

influence his reputation by "trying to impress you" as Jason (FG 5) said. When asked

what motivates males to share their stories, Arry (FG6) echoed Jason and answered, ". .

.yeah, trying to impress is definitely number one." Barry (FG6), pointed out, "there's

probably people trying to overcompensate. . . like there may be a certain group of guys

that, you know. someone's trying to overcompensate for something. . . for some issue

they have self esteem-wise so they try to boost their image." Other males in the group

agreed with his assertion, as Steven (FG6) said "Frat guys I know are more likely to

share… you have like a guy standard that you're held up to."

> Here, the participants point out the importance of impressing others, because in

doing so, a man's reputation is influenced. Furthermore, Steven identifies a specific

group of males that are known for sharing ("frat guys") and states that males are held up to a standard. This "standard" may imply that men are expected to engage in sexual activity and share the subsequent experiences. Thus, the narrator who shares his sexual experiences earns a reputation for being sexually active, which is viewed as positive by other men, as JC (FG5) said "they want to be noticed." This in turn, bolsters the narrator's reputation. Barry (FG6) furthers this when he said, "The guy who gets the most [sex] talks about it the most. I would say, [he's] the biggest pimp, quote unquote." Mezzi (FG5) pointed out that, "you're kind of weird if you don't want to talk about it," which also speaks to the expectation men have of other men to share their experiences. In summary, men are expected to engage in and share their sexual experiences. By narrating their sexual encounters, a man's reputation is positively bolstered, and he may be idolized by other men. In addition to trying to bolster reputation, the participants reported that men share their stories to establish common ground with other men.

Establishing common ground. Participants reported that establishing common ground or having a common reference point may motivate narrators to share their stories. As JC (FG5) said, "Sometimes it's just a common bond… with guys the common bond can always be girls . . ."JC claims one way for men to bond is to discuss women. Establishing a common *bond* as a motivator takes priority over *bolstering reputation*. The listeners perceive the narrators to be less concerned with reputation and more concerned with a establishing a topic for conversation to which all members of the interaction can contribute. Steven (FG6) said males are motivated to talk about sex because, "It's a topic that everyone can relate to and everyone will find interesting."

Furthermore, Bruce (FG6) provides an explanation for how establishing common ground and bolstering reputation are linked:

> It has to do with… if it's something you're kind of wanting to share, something you're proud of… versus something that's like… you don't want to tell a lot of people obviously…, [if it's] something you're proud of… I mean, you're going to tell everybody.

Here, Bruce indicates that if a male takes pride in his sexual experience, he will want to share it with other male listeners. The motivation to establish a common bond ties back to the motivation to bolster reputation, in so much as a man who takes pride in his exploits wishes to share with others who may also deem the experience to be positive. This may positively influence the narrator's reputation. Thus, by establishing a common bond, reputation may still be influenced, regardless of whether influencing reputation is perceived as a motivation of the narrator or not.

Overall, a man is perceived to be motivated to communicate in order to positively influence his reputation and to establish common ground with other men. The male perception of narrator motivation differs from how female participants perceived female narrators. These motivations differ in that women are more concerned with the relationship they have with the person sharing, and only assume reputation bolstering to be a motivation of the non-friend narrators. However, men are concerned with the relationship they have with a listener only when the narrator is sharing a serious experience. Similar to female perceptions of non-friends and male narrators, men reported bolstering reputation as the primary motivator for sharing their sexual experience. These differences, specifically in terms of reputation, are furthered in terms of the truth or accuracy of the stories being shared.

Truth

Unlike female participants, males are more skeptical of how true a story is. As noted, females are quick to assume a female narrator is telling them the truth, but question the truthfulness of a male narrator. Males, on the other hand, are much more skeptical of the veracity of a story told by a male narrator. Skepticism, according to the participants, is related to motivation, as males perceive male narrators to be more likely to lie in order to bolster reputation. One reason males are perceived to lie is because of the pressure to compete for being the male with the most sexual partners or the most interesting stories. This is evident in a conversation in FG 5:

> JC: And some people, it's like a competition.
> Bama: Yeah, they're like, how many girls can you rack up in a week.
> Jason: Yeah, and that's where the lies come in.
> Steven: You're automatically skeptical.

Here, the participants indicate men are motivated to lie about their experiences because of the competitive nature that exists among other males. Because men experience pressure to share their stories, they may feel the need to lie or embellish their experiences. Thus, the participants claimed there are ways to establish how true a story is. Similar to the female participants, male participants establish veracity of a story through knowledge of speaker honesty and corroboration with other men.

A man's tendency to be honest influences how participants interpret how true a story is. As Matt (FG 5) said, "I have friends who lie a lot, and they continue to lie and you just listen and you're like 'Okay, none of this happened' and it's all over the top too and I know you and I know you don't do that. . . it's not your personality to go over the top." Prior personal knowledge of a narrator and their propensity to lie influences

listeners' perception of truth. However, as participants previously noted, not all story

sharing occurs within friendships, thus many of the male listeners may not have prior

knowledge of the narrator's honesty. Therefore, participants may attempt to corroborate

the story with another male who may have been present in the situation in which the

story occurred.

Similar to females, males also attempt to corroborate a story that they think may

be exaggerated or untrue. However, males take a much more proactive role in this

process, whereas females are generally more passive and rely on other people involved

in the story telling process to verify the accuracy of the story. Males actively seek to

verify the truth, as JC (FG 5) explained, "I had it happen where I knew the girl and I

knew she wasn't like that…she's really, really Christian, but the guy just kept lying and

lying and lying, and so one of my friends starts to call up the girl to ask her about it."

This is further demonstrated in a story Matt (FG5) told about his suspicions of his friend:

> A friend of mine always talked about this girl he had a class with… like 'Oh I get
> with her everyday' and then one day he actually brought her over to my place
> while we were hanging out one day and he left for minute and I asked her…
> "You really do all that stuff with him?' and she's like 'No! He really says that?'
> and I said yeah, and of course she got pissed about it.

Thus, both JC and Matt reported instances of proactive attempts to corroborate a story.

Interestingly, JC and Matt's examples also demonstrate how bold some men may be

when attempting to corroborate as story. They each discussed examples in which the

woman who the narrator identified as a participant in the sexual act was explicitly asked

about her involvement in the story. This indicates an interesting gendered understanding

that exists between both males and females. Both genders expect females to be honest

about their sexual encounters, as evidenced by males who may directly inquire of the female the narrator claimed to have relations with. Furthermore, both males and females expect males to be more prone to lying. Thus, the honesty of females and the dishonesty of males may relate to each gender's desire to influence their reputation. Finally, relationship status is the last factor that contributes to how listeners perceive narrator motivation to communicate.

Romantic Relationship Status

The influence of romantic relationship status on perception of narrator motivation differs for men and women. As previously mentioned, women perceived men to not share stories about their girlfriends or serious relationships because they believe they want to maintain intimacy and conceal her sexual attractiveness. However, as many of the males reported, there may be an additional reason why males neglect to share as much of their sexual lives when they are in a romantic relationship. Male listeners may express disinterest or be unimpressed because they assume sexual activities are occurring. Bruce (FG 6) was very frank when he said:

> I feel like guys who you know, if you're in a some sort of steady relationship with one person than like, I don't care about your stories, they get pretty much the same after awhile . . . but if every other weekend you find a new chick to hang with, then your stories are going to vary and you'll have more of them.

Barry (FG6) echoed this sentiment when he said, "Yeah, you're more likely to share a story about someone you're not as serious with." Arry (FG6) reiterated this idea saying, "I think once you've established you're having sex, it's not as impressive as if it's like just a random encounter, that makes it a whole lot more interesting." These participants indicate that a) men in romantic relationships are engaging in sexual activity, b) the

sexual activity they are engaging in is not as exciting as sexual activities that occur outside of a relationship and c) there is a lack of interest in hearing from a male narrator who is in a romantic relationship. This reiterates the idea of competition. Inside a relationship, a male is (presumably) not competing for the affection of his significant other, whereas outside of a relationship, a male pursuing a female must compete with other males for her affection, or to engage her in sexual activities. Thus, listeners are more impressed by stories told by a narrator who has sexual encounters outside of a committed romantic relationship.

Another reason males in relationships are not expected to share the sexual experiences they have with their significant other is to conceal the sexual attractiveness of their girlfriend. As Jason (FG5) said, "If they're in a relationship they don't want to talk about their personal business" to which JC (FG5) responded, "That guy doesn't want anybody looking at his girlfriend, you know?" Here, participants claim males are motivated *not* to share in order to conceal the sexual attractiveness of their significant other. Overall, sex that takes place outside of a relationship is considered a more worthy topic of conversation among males.

To summarize, males are motivated to share their sexual experiences with other males. Participants reported that narrators are motivated to bolster their reputation and establish common ground with other men. Because men are motivated to bolster their reputation, listeners are skeptical of how true a sexual story may be, and thus, take steps to investigate the veracity of the story. Furthermore, men within romantic relationships feel *unmotivated* to share their sexual experiences because their experiences are not as

impressive as sexual acts that occur outside of a relationship, and they wish to conceal the attractiveness of their girlfriend. These are the interpretations male participants made about the motivation of male narrators. However, males perceive female motivation to communicate very differently.

Perceived Motivation for Women to Communicate

Jason (FG 5) provided a simple explanation for why males perceive females to be motivated (or unmotivated) to communicate. Jason said, "It's a double standard that gives us confidence to talk about it [sex] cause we're not really going to be judged." Males claimed female narrators are motivated to avoid judgment and negative influence on reputation. This is highlighted in a conversation between Steven (FG 6) and Barry (FG 6):

> Steven: There are stigmas between genders that . . . you feel more comfortable with people of the same gender.
> Barry: Yeah, and the stigma . . . the girl's stigma is "slut" if you're out with [having sex with] a bunch of dudes. And dudes, it's 'the man' so that's why I think guys will be more free with the information.

While the males recognized the double standard by which females must constantly be conscious of when disclosing their experiences, Barry (FG 6) also added:

> Barry: I don't think any girl is innocent . . . I have no illusions that the girls are any different than the guys… they just hide it better
> Steven: Yeah, they have a standard
> Barry: Well, they just hide it well, they keep it under wraps but they're pretty much the same thing.

This indicates that although females may be engaging in the same behaviors, they must conceal that information in order to preserve a non-promiscuous reputation.

According to the males, another way females maintain a non-promiscuous reputation is by not boasting. As Arry (FG 6) said, "I don't think I've ever heard a woman boast," and Jason (FG5) echoed, saying "girls don't boast, guys it's a lot of boasting." Mezzi (FG 6) adds another layer to this, saying "I really haven't . . . I can say a few times . . . that I've heard of a woman telling a story and so it's, just it seems like they're less open about it." Thus, females rarely disclose their sexual experiences to other males, and when they do, they tend to not share details.

Double standard. Both focus groups identified a "double standard" that exists for females, such that if a female were to have the same number of sexual partners as a male, and discuss having those sexual partners, her reputation would be negatively influenced, whereas a male's may be positively influenced. As Jon (FG 5) said:

> Yeah, cause we don't have that double standard so it's a lot more comfortable talking about it to a wide range of people, whereas with girls, if you talk about what you did every weekend all the time you'll probably end up being associated with as a slut.

This double standard was further identified by Bama (FG5) who said, "Like when you hear about a girl going around the block and back, you think she's a slut, but if it's a guy, it's totally different," to which JC (FG5) responded, "It's a double standard." Thus, males and females both believe female narrators to be more concerned with maintaining a reputation that does not present them as sexually promiscuous. The double standard identified in the focus group conversations among both females and males plays a large role in why some men and women chose to remain silent, or not share their own experiences.

Silence

Silence was mentioned both implicitly and explicitly during focus group discussions. This phenomenon occurs in two different instances. If someone remains silent during sexual storytelling, other people may make assumptions about his/her sexual experience. Similarly, silence may make someone feel pressured to share. People who are in a serious romantic relationship are the only ones expected to remain silent during these discussions. Each instance of silence is described in detail in this section.

The women in focus groups indicated that when a woman is silent, and chooses not to share her sexual experiences, certain assumptions are made about her experiences, and these assumptions are usually false. Kate (FG1) frankly said, "No one is going around like 'I'm a virgin,' so if you are [a virgin] you don't share." Kate went on to share an experience in which her silence was interpreted incorrectly:

> People assume you do (have sex) . . . and you just don't talk about it and they assume bad things about you, and that has affected me personally . . . like they assume I was sleeping around . . . just cause I didn't say I wasn't, cause I didn't want to talk about it.

Here, Kate implies she did not vocalize her sexual experience because she did not have an experience to share. However, the members of the group she was with (as she later found out), assumed that she *did* partake in sexual activities, but chose not to share them. Marilyn (FG1) sympathized with Kate, and explained, "When you're going around in a group, and everyone has sex stories and you don't and . . . [long pause] . . . and it kind of makes you . . . set apart from the group." Based off of these examples, remaining silent is tricky because others may still assume the silent woman engages in sexual activities. Therefore, women are caught in a double bind: if a woman discusses her behavior too

much, and to non-friends, or she remains silent while others are sharing sexual stories, she is judged negatively. Furthermore, silence may make a woman feel uncomfortable because she is not contributing to the conversation. Comments from other focus group members reinforce that assumptions are made about women who remain silent. Punky (FG 2) admitted to making an assumption when she said, "I have one friend and I know she does stuff or I assume she does stuff, but she doesn't' ever say anything . . . but I know like, she has to."

Punky reinforces the assertions of Kate and Marilyn when she explains that assumptions are made about other group members who decide to remain silent. I found the comments the women made to be interesting, based on the fact that the women previously claimed to be motivated to uphold a non-promiscuous reputation. I made my own assumption that by remaining silent, women could avoid shading their reputation negatively, but apparently those who remain silent are subjected to the same amount of judgment as those who vocalize their experiences. Thus, the ideal situation to share sexual experiences, without tainting reputation, would be when a woman shares an experience she had in a committed relationship among friends or is prompted to share by friends. While the women explained the negative implications of remaining silent during these conversations, the men had a very different take on remaining silent.

When asked about who does not share sexual experiences, the men had very different responses and rationales for why someone may remain silent. One of these reasons is that silence is more acceptable among men. Bruce (FG 6) indicated, "You don't have to share yourself but you can listen to someone else share their story" to

which Steven (FG 6) responded with, "and everyone will relate to it." For males, silence

does not negatively influence their reputation, because it is culturally accepted and

expected that a male who is silent has had sex, but simply chooses not to share. This

assumption, however, was also reported by females, and speaks to the nature of a

"double standard." Men assume that other men who remain silent are having sex but not

sharing. The same assumption is made about women who remain silent; however this

assumption negatively shades a woman's reputation, whereas it has no negative effect on

a man's. This double standard may also play a role in why some men feel pressured to

break the silence and share their experiences.

If a man remains silent, he may not lack an experience to share, but may lack an

experience that is just as interesting and entertaining as what the other males are sharing.

This pressure may cause some of the men to lie about their experiences, so as not to

seem to have an uninteresting story. Steven (FG 6) described feeling pressured when he

said:

> The people that are telling their stories, if it's in the group, not everybody's
> gonna talk for whatever reason that is, but you don't have to talk. . . .Sometimes I
> guess you feel pressure to give a story but sometimes you don't need to . . . if it's
> all good stories and you don't want to come up with a bad story.

Men may also feel pressured to break the silence and lie in instances when they feel

pressured to share his experience, and ensure his story is of the same caliber as other

stories being told. Overall, participants indicated that assumptions are made about

women who remain silent, and some men feel pressured to break silence. However,

there is one group of people that is expected to remain silent, and may even *be* silenced

by other members of the conversation: men and women who are in romantic relationships.

The silenced. Silence is only acceptable among those in romantic relationships because an assumption is made that if you're in a relationship you're engaging in sex. Thus, like single men and women who remain silent, men and women in relationships are assumed to be engaging in sex as well. However, some men are silenced by other men. Men assume sexual activities a man in a relationship engages in are boring specifically *because* it occurs inside a relationship. Jason (FG5), explained this when he said, "The thing that never comes up is a couple that's always been together… cause you never think 'Oh they never do anything cause they never talk about it'; you would just never bring that up." Thus, those in a romantic relationship are assumed to be engaging in sex, but are expected to not share their experiences. Ultimately, silence or what is not said plays a large role in the perceptions of others, especially when a person actively decides not to voice their experience (or lack thereof).

In this section, the ways in which listeners perceive the motivation of the narrators has been explained. Generally, perception of motivation differs depending on whether or not the narrator is male or female, and if they are speaking to a male or female listener. Women reported relationship between the narrator and listener, truth, and relationship status to be the most influential in determining the motivation of a female speaker. Men indicated bolstering reputation as the ultimate motivation to share sexual stories. Men also reported that because of the concern over reputation, men are more concerned with how true a story is. Similarly, men also expect men who are in a

relationship to not share their sexual experiences. Lastly, participants indicated that

assumptions are made about men and women who remain silent during conversations in

which sexual stories are disclosed, and that those in relationships may be silenced by

other group members. Now that motivation has been explicated, it is important to

understand how sexual stories influence the men and women who listen to them.

Communication Influence on the Listener

After establishing the communication context, as well as the gendered

perceptions of motivation to communicate, the final theme indicates that listening to

sexual stories has a profound influence on the listener. Specifically, listening to others'

stories influences whether or not a listener decides to share his or her own sexual story

with someone else. Females reported that listening to other people share their sexual

experiences, no matter the context or content, made them less apt to share their own,

while males offered more mixed responses on their decision to disclose.

Decision to Disclose

Almost all of the female participants indicated that they did not wish to disclose

their own stories after hearing the stories of another female. They claimed to not want to

endure the potential negative consequences sharing may have on their reputation.

Marilyn (FG 1) said:

> I personally don't want to share my own stories, cause when my friend sits there
> telling a group of people like all the things she's done, I mean, I just, I feel like
> people are looking at her differently, and why would I want someone looking
> differently at me.

The feeling of impending judgment was echoed by Reese (FG3) who said, "It makes me

not want to [share] cause I don't want to be that girl that they're talking about . . . it

makes me not want to be that girl." Punky (FG2) also said, "I'm not very trusting of people so if it's something scary, something that I want to keep private, I just don't tell anyone." All of these females indicated that they did not wish to disclose their own stories or experiences based on the fear of the consequences. Megyn (FG4) firmly indicated that not sharing is a behavior she learned early on:

> I learned not to share ever. . . . I never told any of my friends, and I never talked to anyone about it, so no one ever talked about me. . . I think most girls should look at it that way, like, you can have fun and not be, you know, have this reputation or be looked down upon. . . . don't go around sharing things constantly.

There were a few exceptions to not wanting to disclose to others, though there were several contradictions present as well. Shirley (FG2) initially said: "If someone's willing to share personal stories with you, you'd be more willing to share with them." This speaks to the idea of reciprocal disclosure, however Shirley contradicted herself when she later said, "If there's things you don't want people to know, maybe just telling your best friend . . . or maybe not," which indicated her hesitation to share with even one other person. The women in the focus group seemed proud to tell me they didn't want to share their stories with other people, as if they had learned something intrinsically about themselves. When I asked them what they learned from listening to other person's stories, Megyn (FG4) and Martha (FG4) said this:

> Martha: I learned about the girl I want to be
> Megyn : I wouldn't want to be (the girl) people talk about her like that. . .
> Martha:. . . the majority of the stories I hear, I would not want to be the girl in that situation.

While the decision not to share reverberated among the females, the males in the focus groups were mixed on their desire to disclose. Several males echoed the women and

claimed to not want to share. Matt (FG5) said, "(I learned) don't be like those guys . . . that's just the person I am though like I'm not the type of guy to just go and try to get with girls . . . I keep my business to myself." However, several of the other men, unlike the females, indicated feeling more at ease with their own sexual stories, and perhaps more apt to share.

JC (FG5) said, "I've become more open than I would have just from friends telling me about their experiences. . . . which are ridiculous . . . they make mine look not so ridiculous so . . . I feel more comfortable to talk to them about that than I would have been before." This is furthered by Barry (FG6), who seems to have identified certain expectations when sharing experiences when he said, "You kind of know what the standard is, like, I'm not going to share a boring story. . . . You learn what parts to leave in and what parts to hang out." Barry's statement ties back to the idea of silence, in which male participants will not share stories they feel are not as interesting or exciting as the other stories they hear. One such story would be of an act that occurred within a romantic relationship.

Furthermore, participants expressed a better sense of knowing their peers, in terms of who to tell if they did decide to share, and who not to engage in with sexual activities. As Shirley (FG 2) said, "There are certain people you know not to tell things to. . . ." Beautiful (FG 4) added, "You learn who not to mess with, what not to tell, who not to tell, who you can tell . . . definitely made me more cautious with everything, who you talk to . . . cause they can take what you say and turn it into something else."

Similarly, participants took away some insights in terms of "how to," as well as use of self-protection. Mezzi (FG 6) asserted, "Be sure of certain things, don't go into it without having what you need" to which Arry (FG 6) replied, "Yeah, use a condom." While protection was not discussed among all the focus groups, one female participant, Megyn (FG4) affirmed, "I will always reiterate them (her friends) having safe sex, always."

Taken as a whole, participants described the conversations regarding someone's sexual experience to be contextual, influential, and that the narrator's have motivations which differ by gender. They also gained some personal insight from these discussions, the implications of which are discussed in the next chapter. This chapter provided a detailed description of both analysis process and resulting phenomena. The next chapter focuses on the theoretical implications of the findings, the limitations of the current study, and suggested direction for future research.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I will provide answers to the research questions and explain how the findings of this study reinforce concepts inherent within Communication Privacy Management Theory. I will explain the new phenomena that emerged from the data and how the findings contribute to a new theory of sexual storytelling. Finally, I provide the limitations of the current research, and the implications for the direction of future research.

Conclusions

Physical location and relationship create contexts in which sexual storytelling occurs. The first research question asked what role location plays in the discussion of sexual storytelling among college students. However, findings indicated both physical location and relationship between the narrator and listener work together to form context, and do not exist mutually exclusive of each other.

Table 3

Communication Context

Theme	Findings	Quotation
Physical Location	• Mixed emphasis on importance of physical location in storytelling	Lucy (FG2): We're surrounded by it, so we hear it everywhere Martha (FG4): …I'd deviate from that conversation if it was in public…
	• Reported storytelling occurs in public and private spaces	Barry (FG6): If you're comfortable, you're going to [share]
	• Where a story is shared influences how the listener interprets the message	Megyn (FG 4): I've had friends tell me "I'm pregnant"… in an intimate setting…and I've been told at a party…that's the way they handle it…to make them more comfortable
	• Storytelling does not occur in church	Jennifer (FG1) [We don't talk about it] in church
Relationship	• Reported friends and non-friends share sexual stories	Bama (FG5): [We share with] close friends… and generally of the same gender Shirley (FG 3): I don't even know you… why are you telling me this?
	• Interpreted non-friends share stories because of alcohol and apathy	Arry (FG6): Alcohol is usually key when stories are brought up
	• Discomfort sharing stories with parents	Jennifer (FG3): [Talking with parents]…I was thinking about how awkward that would be

As shown in Table 3, men and women distinguished public from private spaces in which storytelling occurs, and emphasized the relationship between narrator and listener in storytelling. The findings were mixed regarding how important physical location is. Participants who did not emphasize location asserted that sexual storytelling occurred frequently and often in many places, except church. Those who did emphasize location asserted that stories are shared in both public and private places. The listener's

interpretation of the seriousness of the story a narrator shares is influenced by the location in which the story is shared.

The relationship between the narrator and the listener influences the context in which stories are told. The findings indicate both friends and non-friends share their sexual experiences; however same-gendered friends were the most common storytellers. Emphasis was placed on relationship, as participants interpreted sexual disclosures by non-friend narrators to be influenced by alcohol or apathetic about revealing personal content; whereas friend narrators who disclosed were interested in establishing closeness. Thus, while public or private spaces may not be important to all participants, they are emphasized more when combined with relationship between the narrator and listener.

Men and women identified memorable story content, but asserted that the content of the stories did not have as great an impact on them as the person who was telling the story. Memorable stories are considered atypical, and involve abnormal sexual behaviors being performed. The findings indicated atypical stories are memorable because they are entertaining. Regardless of the content of the stories, the participants believed the narrator was motivated to share. The listener was also influenced or affected by listening to a story. Though the second research question was focused on memorable themes inherent within the content of the stories, the participants emphasized their perceptions of narrator motivation to share a story is more influential than the specific content shared. Perception of motivations became the predominant focus of this study's results.

The ways in which listeners interpreted a narrator's motivation to share was based on the gender of the narrator, and the gender of the listener. Both men and women use the same criteria in determining the motivation of the narrator. Those criteria are based on the relationship between the narrator and listener, how true the listener interprets a story to be, and whether or not the narrator is in a romantic relationship.

Table 4

Female Perception of Motivation to Communicate

Theme	Findings	Quotation
Relationship with narrator	• Friends and non-friends have different motivations to tell stories • Friends are motivated to respond to questions from friends, seek advice, and build intimacy	**Friends** Jennifer (FG1): She needs someone to talk to… (and) it makes me feel closer to her Megyn (FG4): I think subconsciously… they want me to tell them not to do something Shirley (FG2): People ask "How was your night?"… If you're good friends, it just comes up.
	• Non-friends are motivated to bolster reputation, are apathetic, and/or may be intoxicated	**Non-Friends** Taylor (FG1): That's my first impression of you… you can't help but judge. Reese (FG2): Is she trying to impress the guys? Beautiful (FG4) Some girls, they just don't care [who knows] about their business.
Truth	• Assumption that narrator is telling the truth	Martha (FG4) Why would you lie?… You don't want to be perceived… Beautiful (FG4)…as a whore.
	• Corroboration and knowledge of narrator honesty used to assess truthfulness	Marilyn (FG1) Every story… she had someone else there, backing it up.
Relationship Status	• Women in relationships do not share sexual experiences	Taylor (FG3): If you're in a long term relationship… that's [sex] something y'all share together.

The relationship between female narrator and female listener(s) influenced how a listener perceived motivation. As seen in Table 4, female narrators who were considered "friends" were perceived to be motivated to respond to questions, seek advice, and build intimacy in the relationship. However, non-friend narrators were believed to be concerned with bolstering reputation, lack concern with how they are perceived, and/or are under the influence of alcohol.

Women typically assume a female narrator is truthful, and have a method of knowing if a woman is telling the truth or not. Personal knowledge of the honesty of the narrator, as well as corroboration are the two ways in which females assess how true a story is. Determining truth is important because of the potential effect on reputation. Thus, participants tend to assume other females are telling the truth in order to avoid negative reputational impact.

Finally, participants indicated women in relationships are not motivated to share their sexual experiences. An assumption is made that women in relationships are already engaging in sexual activity with their partners. Participants also believe women in relationships preserve intimacy in their relationships by concealing their sexual experiences within those relationships.

Female participants perceived men are motivated to share their stories in order to bolster their reputations. Women presume men are more prone to lying about their sexual experiences in order to strengthen images of sexual prowess, which differs from the presumption that women tell the truth. Furthermore, female participants indicated

men in relationships do not share their sexual experiences in order to maintain the

intimacy within the relationship and conceal the attractiveness of their significant other.

Overall, the female participants emphasized the relationship between the narrator

and listener, truth, relationship status of the narrator, and gender of the narrator to

influence the way motivation is perceived. In general, women perceive their friends

disclose in order to seek advice and create closeness in the relationship, but perceive

non-friends disclose in order to boost reputation and may be under the influence of

alcohol. Ultimately, women believe other women wish to maintain a non-promiscuous

relationship, which differs from how men perceive other male narrators.

Male narrators were motivated to share stories to bolster reputation and establish

common ground. Closeness between narrator and listener is emphasized only when the

content being shared is considered "serious." Impressing other males with stories of

sexual experience is considered the primary motivation for men to share their stories.

However, some participants indicated establishing common ground through discussion

of sex also motivates men to share.

The findings indicated men feel pressured to share interesting, memorable stories

in order to impress other men and thus, also feel pressured to lie about their experiences

(see Table 5). Many of the men expressed skepticism when listening to other men share

their experiences, and have established a method for establishing truth.   Participants

indicated that they attempt to corroborate a story, and contact the female involved in the

story to verify the accuracy. Interestingly, both men and women assume men lie about

their sexual experiences in order to increase sexual prowess, yet both genders presume

women tell the truth in order to preserve their reputation.

Table 5

Male Perception of Motivation to Communicate

Theme	Findings	Quotation
Bolstering Reputation & Establishing Common Ground	• Indicated closeness influenced how serious content shared would be	Bruce (FG6): The more close the relationship, the more serious the content is.
	• Reported desire to impress other men with sexual experience	Jason (FG5): To impress is definitely number one.
	• Sex viewed as a topic all men can speak on	JC (FG5): With guys, the common bond can always be girls.
Truth	• Reported being skeptical about how a true a story is because of desire to bolster reputation	JC (FG5): It's like a competition. Jason (FG5): And that's where the lies come in. Steven (FG6): You're automatically skeptical.
	• Corroboration and knowledge of narrator's honesty used to assess truthfulness	JC (FG5): I knew the girl wasn't like that… so one of my friends started to call her up and ask her about it. Matt (FG5): I know you and I know you don't do that… it's not your personality.
Relationship status	• Men in relationships do not share sexual experiences	Bruce (FG6): If you're in a relationship…I don't care about your stories… they get pretty much the same after awhile.

Men in committed relationships are unmotivated to share their sexual

experiences. Men in relationships wish to conceal the physical attractiveness of their

girl friends, and are also assumed to be engaging in sexual activity frequently. Because

men in relationships are perceived to be engaging in sexual activity on a regular basis

(and with the same person), their stories are considered boring and not worth sharing by

other men, who would prefer to hear a story about sexual experiences outside of relationships.

Interestingly, the results were mixed in how males perceive female narrator motivation. Some of the male participant's perceived females are modest, and motivated to protect their reputation by not sharing their sexual experiences. Others believed women participated in the same sexual activities as men, but conceal their sexuality better than men do in order to avoid judgment and subsequent negative impact on reputation. The men highlighted a double standard that exists between the genders, such that men who engage in sex and discuss their conquests bolster their reputation, whereas women who engage in sex and discuss their experiences negatively influence their reputation.

Men and women believe people are motivated to share their stories. Women base their perception of motivation on relationship, truth, and relationship status. Men perceive motivation based on reputation, truth, and relationship status. While interpretations of motivation differ by gender, both men and women recognized that a double standard exists for women who engage in sexual activity. Regardless of the perception of the narrator, participants also reported feeling influenced by the stories they listen to.

Listening to sexual stories influenced the participants, and was the focus of the third research question, which asked how influential sexual stories are on the people listening to them. While the responses were mixed between males and females, both

indicated listening to sexual stories influenced their decision to disclose their sexual

experiences (see Table 6).

Table 6		
Communication Influence		
Theme	Findings	Quotation
Reluctance to disclose	• Potential negative reputational influence hinders reciprocal disclosure	Martha (FG4): In most of the stories I hear… I wouldn't want to be the girl in that situation. Punky (FG2): I'm not trusting of people…if I want to keep it private, I don't tell anyone.
Learning Norms	Reported knowing what stories and content are considered acceptable and interesting to share	Barry (FG6): You know what the standard is…you learn what parts to leave in and what parts to hang out.

Participants reported that their decision to remain silent influenced their

reputation, that they received pressure to remain silent, and those in romantic

relationships are silenced. Female participants emphasized that people will make

assumptions about a person's sexual activity if they remain silent during conversations

in which other people are sharing. On the other hand, male participants expressed that

some men are pressured to remain silent during storytelling if their stories are not as

interesting as the other men's. Both male and female participants reported that people in

relationships are silenced by those who are not in a relationship. Overall, silence

influences reputations, and those in relationships are pressured to remain silent because

their experiences are deemed less interesting than those who are single.

The findings were mixed between males and females about the decision to disclose. Female participants reported that listening to sexual stories made them not want to disclose their own sexual experiences in order to avoid negative reputational consequences. Male responses were mixed, with some of the men reporting that they lacked desire to share their experiences, while other men felt more willing to share because they felt their experiences were not as excessive as other people's. On the whole, both genders indicated that listening to the sexual stories of others influenced their decision to disclose their own sexual experiences, and female participants also claimed they did not wish to engage in sexual activity in the future.

Initially, I sought out to investigate the importance of location and content of sexual storytelling, as well as whether or not sexual storytelling was influential. While the research questions were answered, the predominant findings of this study focus on the gendered differences in motivation to communicate, which was not considered in my initial investigation. There are several reasons the findings differ from initial inquiry. First, my research questions may have been too strongly shaded by my own beliefs and experiences in terms of sexual storytelling. If theory had played a stronger role in the development of the research questions, the findings may have been more closely aligned. Furthermore, I placed more emphasis on the content of the stories being shared, rather than the people sharing the stories. One of the reasons I focused on content rather than relationship between narrator and listener is because of my belief in the power of the narrative. While the content of the story was important, the process of storytelling is equally important, especially the person telling the story. Thus, my focus was too

narrowed in on the influence of the *narrative*, rather than the influence of the *storytelling*, resulting in an error in conceptualization.

Ultimately, college students deem sexual storytelling as contextual, influential, and that people are motivated to share their experiences. Given the findings from this study, it is important to highlight the ways in which these findings reinforce concepts inherent within CPM, and demonstrate how the findings provide new phenomena to consider when studying sexual storytelling among college students.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM asserts that individuals own their private information, and make the decision to share their information within a rules-based process which includes risk assessment, gendered differences, and personal motivations. In terms of this study, CPM aided in understanding what influences a person to reveal and conceal information about their sexual experiences. Furthermore, personalistic (divulging to one) and non-personalistic (divulging to many) types of disclosure, as well as liking and closeness, influence a person's decision to disclose. The findings of this study reinforced these concepts.

Information ownership. Individuals believe they own their private information, and the participants demonstrated concern for information ownership by emphasizing contexts in which storytelling occurs. For example, the participants emphasized that when stories are told in public, there is a greater chance for others to become co-owners of information who were not intended to be. Overall, the participant's emphasis on

context relates to information ownership because location and relationship are indicative of who may receive information.

Risk assessment and personal motivation. When revealing private information, CPM avers that a person must be motivated to disclose in spite of the risks inherent within sharing. In this study, participants claimed potential impact on the narrator's reputation was the greatest risk to assess when sharing a story, especially among females. Thus, a narrator would have to overcome the possible negative influence on her reputation in order to share. Risk assessment was not as apparent among the male participants, except when they distinguished that they would prefer to share serious content with someone they were close to. In close relationships, male participants believe narrators feel comfortable with the listener, and perceive risk to reputation to be minimal.

Furthermore, participants identified narrators as being very motivated to share their experiences. However, CPM claims motivation for sharing centers on building intimacy within a relationship (which held true for females) and to strengthen interpersonal liking (which held true for both genders). Thus, one of the ways this study contributes to CPM is that it adds and identifies the listener's perception of narrator motivation, such as sharing for personal gain, rather than solely creating closeness within the relationship. CPM focuses on how management of private information inherently affects the relationship between the listener and narrator, and identifies creating closeness as a motivation of the narrator. This study indicates that narrators are motivated to share for personal benefit as well as the benefit of the relationship.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the motivation of the speaker is strictly a perception of the participants listening to the story, and may not align with the speaker's true motivation to disclose. However, motivation to share sexual stories was perceived very differently for and by each gender.

Gendered differences. Research surrounding gendered differences has indicated that females are more likely to disclose information, and that both males and females are more likely to disclose to someone of the same gender. This research reinforces previous findings, as participants reported friends of the same gender to be the most common storyteller's. Furthermore, the female and male participants emphasized that women speak about their experiences for the sake of the conversation, indicating a tendency for women to disclose more than males. As previously mentioned, there were gendered differences in interpretations of narrator motivation as well. The findings also align with research surrounding personalistic and non-personalistic disclosure, as well as closeness and liking.

Personalistic and non-personalistic disclosure. Both males and females engage in personalistic (divulging to one) and non-personalistic (divulging to many) disclosures which influence how participants interpreted the information disclosed. Personalistic disclosures among female friends produce intimacy and closeness in the relationship, but contrasts previous findings, as females did not feel motivated to reciprocate disclosure to a non-friend who personalistically disclosed to them. Male participants engage in both disclosure types, but did not indicate whether one type of disclosure influenced liking and closeness within the relationship between narrator and listener.

Liking and closeness. Findings of this study reinforce that liking and closeness influence and result from disclosure. However some of the findings contradicted previous research. For example, if a narrator disclosed information to a participant who did not perceive their relationship as "close," the listener did not feel compelled to reciprocate disclosure. Similarly, females and some males did not feel motivated to disclose their sexual experiences with friends who had disclosed to them, which contrasts the literature surrounding reciprocal disclosure.

One of the reasons participants may be hesitant to disclose is because of the sexual nature of the information being shared. Sexual experiences may differ from disclosing other information because of the potential influence disclosing sexual experiences may have on a person's reputation. This explains why some males feel more at ease with sharing and females are hesitant. Males are expected to be sexually promiscuous and thus, share their experiences while females are expected to be non-promiscuous, or appear non-promiscuous by concealing their information.

Overall, the results of this study align with previous research and theoretical concepts inherent within CPM. Furthermore, findings from this study also align with other communication theories, such as Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT, Burgoon & Jones, 1976; Burgoon, 1978; 1983), and Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Taylor & Altman, 1987). Expectancy Violation Theory explains people's reactions to unexpected behavior, or violation. EVT claims that people will perceive the violation as either positive or negative, based on social norms and characteristics of the communicator. In this study, EVT was evident in the reactions of participants who had

listened to stories shared by non-friend narrators. Furthermore, Social Penetration Theory speaks to the stages in which persons reveal personal information to others, which was reinforced by participants who emphasized the need for closeness in a relationship when serious information was disclosed. However, this study has contributed new explanations and layers to understanding the process of revealing sexual information, which simultaneously extend findings from CPM and other interpersonal communication theories.

New Phenomena

One of the major contributions of this study is its focus on the perspective of the listener of these sexual stories. CPM emphasizes the relationship between the listener and narrator, and how disclosing information affects that relationship, as well as the way narrators manage their information. Thus, the focus of CPM is on the narrator and the relationship. However, findings of this study indicate that attention must also be given to how interpersonal communication influences the beliefs and perceptions of the *listener* as well. As this study has shown, interpersonal communication regarding sexual experiences is influential on the person listening to the story. Listeners are impacted even when stories are being shared outside of close relationships, which are heavily emphasized in CPM. Thus, the current research complements our understanding of how sharing private information affects the listener, especially when the narrator is not a friend.

These results indicate that on this campus, stories of sexual experience are acceptable and occur frequently among college students. Participants indicated that

while sexual communication is becoming increasingly more widespread and acceptable to discuss, it also still heavily influences the reputation of the person narrating. This is particularly interesting for women on this campus, as acceptance of sexual communication is not reflected on the influence of disclosure on reputation. In this sample, sexual communication is a unique form of communication in that it has a profound effect on the reputation of the person narrating his/her experiences. The effect on reputation is gender specific, such that women experience negative reputational impact while men experience positive reputational impact.

This study is unique because it adds reputation as an influential construct to consider within sexual storytelling. While other conversations surrounding a person's experience(s) may influence reputation, these findings indicate reputation is strongly tied to sexual storytelling, and is highly gendered. This is important to consider because of the strong double standard that exists for females. Participants indicated that for women, discussion of sexual experiences is not as acceptable as it is for men, especially outside of friendships. On the other hand, this study indicated discussion surrounding sexual experiences is accepted within and outside of friendships for men. Both male and female participants judged female storytellers much more harshly than they did males. This double standard is important to consider as it may strongly encourage secrecy and silence among women which would aid in maintaining a positive image, whereas men are encouraged to reveal information which would positively influence the image of a man.

This study indicates that interpersonal communication in which sexual storytelling occurs must consider the influence on reputation. CPM accounts for reputation as a risk to assess within the process of disclosure. However, a narrator's motivation and desire to communicate her sexual experience may be identified by the listener, yet still negatively influence her reputation. Similarly, a male narrator's motivation to share his experience may be identified by the listener, but not without skepticism. Thus, perception of motivation to sexually communicate is gendered, as males and females interpret motivations differently, and are motivated to share for very different reasons.

Finally, it is important to consider how storytelling perpetuates normative behavior among college students. The memorable content college students reported centered on abnormal behaviors. Interestingly, the men and women identified memorable stories as atypical, even though they are the most frequently shared. One would assume the more often a story is told, the more likely the behavior in the story would be to be considered common and typical, rather than atypical. However, this is not the case with sexual behaviors, and may help to explain why college students overestimate how often their peers are engaging in sexual behaviors.

This study contributes to research surrounding sexuality among college students in the following ways. First, findings indicate that sexual communication has major implications for a person sharing his/her story that may not be prevalent in other communication content. Researchers must consider how sexual storytelling influences the people listening, as participants indicated being influenced by what they heard. Most

importantly, sexual communication heavily influences perceptions of reputation, which differ for men and women, and should be considered when someone discloses sexual information.

Limitations

Participants received extra credit for attending the focus groups in this study, and thus, were given an incentive to participate. Furthermore, this study focused on how college students were influenced by listening to sexual stories. While the participants were not asked about their own experiences, they may have wished to present how they were influenced by listening to other people in ways that they interpreted to be socially desirable. For example, the female participants reported that non-friend women who share their sexual experiences suffer negative reputational effects. The women in the focus group may have responded in ways to protect their own reputations, such as claiming they did not wish to disclose their own experiences, or even participate in sexual behaviors.

The results of this study are not generalizable, and are not indicative of what is true for *all* male and female college-aged students in terms of sexual communication. However, the results are transferable, such that other researchers interested in studying interpersonal sexual communication among college students should consider the results of this study in informing their own work, especially if they are seeking similar results/answers to similar questions.

The female participants were predominantly Caucasian, and while there were only 10 male participants, they represented more diverse ethnicities. There was a

discrepancy in the number of participants, with there being more female participants and less male participants. Furthermore, participants were not asked to disclose their religious affiliation, which may have aided in understanding their responses. Participants focused on heterosexual relationships, results may differ based on sexual orientation. Finally, because the focus groups were divided by gender, there were two different moderators for each group, which may have influenced the way in which questions were asked, and the tone of the conversations.

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Future Research**</div>

Overall, this study has reinforced concepts inherent within other communication theories, identified ways in which sexual communication is influential, and poses many new questions for future research.

Based on the results, and input from the focus group participants, the following suggestions are made for future research. First, focus group participants suggested investigating the effect of sexual storytelling on a younger demographic, such as high school students. Participants indicated high school students may be more influenced by these discussions especially because they may be experimenting and lack experience and a reliable information source, in order to understand the consequences of the behaviors they are engaging in. Similarly, participants also believed their views were more conservative than those who attend other universities. Future research should investigate the beliefs of a more diverse group of participants, especially those who hold different views and who may attend universities in other parts of the country.

Theoretically, future research should further explore the influence of disclosing sexual information on listeners. Specifically, future studies should explore if the behaviors of participants align with how they claim interpersonal communication affects them. For example, if someone claims listening to sexual stories makes them not want to engage in behaviors, it should be established if they are, in fact, not engaging in those behaviors. Many of the theories within the discipline focus on the discloser or sender of information, or the effect of communication on the relationship, rather than the effect the communication has on the listener. As the findings of this study indicate, interpersonal sexual communication is influential. Thus, by asking participants to report their personal behaviors in tandem with how listening to other people's experiences has affected them, a greater understanding of the effect of interpersonal sexual communication can be reached.

Since sexual communication is influential, practitioners may wish to use interpersonal communication to alleviate some of the negative consequences associated with adolescent and college student's sexual behaviors, such as having sexual intercourse without contraception. Furthermore, college students overestimate how often their peers are engaging in sexual behaviors (Goldstein, 2007; Lipinski & Rimal, 2005). Overall, college places students at an intersection of risk, and the influence of interpersonal communication may help to alleviate these risks. Practitioners, specifically educators in high schools and on college campuses, should establish curricula or programs within the university that emphasize interpersonal sexual communication. These situations may enable college students to discuss their experiences without

judgment, and with a peer who can give them accurate information. Furthermore, peer to peer education may also be very effective in teaching safe sex practices, as well as facilitating discussions. This may help to deter engaging in risky sexual behaviors, and allow for open discussion on safe sex practices, which were missing from the content of sexual stories.

While the findings of this study reinforce theoretical concepts and common sense, the findings also indicate that a strong double standard still exists for women who have sex. The question is "why?" If discussing sexuality is acceptable, why are women viewed negatively for engaging in, and subsequently discussing, their sexual exploits? Why is it okay for man to engage in casual sex, but not a woman? To take it one step further, why are sexual behaviors and sexuality so influential on how people are perceived by other people? Why is sex so closely tied to reputation for adolescents and college students? Answering these questions would be the first step in understanding the role of sexual communication and how it influences the lives of college students. Future research should focus on the unique gendered influence of interpersonal sexual communication, and how to use the influence of this communication to deter risky sexual behavior and the double standards between males and females.

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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP QUESTION GUIDE

R1:   How and in what circumstances are stories surrounding sexual behaviors discussed?

Focus group questions:

1. Where or in what setting have you been a part of a conversation in which someone has told you a story about their sexual experience?

    Probe Questions:

    a. What kinds of places do these conversations tend to take place?

    b. Does it matter **where** the conversations take place? Why?

        i.   **Why** (do you think) is the location important?

        ii. How does the seriousness of the content affect where the story is shared? (for example, the difference between someone telling you about a awkward sexual encounter versus them telling you about possibly being pregnant or having an STD)

    c. Where are the stories not discussed? Why?

    d. **Who** are these stories discussed with? Why?

        i.   Is the same group of people usually involved in sharing these stories?

      ii.   Without naming names, is there, or are there, particular people known for sharing their sexual experience?

          a. In what ways (if any) does this tendency to share information impact how they're (the common sharers") seen by other people, as far as you know?

      iii.   Are stories ever repeated about someone who is not there?

          a. Why do you think the stories are repeated?

R2: What are the most common themes in stories of sexual experience shared among college students?

2. What is/are the most common theme(s) in sexual stories you have heard?

    Probe Questions:

    a. Why do you think these themes are the most common?

    b. What behaviors are people doing in the stories?

3. What is the most memorable sexual story you have heard?

    Probes:

    c. Where were you?

    d. Who were you with?

    e. What was being talked about?

    f. Why is it the most memorable?

      i. What has stayed with you?

      ii. How has the story affected you?

4. What is the purpose of sharing these stories?

Probes:

    a. Why do you think people are motivated to share their stories?

5. Can you tell which stories are true?

Probes:

    a. What clues let you know if a story is "true"?

        i. What in the conversations clue you in to how true the experience being shared is?

        ii. Does it matter if the stories are true? Why or why not?

    b. Is there anything that makes you want to "tune out" or stop listening to someone's story?

        i. Tell me about a time you didn't want to continue listening to someone's story.

        ii. Why do you think you wanted to tune out?

R3: How do listeners make sense of what they learn from listening to stories?

Focus Group Questions:

1. Do you think the stories that are being told now are different than the stories your parents may have shared when they were in college?

Probes:

    a. Why?

2. Do the stories you hear in the media (such as on TV, social networking sites, magazines, internet, etc) similar to the stories you hear from other people?

   Probes:

   a. How do the stories correspond?

3. What have you learned from listening or sharing stories?

   Probes:

   a. How do you think this sharing has affected you?

   b. What are the "morals" or "lessons" you have learned from listening to other people's experiences?

      i. Have these lessons shaped your own perspectives on sharing stories?

         1. How so?

4. What's the difference between listening to a man tell a story vs. listening to a woman tell a story?

5. Is there anything I should have asked that I didn't? Anything you'd like to share before we leave?

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
SEXUAL STORIES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project studying sexual stories shared among college students. The purpose of this study is to find out what stories about sex are being shared by college students; where, when, and how these stories are shared; and how these stories influence the people who have heard them]. You were selected to be a possible participant because [you are in a communication course at Texas A&M University and have indicated interest in receiving extra credit in your course. .

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group with approximately 4-6 of your same-sex peers. These focus group discussions, including your contributions, will be audio recorded. Your participation will consist of discussing your experiences of hearing sexual stories shared by college students, when and where these stories are discussed, and what impact the stories have had on the people who listen to them. For this study, a sexual story will be defined as a story you have been told in a face to face situation during which [an]other person(s) talked about sexual experience(s). You will NOT be asked to provide information about your own personal experiences.. This study will require a total of one session which will take No more than two hours to complete.

What are the risks involved in this study?
The risks associated with this study are the possibility that you may experience discomfort talking about sexual stories. However, you will not be asked to share a personal story, rather just information regarding stories that you have heard or have been told. You will not be required to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, you will be contributing to a greater understanding of how, why, and when college students share sexual stories as well as helping researchers understand how these stories impact the people sharing them.

Do I have to participate?
No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

Will I be compensated?

You will receive extra credit in your communication course. Disbursement will occur after the focus groups are completed. A list of those who participated will be sent to the instructor for him/her to award you extra credit. After the focus group, the researcher will email your instructor to inform him/her that you have participated in the study and should receive extra credit. However, if you chose not to participate in this study you may complete a five page paper with a minimum of 5 references on a topic chosen by your instructor and still receive extra credit.]

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
Because focus groups require face-to-face interaction, your participation in this study will not be confidential among group participants. Therefore, we ask that the participants of this study make an extra effort to respect the privacy of other participants by not reporting the identity of others or repeating any of the information shared within the focus group to people outside the group. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Your course instructor will be aware that you participated in this study, however he or she will not have access to the recorded records of the study. Research records will be stored securely and only Ashley Spinozzi and my academic advisor, Dr. Barbara Sharf, will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and only Ashley Spinozzi, my research colleague, Eric James, and Dr. Barbara Sharf will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for approximately 3 years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Ashley Spinozzi, at
aspinoz2@tamu.edu, or (815)409-6471.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Signature
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____
Printed Name: _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____
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VITA

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