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HELP IN THE TIME OF COVID: INFORMATIONAL, EMOTIONAL, AND
INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS DURING A PANDEMIC

by

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B.A. Florida Gulf Coast University, 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Arts
in the Nicholson School of Communication and Media
in the College of Sciences
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ABSTRACT

This study examined graduate students' experiences with social support in relation to stress and uncertainty during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Graduate students as a population have significant levels of stress and uncertainty which may have negative effects on their lives and academic experiences. Graduate students often utilize social support as a way to cope with or mitigate the effects of stress and uncertainty. This qualitative study consisted of six focus groups, ranging from three to six participants, total of 22 participants, who were found using a purposeful snowball sampling method. The participants were masters and doctoral level students in communication graduate programs. Findings were made using thematic analysis which identified main themes of; stress, uncertainty, social support, the program, and feelings words. Findings were also examined through the lens of Relational Dialectics and found evidence of openness-closedness, autonomy-connection, and novelty-predictability. Implications, limitations and suggestions for future research were discussed in chapter five.

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CHAPTER ONE: PROBLEM AND RATIONALE

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2019), more than 19%, or roughly one in five, adults in the United States experienced varying degrees of mental illness in 2018. Since then the numbers have only grown, adults are reporting higher levels of anxiety and symptoms of mental illness, many of which have been aggravated due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Czeisler et al., 2020). On an average day, without a global pandemic, graduate students experience high levels of stress and uncertainty that may affect their daily lives and relationships. In 2020, students across the world were personally and academically affected by COVID-19. Universities were forced to close, students moved out, and classes were held on entirely digital or remote learning platforms.

With such a dramatic change on a massive scale, stress and uncertainty increased significantly. After eight months of living in a world with COVID-19, research began to emerge showing that not only had stress increased significantly due to the virus, but signs of long-term effects, like PTSD had also developed (Lui et al., 2020, Zahneis & June, 2020). As schools across the country began to announce their plans for what academia would look like with COVID-19, students were faced with the reality that they would not be returning to familiar learning environments (Wedemeyer-Strombel, 2020; Zahneis & June, 2020).

Stress may lead to depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses, as well as significant negative side effects on physical health (Macgeorge, et al., 2005). Understanding these effects and the deeper consequences of COVID-19 on the graduate experience is important for current and future students and educators.

Stress

According to the Mayo Clinic (2019), stress can affect mood, causing a lack of motivation, restlessness, feeling overwhelmed, irritable, angry, and can even cause depression and anxiety. Stress can also change behavior causing over/undereating, intense anger, drug or alcohol misuse, and social withdrawal. Furthermore, stress can affect the body, leading to increased headaches, muscle tension/pain, chest pain, fatigue/exhaustion, upset stomach, change in sex drive, and sleep problems. There are many additional negative effects associated with stress which presents a certain elevated risk for those who experience higher levels of stress regularly. Researchers have examined burnout (a phenomenon similar to stress) in workplace settings (Boren, 2009; 2013). Burnout is experienced differently depending on the person but it generally consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and or a lack of personal accomplishment (Boren, 2009; 2013). Graduate students experience intense burnout for many reasons, often chief among them is the amount of work in their classes (Boren, 2009; 2013). Burnout has likely increased for students with COVID-19, due to the added stress and increased workload associated with online learning.

Stress can come in many forms, the primary classifications of which being life events or chronic strains (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). One example of stress caused by life events would be relocation or moving, changing one's environment or the idea of starting over. Chronic strains are stressors that people are less able to control such as financial difficulties. Although not every adult may experience struggles with mental illness, most will experience periods of high stress at some point. Stress presents a multitude of potential issues in people's lives and can pose a considerable problem in individuals when they are not able to find coping mechanisms or ways

to care for themselves (Myers et al, 2012). Research indicates that chronic exposure to stress in adult life can potentially lead to decreased ability to retrieve information when said information is not directly related to an emotion. For example, a past trauma would be easier to remember than information from a recent news article (Lupien et al., 2009).

Because cognitive abilities are seemingly affected by stress, it may be more difficult to achieve higher levels of success in graduate school when stress levels are elevated (Myers et al., 2012). If students are unable to recall the information, they might fail a class, and experience problems outside of educational contexts. Examples of this already exist when looking at students who are in a medical field such as pre-med, biology, physical therapy, psychology, etc., although the issue extends far beyond the reach of only those fields. Regardless of the program or field, the negative effects of stress can lead to long-term issues that when left untreated can be detrimental to cognitive ability as well as basic everyday life (Lupien et al., 2009).

Uncertainty

Stress is not the only issue that people face on a regular basis and can be further aggravated by other concerns. Every day that people leave their homes, go to work, go to school, or simply live their lives, they are faced with uncertainty. For some, this uncertainty can lead to a rise in stress and anxiety, making day to day life that much more difficult. Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which people try to avoid uncertainty and or eliminate it altogether (Hofstede, 2001). Uncertainty avoidance differs among cultures and some people may find that they experience higher stress when placed into positions where the outcomes are unclear. A culture which has a low uncertainty avoidance score, generally less than 50, would most likely feel more

comfortable when placed in a position or time of uncertainty. Contrary to that, a culture with a high uncertainty avoidance score, generally above 50, would feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and seek to remove it. For example, a graduate student who was raised in the United States (low uncertainty avoidance score of 46), who is in the same class as a graduate student from Japan (high uncertainty avoidance score of 92), may feel more comfortable going into an exam without a study guide than their classmate. The main difference in this example is how the two students experience and respond to uncertainty, the American student might not be bothered whereas the Japanese student could feel unprepared and uncomfortable with the situation.

Graduate Student Population

Certain populations are more likely to experience stress and uncertainty than others. One population which commonly experiences high levels of both is graduate students (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2018). Graduate students often express feelings of being overwhelmed and can see an increase in the symptoms of stress as they progress through their education (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Graduate students are affected by stress not only in their studies but also in their personal lives, for example arguing with friends or a significant other, potentially even affecting the retention of the information they are meant to be learning (Myers et al., 2012). In addition, graduate students experience high levels of uncertainty during many stages of their education (Sollitto et al., 2018).

For example, when students begin new courses they may be faced with uncertainty about the content, the instructor, or even expectations about their workload or conduct. This uncertainty can begin to increase the stress associate with the course. Throughout their time in a

graduate program, students may be met repeatedly with the unknown, contributing to high levels of stress, which emphasizes the importance of learning how to face uncertainty (Dooley, et al., 2019).

Social support

As students encounter stress and uncertainty, they use many different methods to reduce it as much as possible (Sollitto et al., 2018). One method would be to employ the use of social support. Research indicates that social support can contribute positively to physical and psychological wellbeing (Macgeorge, et al., 2005). Social support comes from many places with interpersonal relationships being strong sources that may help address anxiety and establish a sense of coherence and reduce uncertainty (Darling et al., 2007). Although the existing research shows a valuable application of social support it does not fully examine the uses of such from an educational perspective or now with COVID-19.

Uniqueness of Study

Existing research with first-year undergraduate students has shown results that indicated higher levels of social support led to higher self-esteem and decreased stress (Friedlander et al., 2007). The undergraduate experience has been well documented. However, the same cannot be said of graduate students (Brint & Cantwell, 2010; Wilks & Spivey, 2010; Reeve et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2013; Kong et al., 2015). This study was unique for two reasons, the first, the graduate population itself. Although existent research has examined this phenomenon at the

undergraduate level, it has not yet been applied to the graduate student population within this context.

The second reason is due to the new context of the study and the foundation of communication for social support. In addition, social support, stress, and uncertainty have been of concern to researchers in medical and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, yet it has not been explored in the social sciences or more specifically communication field (Mead et al., 2010; Gray, 2014; Macgeorge, et al., 2005). Social support is delivered and experienced through communication (Macgeorge et al., 2005; Parsons, 2019; Soillitto et al., 2018).

Overview

This thesis examined how graduate students experienced social support in response to stress and uncertainty associated with graduate school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter two developed an in-depth literature review that examined the various conceptualizations and applications of social support. Chapter three explained the method employed in this study. Chapter four examined the findings made from the data collected. Chapter five provided a discussion of all topics relating to the research, including limitations as well as implications for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explored the literature regarding social support and its applications to stress and uncertainty. It began by establishing what made this study unique and reviewing the various kinds of social support; instrumental, informational, and emotional. It then examined different applications of social support in relation to stress and uncertainty, and built a foundation of relational dialectics theory (RDT) which was later used to construct the focus group guide.

Social Support

Social support can come from different sources (e.g., friends, family, peers, mentors, coworkers) and can be used to mitigate stress and uncertainty within various contexts (Alvan, et al., 1996; Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014; Chang, 2009; Dooley, et al., 2019; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Hsu, et al., 2018; Gray, 2014; Lundberg, et al., 2008; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Nick et al., 2018; Parsons, 2019). Just as there are different contexts in which social support can be used, the type of social support provided can affect is efficacy (Chang, 2009; Dooley, et al, 2019; Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018). Although some researchers have developed multilevel subtypes of social support, there are three broad categories under which they fall; instrumental, informational, and emotional support (Chang, 2009; Dooley, et al. 2019; Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018, Beck et al., 2017).

The type of social support provided to others is commonly related to the need that engendered the social support itself – most commonly stress or uncertainty (Chang, 2009; Dooley et al., 2019; Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018). “When going through stressful experiences,

people often turn to others around them for help, advice, and support with the hope that what is said or done will help reduce distress or improve one's efforts to cope.” (Dooley et al., 2019, p. 1). Instrumental support (also called tangible support) can be thought of as the physical support. (Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018; Parsons, 2019; Alvan, et al., 1996; Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014). Instrumental support can look different depending on the needs of others. For instance, if the need is financial assistance then the instrumental support could be providing money or access to financial help. Instrumental support is commonly given in the form of active engagement in lending aid or in helping with a specific task (Parsons, 2019). “Instrumental support (INS) includes provision of financial aid, material resources, and needed services; it includes offering help in getting necessary tasks done, providing something of use, performing a task, or taking on a responsibility” (Nick et al., 2018, p. 1128). In the educational setting, instrumental support can be beneficial if a student's needs are physical in nature, (e.g., a laptop with secure internet access) which causes the student to face anxiety or have difficulties in their classes.

Informational support can be thought of as advice, providing facts, or knowledge in general (Parsons, 2019; Chang, 2009; Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014; Hsu, et al., 2018; Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018). Informational support is a common type of support provided, mostly by peers or instructors, for students as their needs are often knowledge-related (Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014). “Informational support (INF) includes help in defining, understanding, and coping with problems, and it may take the form of giving advice, offering appraisal support, sharing new information or perspectives, or providing reference to new resources.” (Nick et al., 2018, P. 1128). Social support by nature is a transactional process, when done successfully, both parties should not only give the support but also receive support in return (Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014).

An example of informational support is when students create study groups or host study sessions, during which they are all mutually providing informational support through sharing their knowledge, and in receiving knowledge from their peers (Parsons, 2019; Chang, 2009; Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014; Hsu, et al., 2018; Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018). It seems that should students' needs be related to a lack of knowledge, the best use of social support would be through informational rather than instrumental support. The ability to use support types across contexts, even when not the best choice, does indicate the need to maintain awareness of which type of support is most beneficial in what context.

The third type of support is the most commonly provided, emotional (Parsons, 2019; Chang, 2009; Dooley, et al., 2019; Gray, 2014; Nick et al., 2018). Emotional support targets emotional wellbeing and or morale boosting (Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014; Chang, 2009; Hsu, et al., 2018; Gray, 2014; Lundberg, et al., 2008; Macgeorge, et al., 2005; Nick et al., 2018; Parsons, 2019). Emotional support can appear differently depending on the parties engaged in the transaction. For some, it could be expressions of sympathy or support; for others it can be physical affection or intimacy (Parsons, 2019; Nick et al., 2018). "Emotional support is related to the expressions that communicate caring, concern, empathy, encouragement, relational support, closeness, belongingness, and love." (Parsons, 2019, p. 122). Regardless of how people engage in emotional support, the goal should be to help stabilize the recipient's emotional state and reduce or eliminate emotional distress. A common practice of emotional support is to simply listen to others and allow them to vent their frustrations. However, there are potential negative effects that could come from continuous venting with no solution.

For example, co-rumination and the negative effects that co-rumination may develop as unintended side effects of emotional support (Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014). As students experience prolonged periods of stress and begin to feel overwhelmed, they may need emotional support. Failure to properly address that need, or falling victim to co-rumination, would likely lead to extremely unfavorable outcomes (Myers et al., 2012; Boren, 2009, 2013, 2014; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007).

Flexibility of Social Support

Social support is flexible although the three general conceptualizations of the type of support (i.e., instrumental, informational, and emotional) are consistent in the literature (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Parsons, 2019). Graduate students are often faced with stress from multiple areas of their life at once, balancing their academic workload along with any other jobs or roles that they may take on (Alvan, et al., 1996). “In fact, while reported stressors may be different for each academic program, common themes exist regardless of academic program (Heins, et al., 1984), indicating that each of the students’ academic programs (medicine, law, English, psychology, and chemistry) had unique stressors causing graduate students to feel stress.” (Boren, 2009, pp. 5-6). As students’ needs and stress levels vary, they may find themselves looking for a variety of support from multiple sources (e.g., peers, family, instructors) (Sollitto et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2018; Macgeorge et al, 2005).

For example, if students were experiencing a high degree of stress due to an upcoming exam, they may seek out their peers or an older sibling to study, ask questions, or simply discuss their concerns (Macgeorge, et al., 2005). This example of social support can both be emotional

(voicing concerns) as well as informational (content-related questions). Research indicates that emotional support has the potential to reduce distress while informational support can even improve problem solving (Macgeorge, et al., 2005).

Social support is complex in nature and requires a certain level of understanding and conceptualizations to be successful (Boren, 2009; 2013; 2014). The effectiveness of the supportive communication methods varies based on the individuals and the circumstances causing the stress (Myers et al., 2012). As stress and uncertainty fluctuate and the source of social support varies, there is a clear need for more research that examines how to deliver social support effectively. How can people engage in social support in the right way, the effective way, rather than blindly offering help without understanding what is truly needed? To some extent, the answer concerns the individuals and their life experiences, but on a deeper level it stems from a simple lack of information and awareness. Therefore, it is important that as mutual parties of social support they both communicate and create an understanding of what they need, even if it is not as clear to themselves as would be the most helpful.

Graduate Students and Stress

Graduate students have many goals for what they hope to get out of their program beyond just a degree (Aherne, 2012). Some students may feel that their academic success is directly linked to their own self-worth, and the purpose of college is purely doing well to please other people or live up to expectations (Aherne, 2012). “Over-identification can also have resulted in either a heightened fear of failure in examinations or a lack of motivation when the student realizes that academic success is not sufficient for personal satisfaction and happiness.” (Aherne,

2012, p. 182). This high level of importance on academics is a significant source of stress for many in addition to other expectations of obtaining a graduate degree including; exams, homework, classwork, etc. (Aherne, 2012; Reeve, et al., 2013; Alvan, et al., 1996; Boren, 2009, 2013; Darling et al., 2007; Hurst, et al., 2013; Macgeorge, et al., 2005; Oswald & Riddock, 2007; Mistra, et al., 2003). There are many ways to cope with stress and mitigate its negative effects. Using supportive communication, such as emotional support, can help to reduce stress and decrease the likelihood of developing depression or experiencing poor academic performance (Macgeorge, et al., 2005).

Stress may also come from sources outside of academics such as family or romantic difficulties or distress (Aherne, 2012; Alvan, et al., 1996; Boren, 2009, 2013; Darling et al., 2007; Hurst, et al., 2013; Macgeorge, et al., 2005; Oswald & Riddock, 2007). Because stress often stems from the relationships, it is important to recognize how the source of social support affects the stress itself (Macgeorge, et al., 2005). However, there is a gap in the existing research regarding social support and stress. There are few studies that examine the consequences of experiencing high levels of stress and a lack of social support (e.g., Aherne, 2012).

Stress can be simplified into a perceived threat –one which often comes from uncertainty and not knowing what an outcome will be- to any number of different things. For example, students might feel stressed about exams because they do not know what to expect from the questions and in turn how well they will perform (Macgeorge, et al., 2005; Aherne, 2012; Boren, 2009, 2013; Hurst, et al., 2013; Myers et al., 2012; Misra, et al., 2003; Oswald & Riddock, 2007). Stress has negative effects on students' lives, including but not limited to; anxiety, depression, panic disorders, decrease in memory recall abilities, heart conditions, loss/gain of

weight, behavioral changes, etc. (Alvan, et al., 1996; Darling et al., 2007; Lupien et al., 2009; Macgeorge, et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2012).

Stress can be related to specific life events or it can be chronic (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Stress related to life events might include a loss of employment, moving, or even the death of a loved one, whereas chronic stress is more closely related to repeated concerns such as financial burdens/struggles and taking on too many roles/work at one time. When choosing what kind of social support to provide, it is important to identify the origin of stress. If someone is experience high levels of chronic stress caused by a lack of financial support, then it would influence their need which in turn influences the kind of social support that they need. In making these connections, it is evident how social support can also affect people’s physical health. Social support has the potential to improve mental and physical health in addition to reducing stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Social Support and Uncertainty

Uncertainty is something that affects people differently and is frequently influenced by cultural norms (Hofstede, 2001). “Sometimes, however, the stressor is not an event that has already occurred, but the uncertainty of whether an undesirable future event will occur.” (Dooley et al., 2019, p. 2). Whether an individual feels comfortable or is willing to accept ambiguity often determines their uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). Similar to stress – and often times causing stress- uncertainty is something that most people learn to live with, despite its prevalence in academia (Sollitto et al., 2018).

Uncertainty can be defined as a lack of knowledge pertaining to certain outcomes or events (Dooley, et al., 2019; Gray, 2014; Sollitto et al., 2018). College students face uncertainty at a higher rate than the average adult, and the effects this has on their success are unknown (Sollitto et al., 2018). What is known however, is that as students find themselves faced with greater uncertainty, many will rely more heavily on social support to help reduce as much uncertainty as possible; this will mostly be done through informational and emotional support (Aherne, 2012; Sollitto et al., 2018; Dooley, et al., 2019).

The various forms of social support, instrumental, informational, and emotional, are a legitimate framework for understanding how uncertainty reduction may transpire (Downs, 2004). For some students, the best way to combat high levels of uncertainty may involve social support. However, it is important to note that others may turn instead to maladaptive coping mechanisms like drinking, self-isolation, or drug use. If students are faced with uncertainty regarding what professor to take for a class, they may reach out for informational support from their peers so that they can reduce the uncertainty and choose an instructor from whom they know what to expect (Dooley, et al., 2019). An example of emotional support would be if a student is experiencing uncertainty regarding an outcome on an exam, others can help manage uncertainty by providing assurances that they did well, and/or telling the support-seeker that they are here for them regardless of the exam outcomes (Dooley, et al., 2019; Aherne, 2012).

Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational dialectics theory (RDT) was first derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and primarily focuses on contradictions or competing meanings (Norwood, 2012; Baxter 1990;

Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). Although, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) are credited with refining the theory for the communication discipline. RDT posits that relationships are built on shared meaning, which is often co-constructed through contradictions. Understanding this process will provide clarity on how social support exists within these relationships as well. RDT firmly roots this study in communication.

RDT examines various dialects that are both flexible and ever changing, three of the most common are important to this study. RDT commonly is concerned with openness and closedness, or the willingness to disclose to others (Norwood, 2012; Baxter, 1990; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). This contradiction is key not only to the relationships, but also to social support, and is necessary when seeking support (Norwood, 2012; Baxter, 1990; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). Similarly, RDT is concerned with predictability and novelty (Norwood, 2012; Baxter, 1990; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). Relationships need a sense of newness (and perhaps uncertainty) at times. The final dialect is autonomy, also referred to as independence, and dependency (Norwood, 2012; Baxter, 1990; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018).

Although these are the basic assumptions of RDT, it is a versatile theory that allows for interpretations of many complex tensions (Norwood, 2012; Baxter, 1990; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). RDT can be used to understand meaning making and how peoples' discourse forms their own view on the world and their experience (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). "... meaning making is a process that emerges from the struggle of different, often competing, discourses." (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 65). RDT was selected to guide research questions for this study because of its clarity regarding meaning making and relationships. The theory provides a framework to understand interactions within

relationships and has been used in various contexts (Norwood, 2012; Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Dutta, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2018).

The following research question is of primary concern in this study:

RQ 1: What are the experiences of social support, stress, and uncertainty for graduate students in a communication program during a global pandemic?

In review, this study is unique for its graduate student population and the new context which it has been placed in. Social support can be instrumental, informational, or emotional, and can be used interchangeably depending on the need of the recipient. Graduate students experience high levels of stress and uncertainty and may rely on social support to help mitigate some of the associated negative effects of both. The study was routed in RDT and as the next chapter will outline, was conducted through focus groups and analyzed using thematic analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explained the method employed in this study. Research objectives are stated clearly, as are procedures, measurements, and data collection and analysis plans.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to discover the sources of stress and uncertainty among communication graduate students, as well as identify their experiences of social support. Focus groups served the qualitative data-collection method, because they allow participants to engage with one another, build upon their ideas, and delve deeper into the complex nature of social support (Fukuoka, 2011). Prior to beginning data collection, the study received IRB approval.

There is significant research into the confirmability and utility of focus groups. Onwugbuzie et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of data analysis when using focus groups, which influenced the plan selected for this study. The questions used for the focus groups were adapted from Dooley et al. (2019), Hurst et al. (2013), and Sollito et al. (2018) and framed within the constructs of RDT (Norwood, 2012). The focus groups were recorded using the video conferencing app, *Zoom*, and were transcribed using an automated, professional, transcription software. Once the automated transcripts were complete, the researcher confirmed the accuracy of the transcription and made all necessary updates.

Procedure

Graduate students who were pursuing their masters or doctorate degrees in

communication served as the population for this study. The population was chosen because research indicates that college students experience high levels of stress and the given context (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Existing research is focused in STEM fields (specifically medicine) rather than in the social sciences leading to a lack of research in this context.

Participants were recruited via communication courses from seven universities across the East Coast (mostly in Florida) and a purposeful, targeted, snowball sampling method was used to gather participants. Instructors of masters and doctoral level classes informed their students of the study and asked them to complete a short survey if interested in participating (see appendices). Based on the survey results, six focus group sessions were scheduled each with three-six participants (22 participants total). Participants were grouped by availability and no other factors, such as demographics or which class they completed the survey in. Participants were also asked to complete a demographic capture prior to the start of the focus group.

Rubin and Rubin's (2011) responsive interviewing method was used to give the researcher a better understanding of the participants' experiences and to construct meaning from their stories and explanations. The responsive interviewing approach allowed flexibility to respond to the participants' discussion rather than exclusively using predetermined questions. "Responsive interviewing emphasizes the importance of working with interviewees as partners rather than treating them as objects of research." (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. XV). This model of research was beneficial in the focus-group environment to address topics that were brought up and respond with follow-up questions and probes. In accordance with Tracy (2019) the researcher approached the study with an open mind and set aside any preconceived notions of

potential findings to allow for a more thorough examination and to open space for unanticipated findings.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical framework because it allowed the researcher to identify common ways of defining/explaining a given topic (Herzog et al., 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Clarke et al., 2015). The researcher was then able to construct meaning from the commonalities and differences described throughout. Because thematic analysis is not fixed, it also allowed the researcher to evolve and change the coding process as it progressed potentially leading to new perspectives or ideas. Thematic analysis was also useful because of its flexibility a variety of data collection methods and sample sizes. This analytical framework also worked well with the responsive interviewing method as it accommodates to varying themes that may arise throughout the focus group that may not have been thought of during question development.

Measurements

The focus group questions were modified from existing studies to fit clearly within the framework of RDT.

Question about source of stress

To capture stress, the researcher first desired to identify the primary source of stress for participants. Hurst et al. (2013) completed a qualitative study which identified over 40 different themes related to college students and stress. Of the themes, *academics* was prominent and broke down into different subcategories of; exams, classes, studying, and general academic. RDT is

concerned with meaning making and how similarities and differences construct such meanings (Norwood, 2012). Using RDT the researcher developed the following questions in Appendix A:

Q1. Tell me about the hardest part of being a graduate student.

Q2. In what ways has the pandemic changed your stress?

Question about source of uncertainty

To capture uncertainty the researcher first desired to identify the primary source of uncertainty for participants. Uncertainty is also complex and has ties to individuals and their cultural backgrounds. Sollito et al. (2018) crafted a qualitative study which measured uncertainty management, including questions which measured the source of uncertainty that were adapted for this study. Using RDT the researcher developed the following questions in Appendix A:

Q1. Tell me about the hardest part of being a graduate student.

Q3. In what ways has the pandemic changed your uncertainty?

Questions about sources of social support

To capture social support the researcher focused questions about experiences with the different types of support. Dooley et al. (2019) had participants respond to a prompt regarding various waiting experiences, and then discuss their experience with social support as a coping mechanism for the stress and uncertainty produced. The study yielded interesting results which demonstrated the participants, perceived engagement in social support. Dooley (2019) and Norwood (2012), as references the researcher developed the following questions in Appendix A:

Q4. Describe what you do to cope with the added stress of the pandemic?

Q5. Describe what you do to cope with the added uncertainty of the pandemic?

Q6. Describe the relationship you have with the people you turn to for help?

Q8. What do you do when someone comes to you for help?

Questions about the effects of social support

To capture the effects of social support the researcher used Dooley (2019) and Norwood (2012) as references. Dooley et al. (2019), looked at stressful waiting periods is like the circumstance surrounding the COVID19 Pandemic and the ongoing crisis. This study prompted the researcher to develop the following questions in Appendix A:

Q7. Tell me about the different things they do to help you?

Q8. What do you do when someone comes to you for help?

Data Collection

Focus group members were informed about the study's purpose and participant expectations before the interviews commenced. They were given the option to terminate participation at any time. Because the focus groups were conducted over *Zoom*, the participants were encouraged to have snacks, water, or anything they may need to help make their experience more comfortable. Participants were encouraged to remain on camera excluding when they needed a break. Participants were asked to be as honest and open as possible and to feel free to speak at any time or in response to any fellow participant. To start the focus group discussion, the researcher began with an icebreaker, which she engaged so that participants felt more at ease. The icebreaker consisted of low-risk questions (e.g. participant's name, where they were from, and how long they had been in the program) which can be found in Appendix A.

Once the participants were more at ease with the group, the researcher began asking the participants questions using the guide in Appendix A. Throughout the focus group process the researcher used the responsive interviewing method and allowed for further discussion and follow ups to ensure fluidity of responses.

Data Analysis Plan

Once the data were collected, the researcher used thematic analysis to identify common ways of describing the given topics and created meanings from their similarities and differences (Norwood, 2012). To identify themes, the researcher reviewed the participant responses and notated repeated phrases or scenarios which were then grouped to identify themes. Substantial responses in length or explanation were notated regardless of frequency. As themes were identified, the associated quotations for such themes were pulled to maintain quick reference. In addition to identifying common themes, the researchers looked for statements that indicate levels of relating between participants, either blatant or subtle.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter explored findings from the data collected from communication graduate students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The guiding research question for this study was: What are the experiences of social support, stress, and uncertainty for graduate students in a communication program during a global pandemic? They are grouped according to the themes identified using thematic analysis.

Stress

Sources of Stress

Stress, as defined by the Mental Health Foundation website (2021, para. 1), “is the degree to which you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope as a result of pressures that are unmanageable.”. Using this definition, the researchers then defined sources of stress as descriptions of events or pressures that caused the participant to feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. There were four main sub-themes identified as sources of stress; work/job/career, program workload, time management or “balance”, and the pandemic itself.

Participants were asked about the most difficult part of being a graduate student and many began by identifying the responsibility of working –mostly full time – while also being in school. As one participant described their experience:

It's a lot more stressful just because balancing a full-time job and going to school, which is not something I had to juggle in my undergrad days, I worked part time not full time.

So I'd say it's, it's just been a learning experience for me on how to juggle the demands of a full time job and my career and the master's program.

Many other participants echoed this sentiment, describing their work stress as demanding and at times overwhelming. A significant portion of the population were Graduate Teaching Assistant/Associates at their respective universities, and described the unique challenge of teaching during the pandemic. One participant went as far as to say they did not feel prepared to teach at the start of the pandemic and continues to feel uncomfortable even now.

For a majority of the participants, the stress caused by their job was amplified by their ‘overwhelming’ program workload. In more than half of the focus groups participants discussed that they felt they had an unreasonable amount of reading or written work that was at times unrealistic to complete. One participant shared:

I work 40 hours a week for my job and I am in this little space that I am now for, you know, like nine hours Monday through Friday. And now I have to sit through, you know, my three-hour class in the same space. And then I have to, you know, do my hundreds of pages of reading and writing my papers.

In addition to balancing the coursework itself, others described difficulties balancing their social life or finding time to do the things they enjoy. There was a perceived lack of free time which resulted in feeling stuck in a cycle of working, going to school, then repeating. One participant said:

I would say balance, because this does take quite a bit of my time, but then to balance it with a social life or relationship or work or any other hobbies I have going on, it's always kind of in the back of my mind maybe I should be doing graduate work instead of like being online.

The added constraints due to the pandemic were a significant source of stress for participants. Many described fears of being around others or getting sick. One participant stated:

I would say that pandemic has added to the stress a lot, because not only are you dealing with, like, the stress of trying to avoid getting sick but also the stress of trying to keep others around you from getting sick.

The researchers were not only interested in the sources of stress but also what coping mechanisms participants used to help mitigate the negative effects of stress.

Coping Mechanisms

To identify and code the various coping mechanisms used by participants, the researchers defined coping as descriptions of things that helped mitigate feelings of stress. Six sub-themes were identified within coping mechanisms; escapism, exercise, venting, setting boundaries/limitations, self-care, and maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Of the coping mechanisms described by participants, the least mentioned, yet still significant, was the concept of escapism. Those who used escapism to cope described it as a kind of separation from the 'real world'. One participant noted:

I just love, like watching a good type of movie, like with some serious drama and acting and just like totally like diving into it and just like relaxing like even if it's like a like a suspense like drama where like it relaxes me, like I just totally sucked into it and it just to give my full attention and binge watching really good shows. So I just literally sit back and do that and that's what keeps me sane. Kind of escape the real world. Go to the real world of the shows versus the real world of life.

Another method of coping that some participants turned to was exercise. Participants described that during the quarantine and since they have been exercising and find it gives them an outlet for their anger or frustrations. One participant shared:

I will second that as someone who's not a big exerciser, I invested in an exercise bike and I've been killing that thing and it just takes a lot of my anger out.

For many participants, the go to coping mechanism was venting. Whether they vented to friends, family, peers, or a significant other, the practice of venting was present in all focus groups. One common trend of these venting sessions is that people did not seek 'answers' or 'solutions' but rather the act of venting alone was helpful:

I would say I'm bad at coping with stress in general, but one thing I know I have been doing is venting. I talk to my friends on the phone or the messengers, I just complain about the situation and I know that doesn't help like to fix things, but I every time I complain after that, I feel much better

However, venting poses a particular risk of co-rumination which is why setting boundaries/limitations was a common trend amongst participants. They described setting limits in various ways including for their own work, but especially for venting. One participant shared:

I've actually, during this experience, kind of had to set some boundaries with my friends because I found that their issues were only making my anxiety of everything else going on worse. So I'm glad to talk about experiences with them, but I can only take so much. So I've kind of had to set those boundaries and listen, like I understand what you're going through, but I can't talk about it with you every day.

In addition to setting boundaries for their own well-being, participants also mentioned many examples of self-care. Self-care could include alone time, ‘spa days’, watching movies with friends (even virtually), or any type of act meant to ‘treat yourself’. One participant enjoyed self-care regularly:

I get my nails done like every three to four weeks and that's like a relief and keeping me sane, like I have something to look forward to because I like I spend probably like a week beforehand picking nail designs. And then when I get there, that's like a huge thing for me.

Nearly the opposite of self-care are the more dangerous coping mechanisms or maladaptive coping mechanisms. These are behaviors that improve mental well-being in the short-term but could have potentially harmful long-term effects. Such as, drinking, drug use, self-harm, and more. There were a handful of participants who shared their own maladaptive coping mechanisms. One said:

I feel like also as an unhealthy coping mechanism, well... healthy if you think about it, like all of my friends and us, we smoke marijuana. And that's kind of like what we've been doing more so often because of the pandemic.

Uncertainty

Sources of Uncertainty

Uncertainty is understood as the degree to which a situation is either unpredictable, or when one is unable to explain or predict an outcome (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Although uncertainty differs among individuals due to many factors, most prominently culture, it is very

common among graduate students. The findings from the focus groups lead to three main sub-themes within sources of uncertainty; work/job/career, graduate program, and the pandemic.

The most referenced source of uncertainty for the participants was work/job/career. Many participants described feeling like they had lost job security, despite the expectation of getting their masters or PhD. One participant shared:

I would say the biggest uncertainty factor for me is like I went into grad school for the hopes of, like getting a better job and now I'm not even sure if I'll be able to find employment after graduating this spring. So that's a big, just uncertain bubble.

Other participants shared this concern and described feeling uncertain as to whether their degree would be “worth it” which will be explored later. A similar uncertainty emerged as participants described the growing sense of uncertainty regarding their program itself. More specifically, participants described feeling as though they were unsure if they were getting a quality education during this time. One participant explained:

I wasn't sure if I was, with the pandemic, like if I'm getting as much out of my classes in an online setting that I would be in my normal classes. Like a lot of my professors are cutting down the extent of a research project that we would go to in person settings. So it's almost like, should you just finish your degree now or what's the point if you're not going to be getting as much out of it as you could be in a non-pandemic setting.

In addition to feeling the growing uncertainty in a professional or academic setting, many participants also discussed the social uncertainties they were facing. A significant portion of the participants were either international students, or were away from “home”, and discussed their uncertainty regarding when they might see their family again. One participant stated:

Now it's not so much like not being able to meet, visiting [family], or them coming, but it's also like, you know, going back to this idea of uncertainty, not knowing when I'll be able to visit or when they'll be able to come here. Yeah, that makes it more difficult

Coping Mechanisms

To identify and code the various coping mechanisms used by participants, the researchers defined code as descriptions of things that helped mitigate feelings of uncertainty. There were four main sub-themes within the coping mechanisms for uncertainty; uncertainty avoidance, uncertainty reduction, venting, and maladaptive coping mechanisms.

One of the most frequently discussed coping mechanisms was uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance, while typically discussed as one of Hofstede's (2001) dimensions, is also an action itself. Participants described turning to video games and other forms of media to avoid dealing with the uncertainty they are facing. One participant described:

There's this game called Star Dew Valley. It's like Animal Crossing for people who like video games. There's no uncertainty. I know exactly what's going to happen to [the characters].

Similar to uncertainty avoidance is uncertainty reduction. The primary difference is that in uncertainty avoidance the individual avoids the uncertainty itself whereas with reduction it is focused on minimize the uncertainty or knowing the outcomes. One participant elaborated:

I feel like that in a way, just re-watching shows where I know where everything happens kind of reduces any uncertainty, extra uncertainty, I feel.

Some participants found that the more effective way of handling their uncertainty came from venting to others. One of the most prominent groups mentioned were peers or members of the graduate student cohort. When participants were feeling uncertainty, especially from their program, they would vent to others in similar situations. One participant said:

It's been nice that me and my cohort are all going through our comprehensive exams during the same semester, because whenever we do get a chance to talk, we'll spend the whole time complaining about how it's just not clear what we're supposed to do. And that venting really does a lot on top of [talking].

As mentioned before, venting poses its own challenges but again those more serious maladaptive coping mechanisms began to emerge here as well. Participants described that the uncertainty of the pandemic and not knowing when they could see their friends or family again actually caused them to become more withdrawn. One participant shared:

Being the person that's online, you get a different experience, and so I started actually to feel more isolated and like I started to withdraw, actually. So, like, I guess if you consider that a coping mechanism, although it was not a good one, but like when I was at home, I noticed that I was like, you know what? There's no point. I'm just not going to not going to join. I'm not going to go to church and not try to do my livestream church service, I'm not going to do it. And I felt like my community slipping more and more, and so it was harder to cope with those feelings.

Social Support

Sources of Social Support

Social support comes from many places with interpersonal relationships being strong sources that may help address anxiety and establish a sense of coherence and reduce uncertainty (Darling et al., 2007). Sources of social support vary among individuals, however, the five most prominent sources were; pets, family, friends, peer/cohort, and mentors.

Emotional support animals are a kind of service animal that can be used for a variety of reasons, often relating to anxiety, stress, or even PTSD. However, not all pets are certified as emotional support animals, although many participants described how their own pets have helped them during the pandemic. By providing physical comfort or through getting people out of the house, pets proved to be very helpful for some participants:

Yeah, my dog cuddles, too. I feel like also like when I talked about walks earlier, like he gets me out of the house, I can go on walks with him and just he loves car rides. So if I just need to go for a drive to clear my head, it's good to get away with someone, especially because we can't go see our friends that we don't already live with right now. So we can't just, like, go see them and be like, oh, I need a break from whatever I have going on. So it's nice to just have someone, even if it's not a person.

Although not every participant may find comfort with their furry friends, many did seek out their family when in need. Many participants described leaning on their family, especially their mothers, for different types of help. One participant shared:

I'm going to say my mom, so before that, when the pandemic started, I was living by myself, but I was still an undergrad and everything. So during last year, I decided to

move back to my parents' house and my mom is literally helping me with everything during grad school.

For some participants, they turned to friends as well as family. The relationships among these friends often being compared to those of their family or labeling their friends as being family. One participant explained:

I have a lot of friends that don't live in Florida, so I think it's kind of brought us a little closer because during the beginning [of the pandemic] we had a lot more face time and gym calls and happy hours than we would have on a normal basis. We're reaching out to each other more because we know that we're all in the same position and maybe we're lonely or bored or any of those things. I think that's really helped, the family members and friends that are on the same wavelength as me in thinking, they've kind of kind of like solidified my thinking and said "you're not alone".

Friends can come from different places and are often made through common experiences, like graduate school. Cohorts within graduate school can play an important role in the experience of any grad student and many participants described the 'culture' between their program's cohort as being 'extremely supportive' and that they are 'always there for each other'. For one participant:

Definitely the cohort, they're a pretty good bunch. They're consistent, not just with checking up on each other, but with the quality of how they check up on each other. So, it's not just hi, it's hi, how are you doing? Which is pretty cool, but it's also it's kind of like an opt in scenario. So, you know, you get in what you get out for sure.

Similarly, many participants found themselves relying on their more experience peers or mentors. Mentors were described as older graduate students, advisors, as well as faculty or professors. One student explained:

I think I've been lucky to have a lot of support, at least in the first semester, particularly of my program from one of my professors and then also my advisor. They did a lot for me.

Instrumental Support

To refresh, “Instrumental support (INS) includes provision of financial aid, material resources, and needed services; it includes offering help in getting necessary tasks done, providing something of use, performing a task, or taking on a responsibility.” (Nick et al., 2018, p. 1128). Instrumental support was the least mentioned support among the participants. The two sub-themes identified were receiving and giving social support.

Participants were faced with many challenges caused by the pandemic, financial instability, danger to their health, mental duress, and more. Many participants described difficult situations that were outside their control and how they received instrumental support in this time of need. One participant stated:

I had to deal with being told to leave housing, which was fun. Thankfully, a very kind soul took me in, gave me and my dog a home. So that was nice. But if that person hadn't done that, I really didn't have a place to stay.

Other participants described the ‘simple’ things that their support systems did to help them manage the negative consequences of the pandemic. Many described how family or

significant others would help around the house which took away that stress or extra, time consuming, work off their plate. One participant said:

My mom is literally helping me with everything during grad school because she's retired. She's helping me cooking with all the house tasks. Of course, I help her whenever I can, but she's helping me to do everything and organizing my life a little bit because without her, I couldn't do everything that I'm doing now. I think I would have a mental breakdown every week. She's definitely been a great point of support.

Some participants talked about similar experiences and how beyond just helping with tasks around the house, their support system also provided alternatives to help reduce the added stress. One participant explained:

I'm such a planner, and perfectionist around my house. I don't have time to cook all time or to clean things. So my husband is like "you know, let's not cook dinner. Maybe you should relax and order takeout". You know, like giving me alternatives because I don't know if I could I be the person that could do it all. It's not possible. So he's really been like my extra support at home for that, and especially when I get through those bouts of I don't know, not panic, but like those stressful moments, he's definitely more like cool so he's good at keeping me calm.

Many participants shared the exchange of support between them and others, many described sending their friends things that they may need. One participant explained:

I do have this one friend that I mentioned earlier and so she her and I, we have this thing, like whenever we're feeling down or going through things, we have each other's

addresses and so we send each other insomnia cookies, which is a great thing that when you think about it, it's great.

Other participants sent other kinds of gifts for when their family was in need, mostly in the form of financial assistance. One participant described:

I also have supported sometimes as well with money as well, because they live in some countries where now it's pretty difficult and they haven't had a job. And so that's one way financially, not really like much, but when I can I, I kind of like send them something because they need it in. And I know if I get to it, they'll be there for me as well in that sense.

Informational Support

Mentioned slightly more often than instrumental support was informational support. This support “includes help in defining, understanding, and coping with problems, and it may take the form of giving advice, offering appraisal support, sharing new information or perspectives, or providing reference to new resources.” (Nick et al., 2018, p. 1128). This support was common amongst graduate students between their peers and is categorized into receiving and giving support.

For many participants they have found their informational support coming in the form of study groups or sharing resources. One participant said:

Everyone's really responsive in our cohort, that if we can't find something or if we have a question or if we miss class or something, we're all really good about saying, oh, we talked about this, there is a class or let me send you this assignment or these notes I took.

So everyone's really good about being helpful, which I think is another benefit with the COVID thing going on is sometimes we can't make our zoom classes or we have to leave early and for me, I would think that that would be a horrifying idea because who am I going to reach out to? But even though we've never met in person, everyone's been really great about sharing what we need to know.

Some participants went as far as to rely on their peers as the primary source for information, even at times bypassing their own independent research. For one participant:

I have a friend in my cohort who I just like check in with her and I'm like, OK, where is this thing, am I supposed to do it? And she'll just text me "no you don't have to do that". She really helps like limit those like freakouts before they happen by just like letting me know which things matter and where they all are. And it's like, let's say I can't find a book for a reasonable price at the library or something. She can always find like a PDF of them. So that's pretty helpful.

Participants also described sharing of information in order to hold one another accountable, including due dates or important deadlines. For many of the participants in their final semester they described relying on others to know if they were 'on track'. One participant described:

I talk to how many four or five graduate students who were doing the same thing proposal faces in general thesis. So I told them, please keep me updated, keeping me on track because I think it's super easy to get lost, especially since there is no supervisor tell you all "you've got to do this". Even though you have an advisor, they won't keep you on track. You have to talk to them. You have to schedule a meeting with them. But since I

know several of graduate teaching associates or graduate students who are also doing thesis. I talk to them regularly so that way I know I am still on track. That's I think that's very important to me.

Many participants described feeling incapable of providing informational support or as though they did not have the resources for it. However, when they are able to provide the informational support it is an added source of relief for the giver. One participant said:

I try to do what I can, if I know the answer, then I'll tell them, but if I'm not sure, I'll try to find something. And because I also know that, like, if I'm able to help them, then when I might need help, they'll be more willing to help me, it's like that give and take kind of thing. Like I know there's been a lot of times that people have really helped me. At one time they asked me for help and I was like, oh, thank God it's not just me. And so I gave her the answer, whatever. And I was like, I'm so glad you asked me for help, because I had like this like "Am I the only one that doesn't know what's happening" that kind of feeling, so when people do ask for help, even if I don't or might not know the exact answer, it's a stress reliever for me and myself. So it's nice to have that feeling.

Emotional Support

As a reminder, "Emotional support is related to the expressions that communicate caring, concern, empathy, encouragement, relational support, closeness, belongingness, and love." (Parsons, 2019, p.122). This understanding of emotional support was used to help code the associated responses. The sub-themes identified here were categorized as either receiving or giving emotional support.

Emotional support is often expressed through the idea of ‘being there’ for someone or lending them an ear, maybe even a “shoulder to cry on.” Many participants described situations where they received this support from someone and the significant impact it had on their well-being. One participant explained:

I think just because COVID has caused so many of us to go into quarantine or isolation, just the mere fact that there's another person interacting with us, whether it is friends or family. In the few fleeting moments that we do get to spend in contact with them, it's a lot more significant because humans are social creatures, we are not meant to be alone. So I think just the fact that there is social presence that we can interact with helps us feel some sort of connection or connectivity. And I think that does help because we've all been quarantined and isolated like this.

Many people elaborated that despite being isolated from one another physically, they were still able to receive this emotional support through online or virtual meetings. Participants often described using Zoom as a platform to ‘get together’ with friends or family. One participant shared:

Zoom and the pandemic has done something to make me closer to my family and my friends, we're actually hanging out, which is interesting. You know, we're not just texting each other or never talking to each other, we actually hung out. And I've also been, on Sundays, I have a weekly group chat, a video call with my siblings. We've never done that, we've never done anything like that. So that's something that's pretty new and it's been going strong since, like all of 2020 I think. But yeah, it was like a pandemic induced thing. So I think that's pretty cool.

For many participants, receiving emotional support was not where things stopped, but where they started. Participants described how these interactions were ‘transactional’ in nature but in a positive sense. They exchanged support with one another, as one participant explained:

I think that's huge when they agree with me that I know I just don't have unrealistic expectations. And then also we are kind of like one another's hype men, and will say things like, “you know what you're talking about in this area and can you help me with it”? Or, you know, one time I said something about being dumb and they were like, “we don't buy that for a second, you are so smart”. Just being each other's like hype men and agreeing with one another, it's been really helpful.

Some participants experienced a difficulty when providing emotional support and described as though they didn’t have ‘solutions’ or were not truly able to help. Many of these participants, who were graduate teaching assistants, described this difficulty when helping their students. One participant pointed out:

I have to be there for them. It's kind of the role of the coach, but it's like I realize, instead of like trying to offer advice, because how can I possibly pretend that I have any advice that's going to mitigate their situation, I just agree with them. And I'm like, yeah, this sucks, you're right. Maybe there's stuff we can do to make it suck less, but I can't take the entire suck away. But that's validating their feelings. Yeah, it's more about like making sure they're heard because right now so many different things suck, it's not just a pandemic, so many different things have happened in the past year that are just awful. And so, you know, people get tired of hearing things suck all the time, but things aren't

going to stop sucking. And people still have those feelings about those things sucking, so it's about validating those feelings.

Another participant echoed those sentiments and said:

With teaching, because that's where I get a lot of emails, too, about needing help is from my students. I have adopted, an attitude of being very or I've tried to anyway, to be as merciful and gracious and flexible and cooperative with people as much as I possibly can. And I've tried to rethink how I think about my own pedagogy and how I think about like what is important for us to do or think about or learn in a classroom. I think just thinking about that, what people need, honestly, I think it's just Grace. I think people just want to know that it's OK. It's OK if you're not being super productive right now, it's OK if you're struggling, it's OK if you're not struggling and you're living it up and zoom and being online is the best thing ever happen to you. Like, you know, it's all OK. And the way that we're coping and processing with all this is just a part of it. And I think people need to just hear that and hear that people are OK with where they are at. Mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, all those sorts of things

Program

Throughout the focus group discussions many participants would spend extensive amounts of time describing their experiences with their programs and how the pandemic has changed that. Due to the significance in both description and frequency of responses the researchers chose to create additional codes to capture these themes addressed. This section is

categorized by topics relating to the college/university and the graduate program itself. Two themes emerged one broader and one specific; the University and the professors/instructors.

The University

This theme was defined as experiences with the college/University and operation –in person or online- during the pandemic. Many participants described the perception of their college ‘not caring’ about the students. One particularly passionate participant shared:

Unfortunately, here in Ohio, they don't care about us. I actually taught in person last semester, two classes, and I had to wear the mask. The entire class had to, I teach 30 students in each class with wearing masks and that was very consistent for a lot of instructors here. Having to navigate not only teaching an in person class during a pandemic, but then also having to stream your class online through zoom in case any of your students had COVID. That was particularly stressful with this pandemic.

Other participants felt as though their program had become ‘unavailable’ or unwilling to help. Multiple participants describe situations where they reached out with questions and were left with no answers. One participant said:

Something happened this semester where nobody has time for anything, and that's been a little bit frustrating. Because it's kind of like, well, there's pressure coming down for me to do a particular thing but I can't really do this particular thing without some help. Yet nobody seems to have time to offer any help. What are going to be the consequences if I don't do this thing when I didn't have any help? And I mean, I'm resourceful and I'll go

figure it out, whatever. But it does sting, when you hear over and over again, “I don't have time. I don't have time.”.

Similarly, many participants expressed frustration with the uncertainty of whether their program would be online or not. Often referencing ‘last minute decisions’ or a lack of transparency when it came to the decisions the University was making. One participant described:

I feel like so many last-minute decisions have been happening that we can't help but feel some sort of uncertainty moving forward, because even leading up to spring semester, it was, are we going to be on campus, are we not? And for international students or someone like me who, I don't have a car because I don't have to go anywhere, am I going to need to go get a car to drive to campus? Those sort of things that are happening, those last minute decisions and last minute changes, I think are really driving my uncertainty.

Many participants further explained their frustrations with their programs moving online and offering ‘no flexibility’ for mandatory classes. Much of this frustration was described as a result of ‘not being an online learner’ or the instructors themselves. One participant explained

There's also the factor of like me personally, I just don't learn well online. So having to kind of adjust those standards for myself of grad school to deal with my classes being in an online setting, which wasn't what anyone signed up for, going to an in-person program.

Professors and Instructors

This section was clearly defined as experiences with professors or instructors ‘within’ a COVID classroom, be that online or in person. The majority of responses within this sub-theme were relating to the ‘workload’ or ‘leniency’ that their educators showed them. One participant shared:

Towards the end of last spring semester [2020], the professors were a little bit more understanding that there was a pandemic going on and adjusting the projects. Whereas I feel like when we got to fall semester, all of our professors just expected everything to be back to normal, even though everything wasn't back to normal. And they just added on that workload and it was just a little bit too much to handle versus when the pandemic first started.

Another participant echoed this sentiment and shared their experience:

You also have to deal with professors thinking that they're doing something for your education by giving you different, harder assignments because you're online now and you're like, this isn't helping me, this isn't helping me at all. This isn't going to make me want to learn more because we're online. We just need to get to the finish line, you know what I mean? Like, that should have been on every professor's mind, like, how can I get my students to the finish line? And for some people, it wasn't that. It was how do I maintain a similar educational experience. That was never going to happen, that was never on the table. It's a pandemic.

Similarly, many participants described the level of caring or understanding they perceived from their instructors and for most it was not a positive experience. Many described

'mixed messages' or feeling uncertain about the expectations set for them by their instructors.

One participant explained:

We're getting a lot of mixed messages, some professors are like "you take care of yourself, make sure you're OK." And then the other ones are just like "you still need to do all the stuff". I can't take care of myself and keep up with your workload at the same time. I don't understand, what should I prioritize. Me, or do I prioritize the mountains of assignments you're giving us. That like confliction because I felt like, I'm tired, I need to take a break. Oh, I have these ten assignments and they are due. That was just kind of just like a battle for me, especially in the fall semester.

Another participant elaborated:

The problem that I experienced last semester is there is a very wide continuum of communicative and not communicative, and a really wide continuum of accepting of problems and not at all accepting of problems. Even this semester, I have a professor that came out and said, "if you miss an assignment, if you feel like you're overwhelmed and can't get something done on time, email me. It's fine. I'm not going to do anything to your grade. We'll get it done when we get it done". Whereas I have another professor that the class has been disorganized and we've all been confused and suffering, but then like nothing is done to fix it even when we do reach out. So I just think there's a wide array of how professors are handling this situation.

Feelings Words

Among the themes identified, “feelings words” were present throughout. These words were those used to describe how the participants were feelings given a situation, or when discussing their experiences. Participants frequently mentioned a lack of “motivation”, be that to complete work or to participate in social interactions. These feelings words were most often described when asked about the program or workload, or in correlation to their sources of stress. One participant described:

I was on track to propose last semester and then motivation just became zero because I also had to, like, figure out how to teach on Zoom and how to learn online and how to do so much that I couldn't possibly also juggle, like writing my thesis proposal. So that's why I have to take an extra summer semester in order to be able to defend in the summer.

Participants also described a lack of “meaning” or “worth” to their graduate experience. This was most commonly described within sections discussing the program and uncertainty. One participant shared:

I suppose with graduation being online, it just feels less genuine. And I feel like because everything's online right now. Just having another thing online doesn't really separate a difference from just taking my classes or finishing a regular class. It doesn't feel like I'm going to be actually making a huge road stop like graduation.

Negative emotions were described frequently throughout all main and sub-themes and included emotions such as; frustration, injustice, and helplessness. One participant shared:

When I've kind of been in that position where I'm hearing the same kind of problems being discussed on a regular basis or the same issues being addressed in many different

contexts, it kind of is frustrating and it brings up these feelings of just kind of an anger in the sense of there's nothing that I can do about it. There's nothing that I can do to change what's happening or to really change what the other person is experiencing

Summary

The findings from this research can be summarized into main themes and sub-themes. The main themes were stress, uncertainty, social support, program, and feelings words. The sub-themes identified for stress consisted of sources of stress and coping mechanisms. The sub-themes identified for uncertainty consisted of sources of uncertainty and coping mechanisms. The sub-themes identified for social support consisted of sources of social support, instrumental support, informational support, and emotional support. The sub-themes identified for program consisted of the university and professors and instructors.

Table 1; Findings Summary

Main Theme/Sub-Theme	Findings
Stress/Sources of Stress	Work/Job/Career Program Workload Time Management or “balance” Pandemic (COVID-19)
Stress/Coping Mechanisms	Escapism Exercise Venting Setting Boundaries/Limitations Self-care Maladaptive coping Mechanisms
Uncertainty/Sources of Uncertainty	Work/Job/Career Graduate Program Pandemic (COVID-19)
Uncertainty/Coping Mechanisms	Uncertainty Avoidance Uncertainty Reduction Venting Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms
Social Support/Sources of Social Support	Pets Family Friends Peer/Cohort Mentors
Social Support/Instrumental Support	Receiving Giving
Social Support/Informational Support	Receiving Giving
Social Support/Emotional Support	Receiving Giving
Program/The University	‘Not caring’ ‘Unavailable’ ‘Last minute decisions’ ‘No flexibility’
Program/Professors and Instructors	‘Workload’ ‘Leniency’ ‘Mixed messages’ ‘Unclear expectations’
Feelings Words	Motivation Meaning/Worth Negative emotions

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter provided conclusions and implications drawn from this study, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

Research Interpretations and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of social support, stress, and uncertainty among graduate students in a communication program during a global pandemic.

Previous research maintained that stress has potentially long-term negative side effects, including reduced cognitive function, and that graduate students experience stress at a higher level. However, this research was limited to mostly STEM fields with little to no consideration of the social sciences. The findings from this study indicate that graduate students in communication programs experience levels of stress that was consistent with that of the STEM counterparts. Sources of stress in existing literature are often categorized as chronic strains and life events. In this study, primary sources of stress as life events were program workload and time management, whereas the chronic strains came from work/job and the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the coping mechanisms discussed in existing literature the most prominent was venting, yet the findings of this study showed that escapism, exercise, setting boundaries, self-care, maladaptive coping mechanisms, in addition to venting, were also effective in mitigating the negative effects of stress.

Looking at these findings through RDT, of the three dialectics (i.e., openness/closedness, novelty/predictability, and autonomy/connection), one seems particularly noteworthy. Novelty and predictability represent the tension between what is known or unknown, (i.e., uncertainty).

Although uncertainty is a construct itself for this study, it also plays a significant role as a dialectic for stress. Participants discussed their sources of stress and explained the tensions they were feeling which clearly aligned with novelty/predictability. For example, many participants explained that the pandemic was a significant source of stress for them but more specifically, the unpredictable nature of COVID-19 and not knowing when the pandemic would be “over.”

Regardless of the pandemic, previous research showed that graduate students are faced with elevated levels of uncertainty in their respective programs. A large portion of this uncertainty came from the inability to predict whether an undesirable event would occur. The literature also showed that uncertainty is prevalent in the classroom regarding exams, expectations, and the notion of success. The findings from this study were consistent with existing research and identified the graduate program, work, and the pandemic as a primary source of uncertainty. When participants described uncertainty caused by their graduate program they often stated that they felt uncertain about what was expected of them. The coping mechanisms for uncertainty identified in previous research showed that social support played a significant role yet the findings of this study were more robust. Findings showed that participants engaged in uncertainty avoidance and reduction, venting, and maladaptive coping mechanisms to help mitigate the negative effects of uncertainty.

Continuing to examine the findings through the lens of RDT, uncertainty fits bet within the dialectical tension of novelty and predictability. Like the participants’ discussions regarding stress, they explained that they felt a tension for their sources of uncertainty. For example, when participants described uncertainty regarding work, they focused heavily on if they would be able to find a job after graduation. This was a significant concern for many participants as they

described feeling like the pandemic is what caused them to experience a lack of predictability when it comes to work post grad school. Moreover, the findings show a trend of equating the pandemic with an increase in uncertainty from all sources.

Social support has a wealth of existing research to explain both the sources of support and the effects support has on recipients. Social support is most commonly broken down into informational, instrumental, and emotional support. Research showed that although emotional support was the most common among the three types of support, all were effective if done correctly. Sources of social support vary, and may come from family, friends, or spouses. The findings from this study identified the following as sources of support for our participants; pets, family, friends, peer/cohort, and mentors. Surprisingly, participants did not mention their significant others frequently enough for it to be considered a source of support, yet pets were mentioned often.

Informational support, in previous research, is given when the need is related to a lack of knowledge or information. It could come in the form of providing resources that help fill a knowledge gap. The findings from this study showed that this was the least frequent type of support however it was still effective when used. For example, participants described that at times they felt lost or like they didn't know what was going on in their courses so they would reach out to their peers. These peers provided them with either resources –like the syllabus or perhaps an article- that helps the recipient stay on track with the class expectations, reducing their stress and uncertainty along the way.

Looking at informational support through RDT, two dialectics start to stand out. Because informational support relates to knowledge, and using the example provided before, it is clear the

novelty/predictability was a key tension. Participants described relying on their peers to help reduce uncertainty and ‘predict’ what was expected of them. This is also an example of how autonomy and connection plays a role. Participants needed to rely on one another to get the informational support yet due to COVID-19 they were restricted into how. Some participants describe online study parties or gatherings that were conducted on *Zoom* as a way of holding each other accountable and staying on track.

Instrumental support, in previous research, shows that this type of support is given when the need is more tangible in nature. For example, a common type of instrumental support is providing financial assistance when someone is struggling. The findings of this study were consistent with that of the research and demonstrated that participants were relying more heavily on this type of support than they did before the pandemic. Participants shared that they needed assistance with things like cooking, cleaning, housing security, and more. From the examples described by participants the most frequent instrumental support provided appeared to be financial in nature. Both when giving and receiving, a significant portion of the participants described the financial difficulties that the pandemic caused and how that extra monetary support was helpful.

Looking at instrumental support through the lens of RDT, the dialectic of openness/closedness starts to make an appearance. Some participants described feeling conflicted or this tension around whether or not they can or should reach out for this support. Many participants felt if they admitted that they needed help, it would be a burden to others. Yet many participants stated that their needs ultimately “won” and resulted in them sharing their hardship with friends or family. Some participants seemed to struggle with this dialectic

significantly and found themselves facing internal conflict over disclosure. When facing this internal conflict, many participants also battled with the need to be connected to others and share in their struggles, while also feeling defeated and wanting to isolate. It appears that the two dialectics often played a role together in the decision-making process of asking for help.

Emotional support, in previous research, shows that it is typically provided when the need is related to emotional wellbeing or boosting morale. It can be provided through expressions that communicate caring, concern, empathy, encouragement, relational support, closeness, belongingness, and love. One concern within existing research, when it comes to emotional support, is the concept of venting which can then turn into co-rumination. Co-rumination causes something like a boomerang effect as rather than helping to boost morale or emotional wellbeing, it causes more damage. The findings of this study were consistent with the existing understanding of emotional support and even highlighted some instances when co-rumination began to take place. Participants described the excessive amounts of venting that was taking place throughout the pandemic quarantine in Summer 2020, and how it made things worse for them which resulted in having to set boundaries around venting. As identified earlier, many participants indicated that their biggest source of emotional support was their pets because they were “just there” or would listen when the participant was struggling.

Looking at emotional support through the lens of RDT, the most obvious dialectic present is autonomy and connection. Emotional support is reliant on the idea of ‘being there’ for a person which goes back to that tension and need to be connected to others while also needing autonomy, as demonstrated by setting boundaries. Many participants discussed how they would either seek out others and lean on them or how they would retreat inward and self-isolate. The

quarantine caused by the pandemic was a sort of forced autonomy, which is why it was interesting that so many participants described feeling that tension between wanting social interaction and keeping to themselves. Furthermore, many participants described how the pandemic caused them to become more connected to their friends, family, and peers which was an unexpected positive result of the pandemic.

Throughout the data analysis process, a secondary focus emerged into a theme; the communication graduate program. Although the researcher was not interested in the program specifically, there were significant responses during the data collection that indicated it was important to recognize. The findings showed that participants were facing difficulties with not only their university but also their professors/instructors. Many described feeling as though their professors did not care about them or as though they were deliberately making their courses more difficult, as some sort of attempt to improve the educational experience while being online. Findings showed consistent perceptions that the professors and universities were causing significantly higher levels of stress and uncertainty among participants during the pandemic compared to pre-COVID-19.

This finding is noteworthy because the global pandemic COVID-19 caused massive turmoil across the world and had significant negative effects on academia. This study collected not only students' experiences, but their perceptions of their university's response to COVID-19. The findings have shown that while the world has been faced with unimaginable uncertainty and increased stress levels, graduate students have been expected to perform at the same level as before the pandemic. This study has also provided insight into what these students have done to help mitigate the negative effects of stress and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. In addition,

this study has demonstrated the importance of social support in times of need and specifically what that support has looked like during the pandemic thus far. It is important that we learn from these findings and adapt our method to improve not only the experience of current students, but future students as well. Like with any crisis, we must look to and learn from the past to create a better future. With no end in sight for COVID-19 it is time to start learning from the experience and findings ways to make things better.

Limitations and Future Research

Before addressing how the research could evolve in the future it is important to first identify the limitations of this study, starting with the population size. Although the participants were recruited from seven different universities across the United States, there were still only 22 total participants in the study. This limited sample size provides only a glimpse into the complete experiences of the millions of graduate students during the pandemic. Furthermore, the majority of these participants came from Florida which was a ‘hotspot’ for the COVID-19 pandemic and experience significantly higher case numbers than other states which could have potentially had an impact on the participants experience. The minimal sample size, and area of residence during the pandemic, does not lend to a comprehensive understanding of the experiences for graduate students across the United States, let alone on a global level.

Another limitation is the fluctuation of said stress and uncertainty throughout the study. While the focus groups took place over the span of two weeks, participants were at various points in their semester, for example during mid-term exams, which could contribute to higher/lower levels of stress and uncertainty. Like with the location of these universities, some

participants' programs had remained online while others had returned to normal face to face operation, leading to increased stress and uncertainty for some. Furthermore, participants who were nearing the end of their program or were in their final semester, discussed stress and uncertainty associated with graduation on a much higher frequency than others. These factors make it difficult to know the true influence that program specifics may have had on the participants' experiences.

In addition, there was a limitation regarding not addressing cultural and critical issues. While a demographic capture was taken for all participants, the researcher did not specifically analyze the implications of gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc., as a factor. Marginalized populations may have experienced additional difficulties than already prevalent, due to the pandemic, which was not explicitly addressed. More specifically, the researcher did not address the protests relating to the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, rise in xenophobia, and or attacks on the Asian population following the coronavirus outbreak. Also, at least five participants were international students, yet the distinction of international versus domestic students was not considered. The lack of consideration for these factors could potentially lead to gaps in understanding the experiences of each participant or those who may have faced additional challenges.

Understanding these limitations allows for future researchers to make changes that will create a more comprehensive understanding of graduate students experiences with stress, uncertainty, and social support during a global pandemic. This study has shown that graduate students in communication experience significant degrees of stress and uncertainty, which was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also identified sources of social support and specific

examples of informational, instrumental, and emotional support which were effective during this time. It also provided insight into the graduate students' experiences with their program including the university specifically, as well as the professors/instructors.

Recommendations for future researchers start with the sample size. By increasing the number of participants and expanding the recruitment to include more universities in various places will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences. In addition, it is important to account for the fluctuation of stress and uncertainty by collecting data over a longer period, and potentially either between semesters or during the initial weeks. Another recommendation is to examine the experiences of international versus domestic students more in depth. Look at how the experiences of someone in their home country compares to that of a student who is not, and what additional challenges that might bring to those students. One final recommendation, consider addressing the critical cultural issues that may have been affected, potentially aggravated, by the pandemic.

Conclusion

Graduate students in communication experience high levels of stress and uncertainty which have been elevated by COVID-19. Graduate students utilize various coping mechanisms in conjunction with social support to help mitigate the negative effects of stress and uncertainty. Sources of informational, instrumental, and emotional support can come from many places but commonly come from pets, friends, family, peers, and mentors. College and universities contributed to the elevated levels of stress and uncertainty in their students due to their lack of transparency and high expectations for performance from their students. Looking at the tensions

of graduate students' experiences provides a better understanding for beneficial changes that can be made. Although more research is needed to better understand the experiences of stress, uncertainty, and social support for graduate students during a global pandemic, this research provides a foundation of where to begin and how to make sure that students are set up for success.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Hello, my name is Teanna and I will be your moderator for today, welcome to the focus group discussion. If you are unfamiliar or have never participated in a focus group before, it is simply a group of people from a distinct population who get together and discuss a specific topic. They typically last for about an hour or until all the questions have been addressed and everyone has gotten the chance to say what they would like. Today's topic is going to be about your experiences with stress, uncertainty, and social support.

There are some rules for the discussion that I want to start with addressing. This is a safe space, and everyone should feel comfortable speaking freely about their thoughts, ideas, experiences, or beliefs. There are no right or wrong answers, and every experience is valid and valuable. Because everyone's experiences are valid, it is important that everyone and talks to share their own. Do not feel afraid of judgment or disagreeing with another participant, everyone is different, and it is expected that you might not agree on some things. I know that it may be difficult to speak up at times and so I will be looking at all cameras throughout to see if anyone is trying to speak. Please do not interrupt each other whenever possible; if you have something to share while someone else is talking, please use the "raise hand" tool available in zoom. You may also use the comment section to call my attention but avoid writing your ideas there. Finally, be respectful of each other's ideas and experiences even if you do not share them. Any questions?

There is a lot to cover in the next hour so things might speed up or slow down depending on how the discussion is going. If at any time, I have moved on from a topic and you have something you would like to add please do not hesitate to stop me at any point. Depending on who has been speaking I may call on you or skip over you to allow for more people to speak.

The goal is to hear from everyone. This focus group is being recorded for research purposes.. Following the recording the researcher may reach out to you to clarify a comment if there are any issues. Be sure that any time you want to speak you are unmuted and when not speaking please mute yourself. Although you are being recorded there will be no documentation or connection with your name and what you have said. Any questions about that?

Last, if you need to take a break or go to the bathroom please feel free to do so without interrupting the discussion. Having snacks or drinks with you throughout is encouraged to be as comfortable as possible but please be mindful when speaking not to do so while also eating. Any final questions? Let's get started.

Icebreaker

We're going to start with a small ice breaker to get to know each other. Please tell us your name, where you are from, and how long you have been in the program.

I'll start, I'm Teanna, I'm from Orlando, and I have been in this program for four semesters or two years.

Transition

As mentioned earlier, this discussion is about your experience with stress, uncertainty, and social support. I am interested in what everyone has to share and will be providing additional information at the end of the session.

Discussion Questions

1. Tell me about the hardest part of being a graduate student

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common experiences are... etc.

2. In what ways has the pandemic changed your stress?
 - a. How has this changed over time?

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common changes have been...

3. In what ways has the pandemic changed your uncertainty?
 - a. How has this changed over time?

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common changes have been...

4. Describe what you do to cope with the added stress of the pandemic?
 - a. Do those relationships you mentioned before help at all?
 - b. If so in what ways?

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common changes have been...

5. Describe what you do to cope with the added uncertainty of the pandemic?
 - a. Do those relationships you mentioned before help at all?
 - b. If so in what ways?

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common changes have been...

6. Describe the relationship you have with the people you turn to for help
 - a. What about them or your relationship makes you feel comfortable going to them?

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common people are...

7. Tell me about the different things they do to help you?
 - a. How does their support make you feel? (more or less stressed/uncertain?)

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common things they do are...

8. What do you do when someone comes to you for help?

- a. How does helping others make you feel? (signs of co-rumination?)

SUMMARIZING MOMENT: It sounds like some common changes have been...

Finishing up:

Is there anything else you like me to know before we wrap things up?

That is all for today, thank you so much for participating and taking the time to talk with us.

Please take a couple minute to fill out this short demographic (link in chat to survey) Please leave your cards and information sheets on the table at your seat on your way out. If you have and questions you can refer to your consent form. Thank you all again!

APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Hello,

I am currently conducting a study to understand graduate students' experience with stress, uncertainty, and social support during a global pandemic Please read this message carefully if you are interested in participating in this research.

Study Description

- **Title of Project:** Help in the time of COVID
- **Principal Investigator:** Adam Parrish, Ph.D., Lecturer (?), Nicholson School of Communication and Media, University of Central Florida
- **IRB ID:**

Purpose of the study & process

The objective of this study was to discover the sources of stress and uncertainty among communication graduate students, as well as identify their experiences to social support. In this study, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your experience with stress, uncertainty, and social support.

Requirement and Process

In order to participate in the survey, you **must be at least 18 years old**, and a graduate student perusing a masters or PhD. You need to have the *Zoom* application for the focus group and must complete a short demographic survey. When applicable, extra credit will be awarded by sending a list of participant names to any associated instructors to confirm participation. Your responses will be treated as confidential, and no personal identifying information will be associated. Thus, confidentiality will be guaranteed. You can always stop completing the study if you are not comfortable with this research participation.

Time Required

The focus group will take about an hour and groups are chosen based off participant availability alone.

Please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Adam Parrish, at adam.parrish@ucf.edu if you have any questions about the survey.

Thank you,
Teanna Staser.

APPENDIX C
INTEREST SURVEY

Question 1: Are you a graduate student pursuing a masters or PhD?

-Yes

-No

**If “no” is selected the message “Thank you for your interest in this study, you do not meet the qualifications to be a participant, thank you for your time.” appeared and the survey was completed.*

Question 2: Are you comfortable discussing your experiences with stress, uncertainty, and social support?

-Yes

-No

**If “no” is selected the message “Thank you for your interest in this study, you do not meet the qualifications to be a participant, thank you for your time.” appeared and the survey was completed.*

Question 3: Which of the following focus group sessions would you like to attend? *Note that they will be conducted via Zoom

**If “none of the above” is selected the message “Thank you for your interest in this study, you do not meet the qualifications to be a participant, thank you for your time.” appeared and the survey was completed.*

Question 4: In the event that the session you chose is full, please choose an alternative.

***Note that they will be conducted via Zoom**

Question 5: Please provide your full name and preferred email address for the researcher to contact you. *If participating for extra credit please also provide name of the course and instructor.

-*Text entry*

APPENDIX D
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Question 1: Please select the age range that applies to you

-18-24 years old

-25-34 years old

-35-44 years old

-45-54 years old

-Over 55

Question 2: What is your gender?

-Female

-Male

-Other

-Prefer not to say

Question 3: What is your Ethnicity?

-White

-Hispanic or Latino

-Black or African American

-Native American or American Indian

-Asian/Pacific Islander

-Other

Question 4: What is your current employment status?

-Employed full-time (40+ hours a week)

-Employed part-time (less than 40 hours a week)

-Unemployed

-Unemployed due to COVID-19

-Student

-Retired

-Self-employed

-Unable to work

Question 5: What is your marital status?

-Single (never married)

-Married

-In a domestic partnership

-Divorced

-Widowed

-Other

Question 6: What is your household income?

-Below \$10k

-\$10k-\$50k

-\$50k-\$100k

-\$100k-\$150k

APPENDIX E
IRB APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA0000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

January 13, 2021

Dear Teanna Staser:

On 1/13/2021, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Help in the time of COVID: Informational, emotional, and instrumental support among graduate students during a pandemic
Investigator:	Teanna Staser
IRB ID:	STUDY00002617
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staser Advisor Authorization Form.pdf, Category: Faculty Research Approval; • HRP-255-FORM - Request for Exemption (1).docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Staser Demographic Capture.docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Staser Eligibility and Availability Survey .docx, Category: Survey / Questionnaire; • Staser Explanation of Research.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Staser Focus Group Interview Guide.docx, Category: Interview / Focus Questions; • Staser Icebreaker Questions.docx, Category: Interview / Focus Questions; • Staser Recruitment Message.docx, Category: Recruitment Materials

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Katie Kilgore
Designated Reviewer

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