

EXPLORING AFFECTION EXCHANGE: MARRIED GRADUATE STUDENT
PERSPECTIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

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Under the Supervision of Professor Erin Sahlstein Parcell

Relationship research involving students typically includes undergraduates. Graduate students are deserving attention, as well. Examining the experiences of graduate students, and in particular married graduate students (MGSs), is the focus of this thesis. Maintaining a sound relationship with a spouse is a crucial aspect of a graduate student's life that can significantly influence their physical and mental well-being. This study was informed by affection exchange theory (AET), an interpersonal communication theory, as a framework to explore how married graduate students experience affection with their spouses and how it functions to help manage stress, enhances relational satisfaction, and contributes to their overall well-being. I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews, with 13 graduate students from diverse backgrounds about their experiences of marital affection while also pursuing graduate education. They shared that expressions of affection, both verbal and nonverbal, served as a vital coping resource for MGSs. Through emotional reassurance, physical closeness, acts of service, shared routines, and mutual goal setting, they maintained relational harmony during periods of academic stress. The study's implications for mental health support, marriage counseling, and academic resources tailored to married graduate students, limitations and suggestions for future research avenues are addressed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

For married graduate students (MGSs), the demands of academic life, combined with the pressures of sustaining a healthy partnership, present unique challenges that may exacerbate stress and affect overall well-being. For this thesis, I explored MGSs' experiences of affection exchange, examining its perceived links to well-being and the influence of cultural factors within their relationships. Graduate students often face substantial stressors related to academic demands, financial pressures, and career prospects, making their relationships with spouses pivotal for support and overall well-beings, as marital satisfaction and quality have been correlated with positive outcomes for individuals and families (Rockinson-Szpakiw et al., 2015). Affection indicates both verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as hugging, kissing, and saying things like “I love you” to spouse, and this affection exchange often serves as turning points that advance relational development in spouse (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021). Communication research demonstrates that affection exchange in personal relationships is associated with healthy stress regulation, which benefits individuals and may benefit relationships by extension (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008). Moreover, some studies show that, “communicating certain types of maintenance behaviors and affection may be beneficial for relationship satisfaction” (Gentile & Edwards, 2014, p. 15). Yet there remains a relative scarcity of research exploring the experience of affection expression within the graduate student population.

Motivated by the desire to contribute to the literature on this population, I chose to explore how graduate students experience marital affection, and how it relates to their well-being and cultural background. Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021) highlights that cultural norms and social learning play a significant role in which behaviors are encoded and decoded as affectionate, but

it is the presentation of an affectionate emotion that qualifies behavior as affection. Domestic American students often draw upon indigenous values and communal traditions that emphasize interdependence and relational harmony, while international students navigate the intersection of their cultural heritage and the cultural expectations of their host country. When international graduate students go abroad to study, it is a great transition in their life and a turning point (e.g., being in long-distance, transnational relationships with family and friends in their home country) that is a significant event (Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014). This turning point causes numerous ups and downs in their marital affection expression. By understanding the cultural nuances that shape affection exchange, this research aims to provide valuable insights into how diverse student populations manage the intersecting pressures of academic life and marital relationships, and how it can better support their well-being.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Married graduate students often navigate complex dynamics in their relationships as they strive to balance academic responsibilities with their personal lives (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Researchers highlight that education, career, and romantic relationships are linked to pressures which even results in conflicts (Youmans et al., 2022). Under such hurdles, marital affection encompasses both verbal and nonverbal expressions, including physical gestures like hugging and kissing, as well as verbal affirmations such as saying, “I love you,” which play a pivotal role in relational maintenance and often act as significant turning points that strengthen spousal bonds and enhance relationship satisfaction (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021). According to Xu and Burleson (2004) marriage is assumed to be a deep emotional relationship which fosters tangible support among spouses. They also claim that continuing a romantic relationship is not impossible during such instability. One finding of Floyd and Riforgiate (2008) illustrates that sharing affectionate communication benefit marital partners by defusing the negative mental and physical effects of stress. Their research highlights how affection exchange is also associated with healthy stress regulation. Students often find that mutual understanding and open communication about their social workload fosters an environment where affection can flourish despite constraints (Goodboy et al., 2022). Thus, marital affection exchange can help graduate students balancing their personal life and academic responsibilities. For this thesis, affection expression and its benefits are examined through the affection exchange theory lens.

Sensitizing Framework

In the early 2000s, Kory Floyd introduced affection exchange theory (AET) as a framework to explain the evolutionary benefits of affectionate communication in human

relationships. Floyd (2025) highlights that “AET emerged out of necessity for a systematic theoretic treatment around which emerging questions about affectionate communication could coalesce” (p.3). His work emphasizes how affection contributes to relational satisfaction, psychological well-being, and even physiological health. AET provides a logical foundation for this study as it explains how affectionate communication functions as a critical mechanism in maintaining relationships and promoting well-being, which is particularly relevant for married graduate students navigating academic, financial, and personal stressors (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021). AET adopts an evolutionary standpoint and argues that affectionate communication is a resource that fosters long-term survival through procreation (Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Floyd, Hesse, et al. (2021) highlight that AET is one of the interpersonal communication theories which is based on the idea that humans are driven to provide and receive affection in their relationships to sustain genetic fitness. By applying AET, this study will explore how cultural backgrounds influence affectionate communication and assess its role as a coping mechanism in sustaining both relationship quality and overall well-being (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021).

Floyd, Hesse, et al. (2021) explains that “AET offers the first comprehensive theory from which to understand affectionate communication and its impact on humans” (p. 32). According to this theory, the exchange of affectionate behaviors, such as verbal expressions, physical touch, and support, is a crucial mechanism in maintaining relationships and fostering individual well-being. This theory holds that more affection contributes to the development and maintenance of human pair bonds and their associated resources. AET predicts that individuals who communicate more affection will show a greater ability to succeed in relationships, leading to better indices of psychological and physiological well-being (Campbell et al., 2017). According to van Raalte and Floyd (2021), affectionate communication evolved in the human species to

regulate stress, contribute to viability and fertility, and that affectionate communication exerts some of its benefit via pathways that regulate stress, immunocompetence and reward.

AET suggests that affectionate communication not only strengthens bonds between individuals but also provides physical and emotional health benefits. Additionally, AET addresses some common questions such as why humans' express affection, and why it is beneficial (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021). Understanding the role of affection exchange in relationships is particularly important for populations under stress, such as married graduate students. As affection serves as a coping mechanism and a source of emotional support, helping partners navigate academic, financial, and personal challenges, so, many aspects of a romantic relationship can contribute to happiness and satisfaction as stated by researchers (Gulledge et al., 2003, p. 23). However, Floyd, Hesse, et al. (2021) argues "One of the innovative aspects of AET is its proposition that individuals can also reap health benefits by giving affection to others" (p. 31). Indeed, researchers also claim that expressions of affection often serve as turning points that advance relational development and relational maintenance (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021); Stafford et al., 2000).

According to Floyd, Hesse, et al. (2021) expressing affection reduces the body's susceptibility to stress and activates its hormonal reward systems, which have sedative and analgesic effects. They also added that "AET's simplicity is connected to its narrow, focused scope of exploring affectionate communication" (p. 31). However, AET has its limitations. The theory assumes that affection is inherently positive, overlooking the complexities of affectionate exchanges that may be perceived as obligatory, intrusive, or even burdensome in certain relational or cultural contexts (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021). Additionally, AET does not fully account for how external factors, such as cultural differences or power dynamics within

relationships, may influence the interpretation and reception of affectionate behaviors. Using affection exchange theory lens, this study will investigate how spousal affection expression relates to physical, mental, and relational well-being of married graduate students and provide valuable insights into how cultural factors from both domestic American and international backgrounds impact relationship satisfaction and well-being through affection exchange.

Impact of Affection on Well-Being

Floyd and Riforgiate (2008) found that affectionate communication between spouses is related to hormonal stress regulation. They also reported that an increase of affectionate behavior in romantic relationships may have stress-ameliorating physiological effects. Affection plays a crucial role in shaping emotional, psychological, and academic outcomes, particularly for individuals facing the pressures of graduate studies. Researchers identify substantial bodies of evidence in which they found that expressing and receiving affection with significant others is associated with a multitude of positive health outcomes (Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021). For example, holding hands and expressing love appear not only to be important relational messages shared between partners, but they also appear to be indicators of one's affection to partner (Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Emotional closeness and affectionate exchanges between partners can provide a sense of affection and emotional attachment with partner in different turning-point related events. Floyd and Morman (1998) argue for the importance of studying affection:

While several empirical investigations have examined the communication of affection, there is little consistency from study to study in how affectionate communication is operationally defined, making it difficult to interpret the findings of such research and to compare findings across studies. (p. 144)

Berretz et al. (2022) also states that stress is omnipresent in our everyday lives and therefore it is critical to identify potential stress buffering behaviors that can help to prevent the negative effects of acute stress and improve health condition in daily life. For example, embraces between spouses prior to stressful social situations such as examinations or stressful interviews can reduce the cortisol response in that situation, which can bring out physical well-being by performing a successful interview. Moreover, Floyd and Riforgiate (2008) found that spousal affection predicted levels of diurnal cortisol for the participants. In the context of graduate students, affection can also enhance focus, reduce anxiety, and promote a healthier work-life balance, which can lead to improved academic performance. “Receiving affectionate communication has been related to lower anxiety, lower depression, lower stress, and lower loneliness, as well as to a lower likelihood of being diagnosed with major depressive disorder” (van Raalte & Floyd, 2021, p. 489). Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021) also highlights socially supportive behaviors although they technically can be either verbal or nonverbal in nature-are those that convey an affectionate sentiment in the form of a behavior that, even devoid of its affectionate subtext, embodies help or support to the recipient.

Researchers claim that more in-depth studies could be conducted to investigate the dynamics of spousal decision behaviors (Su et al., 2003). According to Floyd et al. (2009) affection exchange theory posits that expressed and received affectionate messages have emotional and physiological benefits. Combined sharing can reduce stress as studies show that both husbands and wives (equally) maintain their marriages using prosocial relationship maintenance behaviors when they are autonomy supported (Goodboy et al., 2022). Thus, marriage can simultaneously confer both benefits and costs, and it is the delicate balance of these countervailing forces that ultimately determines how marital patterns affect health and well-

being (Williams & Umberson, 2004). Floyd et al. (2009) highlights that affectionate behavior has stress-ameliorating effects. Researchers also claim that their study tested this proposition by examining the effects of increased romantic kissing on blood lipids, perceived stress, depression, and relationship satisfaction (Floyd et al., 2009). They found improvements in perceived stress and relationship satisfaction. These findings underscore the importance of affection as a key factor not only in emotional and psychological well-being but also in academic success, particularly for married graduate students balancing multiple stressors. Substantial evidence exists that affectionate communication practices differ systematically as a function of culture Floyd (2025).

Cultural Perspectives on Affection

Cultural perspectives on affection significantly influence marital dynamics, shaping how partners express and interpret love and support within their relationships. According to Burleson et al. (2019), “Affectionate touch (AT) is central to interpersonal relationships, and culture may influence it in both subtle and powerful ways” (p. 17). Strong interpersonal relationships support a host of physical and mental benefits and have long been regarded as vital to human survival and well-being (Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021). The exploration of other cultural differences as they relate to the expression of emotion could be extremely valuable, particularly in combination with the effects of individualism-collectivism on emotion (Stephan et al., 1998). For example, affection in U.S. domestic relationships is often communicated through subtle, non-verbal cues and actions that align with broader cultural values of respect and balance, rather than overt displays of affection.

In contrast, international students, who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, may have differing norms around affection expression. Stephan et al. (1998) indicate that

collectivistic cultures differ from individualistic cultures. Whereas collectivist cultures may place more emphasis on indirect expressions of affection, such as acts of service or providing financial support, individualist cultures may value direct verbal and physical expressions of love. Cultural differences can create challenges for international students navigating marital relationships in a foreign context, where their behaviors may be perceived differently by their spouse or peers. Additionally, international students share some common characteristics regardless of their diverse cultural, social, religious, and political backgrounds (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Researchers also found that affectionate communication is associated with several individual and relational benefits (Floyd & Mikkelson, 2004). Lum (1997) reported that emotional expression varied in relation to an individual's cultural influences. One explanation for cultures expressing emotions differently is that people within a particular culture have qualitatively different experiences of emotion compared to those in other cultures (Lum, 1997).

Graduate Students' Marital Relationships

Marriage is typically assumed to be a deep emotional relationship, suggesting that spousal emotional support should contribute strongly to marital satisfaction (Xu & Burlison, 2004). Dainton et al. (1994) highlighted that relational satisfaction is generally defined as an individual's attitude toward the partner and the relationship, typically in terms of the perceived quality of the relationship. They found the process of giving and receiving expressions of love, care, and emotional support plays a pivotal role in maintaining relational well-being, particularly in marital relationships (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008). According to Horan and Booth-Butterfield (2010) affectionate messages offer benefits to both sources and receivers. They also examine how communicating affection or receiving affection relates to greater relationship investment. Thus, marital support has been identified as a critical factor in mitigating stressors. A supportive

spouse can provide emotional stability, practical assistance, and a sense of security, which helps married graduate students navigate academic challenges more effectively.

Some studies show that humans communicate affection in romantic relationships to demonstrate investment and enhance relational bonds, and that enhancement of relational bonds can benefit survival via increased access to marital and emotional resources and reproductive probability via the availability of sexual opportunity (Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021). Individual and collective resilience among graduate students often helps to alleviate co-occurring mental stress in higher education (Mesmer et al., 2024). Research also suggests that students who receive strong marital support tend to experience lower stress levels, higher academic success, and greater overall well-being. Debrot et al. (2013) argue that romantic relationships contribute to the maintenance of positive behavior. A common behavior of marital relationships is to express as well as receive affection and it has both emotional and physiological benefits (Carton & Horan, 2014). This expression of affection not only enhances the individual's ability to cope with academic demands but also strengthens the marital bond, fostering mutual understanding and resilience in the relationship.

Affection Exchange Among Domestic Graduate Students

Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021) argues that AET provides an insightful framework for understanding exactly why expressing and receiving affection is central to human wellness and viability. Key findings in the literature suggest that affection behaviors within domestic American marriages may be less overt than in other cultural contexts, relying more on non-verbal cues, acts of service, and a sense of mutual responsibility. If either spouse ever requested a divorce, they would attend marital counseling before splitting up (Cherlin, 2010, p. 13). Another study shows one might suppose that communicating affection is such a natural human function

as to make questions about how that task is accomplished seem superfluous (Floyd, Morman, et al., 2021). In fact, individuals use a wide variety of both verbal and non-verbal behaviors.

Affection exchange among domestic American graduate students reflects the deep cultural values of community, respect, and harmony that are often central to their relationships. They also go through some common stressors such as depression, family commitments, academic performance, workload and finances while entering new schools. Pfeiffer (2001) figure out that new environments will have new properties, and the student needs to adapt the new places, faces, and routines. As a result, some students share increased levels of depression and absent-mindedness within the first few weeks of the first term (p. 11). For Americans, there are common stressors that graduate students tend to experience while in college. Some of these common stressors are transition to graduate school, test anxiety, academic performance, family commitments, and finances (Pfeiffer, 2001).

In some cases, graduate students face difficulties as they cannot afford to live with their spouse in the same city. “Sometimes this occurs because one spouse may have finished graduate school sooner than the other or the other did not choose to go to graduate school” (Pfeiffer, 2001, p. 20). Research also highlights that for domestic American graduate students; the support and affection they receive from their spouse play a significant role in their ability to cope with academic stress. There must be a great deal of flexibility in the family so that they can complete the program (Pfeiffer, 2001). Positive relationship dynamics, including the exchange of affection, contribute to emotional resilience, higher self-esteem, and a greater sense of belonging, all of which enhance their overall well-being. Burleson et al. (2019) argue, indeed, greater awareness of one’s own and other’s attitudes about touch can help balance intimacy and comfort in relationships. This support system becomes especially important in navigating the dual

challenges of academic pressure and cultural expectations, reinforcing the value of affection as both a personal and cultural strength in maintaining well-being. Some studies mention the similarities in people's use of intimate touch across relationships, namely, to communicate affection, trust, and responsiveness to their loved ones (Chopik et al., 2014).

Affection Exchange Among International Graduate Students

In the context of the United States, married graduate students have an opportunity to bring their spouse and live together while they are studying which is significantly important for them to lessen their physical and mental stresses. If they did not have access or the right to bring their spouse with them, they would have to keep their children and spouses in their home country. Under this situation, not only their physical or mental health but also their education would be hampered seriously. Instead, students who are studying with family (spouse and children) can enjoy their free time with their family. Floyd et al. (2006) highlighted that one reason why sharing affectionate communication may benefit marital parents is that it may help to defuse the negative mental and physical effects of stress. Affection exchange among international graduate students is deeply influenced by the cultural norms and values they bring from their home countries, which shape both how they express and interpret affection within their relationships. International students face numerous challenges while studying abroad and seeking support from their spouses. Moreover, they face difficulties with English-language proficiency and with adjustments to the American culture that might contribute to academic stress. Misra and Castillo (2004) explain that "Furthermore, international students have difficulties adapting to a new educational system in a short period of time" (p. 134).

In collectivist cultures, affection is often expressed through indirect actions, such as providing support, fulfilling family roles, and acts of service, rather than through overt verbal or

physical displays (Floyd, 2025). In contrast, students from individualist cultures may prioritize direct verbal affirmations and physical expressions of affection. According to some studies, affectionate communication includes nonverbal behaviors such as kissing and hugging, as well as verbal affirmations of love and support (Floyd & Morman, 1998; Gullede et al., 2003). Dillow et al. (2014) argue that communicating affection in relationships has a positive impact on a myriad of physical and mental health outcomes that is crucially important for married graduate students. Caldwell-Harris et al. (2013) conclude, “this confirms that different cultural norms underline differences in emotional expression” (p. 67). These cultural influences have a strong impact on relationship satisfaction, as the way affection is exchanged can either strengthen or challenge the emotional connection between partners. In case of stress, they seek support from their spouse. So, family stress can be a wake-up call for people to appreciate what their spouses do for them (Chen & Li, 2007).

For both domestic and international students, affection exchange likely plays a critical role in managing the stress of graduate studies and promoting emotional resilience. Researchers found that affectionate communication has numerous benefits on several areas of health, including cardiovascular, stress hormonal, stress reactivity, and mental health (Hesse et al., 2021). Some international students, depending on country of origin, may react to stress by using the cognitive approach whereas some American students may display behavioral reactions when coping with stress (Misra & Castillo, 2004). In the U.S., the impact graduate school has on marriages may be different from one couple to another. Although the literature indicates that international students tend to somaticize feelings of stress, there is no significant difference in physiological reactions between international and American students (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Domestic American students often engage in more subtle, non-verbal forms of affection. Floyd, Hesse, et al. (2021) found that in North American cultures, nonverbal affection affectionate gestures typically comprise behaviors such as kissing, hugging, hand holding, warm touch, smiling and sexual interaction. Additionally, international students, depending on their cultural backgrounds, may express affection either through indirect actions, as seen in collectivist cultures, or more direct verbal and physical expressions, common in individualist cultures. “In principle, expression of love and other warm feelings could facilitate relational closeness and interdependence, which are valued in collectivist culture” (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2013, p. 42). Misra and Castillo (2004) conclude that college is a stressful time for many married graduate students as they go through the process of adapting to new educational and social environments, and it may be even more stressful for international students.

Based on my literature review, I asked the following research question:

RQ: *How do married graduate students describe their experiences of affection exchange within their marital relationships while balancing academic responsibilities?*

Chapter 3

Method

To answer the research question, I used a qualitative research design to explore the impact of affection exchange among married graduate students, focusing on domestic American and international populations. I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of participants lived experiences by conducting qualitative research (Goulding, 2005). I collected the data through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives on how they experience affection within their marriages and how they perceive affection to contribute to their overall well-being during their academic journey. As qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions and behavior by answering the 'how' and 'why' questions instead of 'how many' or 'how much' questions, this method will allow for a rich understanding of the nuances in affection exchange and its potential implications on marital dynamics.

Participants

Thirteen MGSs participated in semi-structured interviews. A total of thirteen graduate student participants were recruited for this study. The sample consisted predominantly of women (n = 10), with three male participants. Among thirteen, eight participants had partners in grad school. The sample included both domestic and international graduate students. Specifically, four participants identified as African American, three as Latin American, two as African, three as South Asian, and one as Chinese. African American and Latin American participants were primarily domestic students, while those identifying as African, South Asian, and Chinese represented international student populations. Participants were from different types of programs such as social science, natural sciences, nursing, engineering, and communication & journalism.

Regarding parental status, five of the participants reported having one or more children, while the remaining eight participants did not have children at the time of the study. The participants ranged from 24 to 39 years, with an average age in their late twenties to early thirties. The length of marriage varied from as little as one month to as long as nine years, reflecting a wide range of marital experiences among the participants. This variation allowed for exploration of perspectives across both newly married and longer-term married graduate students. This demographic composition reflects a purposeful sampling strategy aimed at capturing a range of lived experiences across gender, race/ethnicity, and family roles among graduate student populations.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be (a) currently enrolled as full-time graduate students, (b) legally married adults, and (c) either self-identify as American or hold international student status. Additionally, both spouses must be residing together during the participant's academic program. Exclusion criteria include unmarried students, those separated from their spouse during their graduate studies, and participants who identify outside the defined groups. The inclusion of both domestic and international participants was critical for understanding how cultural factors might influence affection exchange in the context of graduate studies. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that the selected participants represent these specific demographic groups and meet the study's objectives.

Recruitment

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB#25.144), I recruited study participants through various channels, including social media, personal contacts, graduate student associations, and cultural organizations using a standard recruitment message (See Appendix A). I contacted faculty and student support services to ensure visibility within the

target communities. Also, I used a snowball sampling approach to identify participants, and I got only two through this process. Snowball sampling focuses on targeting a particular group and asking them to suggest others who might qualify for the study and be interested in participating (Noy, 2008; Rahman et al., 2020). If they qualified, I asked interviewees to participate in an interview where they would share their experiences related to affection exchange with their spouse. Then, I invited interested participants to contact me directly, at which point they were screened for eligibility based on their age, marital status, full-time graduate student status (in a U.S. graduate program), and combination status. I informed participants of the voluntary nature of the study and assured them that their identities will remain confidential throughout the research process. Qualitative researchers' obligations are highlighted by Arifin (2018):

It is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to ensure participants to have a power of freedom of choice to involve in the study, protect the participants' identity throughout recruitment and dissemination process, and promote clear and honest research reporting without deception to readers. (p. 32)

Interview Procedures

I followed a structured yet flexible approach for this study to explore affection exchange among married graduate students from domestic American and international backgrounds. After recruitment, I contacted eligible participants to schedule one-on-one semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face or via an online platform, either Teams or Zoom, depending on their preference and availability. All participants chose the online interview context, and they were all virtual via Zoom. The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes time. Prior to the interviews, participants received an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place (See Appendix B). I audio-recorded the

interviews using the record function in Teams or Zoom which automatically transcribed the conversations. In preparation for my analysis, I checked each transcript with the recording for accuracy.

During the interview, I asked a prepared set of interview questions (See Appendix C). For example I asked questions that helped me understand how they experience affection and if they recognize potential cultural influences on their behaviors by asking questions such as, “How would you describe the way you and your spouse typically express affection toward each other?”, and “Are there any cultural traditions or practices related to affection that you and your spouse observe?” Additionally, I asked participants about their work/life balance and well-being through questions such as, “Can you describe how your academic responsibilities have impacted your relationship with your spouse?”, “How do you and your spouse communicate about affection and emotional needs within your relationship?”, “What challenges do you face in maintaining affection and emotional closeness with your spouse while navigating graduate school demands?”, “How do you take care of your own emotional and physical well-being while managing both your academic responsibilities and your marriage?”. Finally, I asked closing questions, such as “Is there anything else you’d like to share about how affection exchange has impacted your relationship during your time as a graduate student?” and concluded by thanking them for their time and ending the recording.

As compensation for the participants’ valuable time and effort, I gave each interviewee a \$15 gift card, which I provided immediately after the completion of their interview. Participants who engaged in the interview process remotely via video conferencing through Teams or Zoom, received Amazon gift cards. This approach guaranteed transparency and timeliness in compensating participants while maintaining convenience and accessibility. An internal

scholarship (John Paul Jones) from the Department of Communication at UWM, I funded the participant incentives. The incentive distribution process was documented through credit card records to ensure accountability and adherence to ethical research practices.

Data Analysis

I conducted my data analysis using thematic analysis (TA), which allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After transcribing the recorded interviews, I read the transcripts several times to familiarize myself with the data. Next, I conducted open and in vivo coding to identify recurring concepts and themes related to affection exchange and its relationship with well-being. Open coding allowed me to label and categorize meaningful units of text, while in vivo coding preserved participants' own words to capture their lived experiences more authentically. For example, one participant described her relationship as "running on emotional fuel," which was initially coded as "emotional dependency" and later contributed to a broader theme around *Emotional Support in Affection Exchange*

After generating initial codes across all transcripts, I sorted and grouped related codes to develop candidate themes. This involved identifying patterns of meaning that were both recurrent and salient across participants. For instance, codes such as "help with tasks," "checking in daily," and "moral encouragement" were clustered under a theme titled *Instrumental and Emotional Spousal Support*. I refined these themes through iterative reviews, checking them against the full dataset to ensure they captured coherent and meaningful patterns.

Once final themes were established, I selected strong exemplary-representative quotes that vividly illustrate each theme's core message. These exemplars were chosen based on their clarity, richness, and ability to encapsulate common experiences shared across participants. I

then developed analytic narratives for each theme, connecting them to the broader research question on how affection exchange contributes to married graduate students' well-being and academic adjustment. This involved examining shared themes across the married graduate students to highlight how affection exchange relates to marital and academic life.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings, I employed multiple validation strategies throughout the research process. First, I conducted a peer review of the coding process by inviting a fellow qualitative researcher to independently examine a sample of transcripts and the associated codes. This peer reviewer provided feedback on code clarity, consistency, and thematic alignment, which led to refining several code labels and strengthening the coherence of theme definitions (Lidong et al., 2023).

Second, I engaged in member checking during the data analysis phase, particularly when I noticed similar expressions used by three participants. To ensure accurate interpretation, I contacted each of them individually for clarification. Participants were asked whether the emerging interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and were encouraged to expand upon or clarify their initial responses if needed (Birt et al., 2016). This process revealed that, although participants used similar phrases, their meanings were rooted in distinct personal contexts. To further enhance credibility and foster collaborative relationships, I shared the preliminary findings with all participants. However, only three participants responded. This limited response may be attributed to participants' competing academic and personal responsibilities, especially considering their identities as married graduate students managing multiple roles. While the number of responses was small, the feedback received was constructive and confirmed the accuracy and relevance of the thematic interpretations, thereby supporting the credibility of the analysis.

Finally, I used cross-participant triangulation, systematically comparing themes across individuals from different gender, cultural, and parental backgrounds to identify both shared and unique patterns (Lemyre & Lee, 2006). This process allowed for a richer, more nuanced understanding of how affection exchange was experienced across diverse relationships and academic contexts. Follow-up communication with participants was conducted via email in a few cases to clarify specific statements or gather elaboration on emerging subthemes. These credibility-enhancing strategies contributed to a more rigorous and context-sensitive analysis. To enhance transparency and dependability, I maintained an audit trail throughout the research process. This included detailed records of coding decisions, theme development, peer feedback, and analytic memos. The audit trail allowed for a clear account of how interpretations were made, supporting the rigor and replicability of the study.

Chapter 4

Findings

In this section, I present the key themes that emerged from in-depth interviews with 13 married graduate students, connecting their lived experiences to existing literature. The findings are organized around four main themes: (a) forms of affection, (b) functions of affection, (c) factors influencing affection, and (d) challenges in affection exchange.

Forms of Affection

Participants discussed several different ways that they and their spouses express affection to one another. In my analysis, I identified different types of affection forms shared by participants, such as verbal affection, physical affection, service acts, financial sacrifice as affection, cultural perspective as affection, affection through academic support, subtle nonverbal affection, public vs. private affection, and preferred vs. non-preferred affection. These expressions of affection reveal the complexity and richness of how married graduate students navigate emotional intimacy amid their demanding academic and family lives. While some forms, like verbal and physical affection, are more direct and overt, others, such as shared responsibilities, financial sacrifices, or preparing a favorite meal, reflect deeply rooted cultural values and practical adaptations to their busy schedules. Several participants also highlighted the nuanced nature of affection in public versus private settings, as well as the differences between personally preferred and less preferred expressions of love. Together, these diverse forms illustrate how affection is both contextually shaped and mutually negotiated within the everyday realities of academic partnership and married life.

Verbal Affection

Verbal affection emerged as a significant theme in the experiences of married graduate students, highlighting the importance of expressing love and appreciation through spoken words.

Participants consistently described using verbal affirmations to maintain emotional connection amidst the demands of academic responsibilities. As articulated by Rose (Transcript 7), “We try to say, ‘I love you’ every day, usually at night before going to bed.” This routine of verbal acknowledgment reflects a deliberate effort to sustain emotional intimacy despite busy schedules. During my conversation with Asma (Transcript 9), a 24-year-old American woman in the early stages of her master’s program, I was struck by the openness and intentionality she and her husband, married just one month, brought to affection in their relationship. “His family did not grow up being very affectionate, my family did,” Asma noted, explaining how they’ve built their own routines of verbal expression. She emphasized how important it was to her to hear affirmations: “I like to be told, ‘I love you,’ ‘I think you look pretty today,’ or ‘I’m proud of your working’, those are all the things I like to hear.” These expressions not only serve as reminders of care and appreciation but also act as emotional anchors during periods of academic stress and time constraints. This aligns with AET’s prediction that greater affectionate communication enhances relational functioning and well-being (Campbell et al., 2017).

Married graduate students frequently expressed affection through verbal communication, using phrases like “I love you”, “I appreciate what you did,” and regular words of affirmation. For instance, Asma (Transcript 9) highlighted the significance of verbal reassurance in her relationship: “I prefer verbal affection, and he’s learned to be more verbal because that’s how I receive love.” Sophia (Transcript 2) emphasized how they express love through “words like ‘I love you,’ giving compliments, and showing gratitude.” A Ph.D. student Amena (Transcript 6) shared that while “we usually ask each other how your day went” and exchange kind words after long hours on campus, expressions of affection often shift depending on their mood and workloads. “If he had a bad day, I try to pacify him,” she explained that her love language

includes ‘saying I love you.’ Furthermore, Tulip (Transcript 11) described how verbal communication remains a cornerstone in her marital relationship: “I always say thank you and I love him, and I appreciate whatever he's doing.” Such consistent verbal affirmations contribute to reinforcing bonds and ensuring both partners feel valued and emotionally supported.

Physical Affection

Physical affection plays a crucial role in maintaining emotional closeness among married graduate students, serving as a tangible expression of love and support amid the challenges of academic life. Participants described engaging in physical displays of affection, such as kissing, hugging, and holding hands, as meaningful ways to convey their care for one another. As noted by Rose (Transcript 7), “We also share affection through kissing a lot. Most of the time we hug. We hold hands, I love touch very well. Sometimes I’m like, ‘you don’t touch me enough,’ but I try as much as possible to touch us.” This statement underscores the importance of touch in reinforcing relational bonds and providing comfort during periods of stress. Similarly, Aleena (Transcript 10) shared how physical gestures are central to her relationship: “I reciprocate the affection for him by also hugging and kissing. Sometimes we can massage, sweet talks, pillow talks, just the massage, the rub.” Sophia (Transcript 2) described affection as “hugging, kissing, and cuddling.” These physical interactions not only symbolize emotional connection but also serve as mechanisms for stress relief and mutual reassurance.

Egbe (Transcript 5), a 27-year-old female graduate student, uncovered their exchanges of affection as “probably what the norm is, kissing and hugging.” Her husband often expresses affection through physical gestures like hugging and shared moments of touch, which Egbe reciprocates despite her more reserved tendencies rooted in a conservative Christian upbringing. Furthermore, Asma (Transcript 9) highlighted the calming effect of physical touch during

moments of anxiety: "He prefers to hug me or give me a kiss on the cheek or on the mouth. A lot of times if I get really anxious, he massages my scalp, it just makes me calm down." Thus, her husband, being more physically expressive, shows affection through touch, kisses, hugs, and comforting scalp massages when she's anxious. Though their time together now includes routine acts, watching a show, doing chores together, or setting a specific bedtime to reconnect, Asma acknowledged that affection has become an active practice in managing the emotional load of student life. Married for just over two years to his 27-year-old wife, Max (Transcript 4) emphasized the centrality of physical touch, particularly hugs, as their most frequent and meaningful expression of affection. "She'll come in the kitchen and like wrap her arms around me and then kind of lean her head on me," he shared, describing moments of quiet connection amid everyday routines.

Service Acts

Acts of Service emerged as a prominent form of affection among married graduate students, reflecting how practical support and shared responsibilities are deeply intertwined with expressions of love and care. Service acts also include parental affection display, shared responsibilities, and food preparation. In the context of demanding academic schedules and familial obligations, participants described how performing everyday tasks for their spouses symbolize appreciation and commitment to maintaining their relationship. As Sophia's (Transcript 2) account illustrated that affection was not only verbal or physical but also enacted through shared acts of service.

In addition, my interview with Hena, (Transcript 8) a 34-year-old Chinese woman in her second semester of a master's program, I learned how affection in her marriage is deeply embedded in daily responsibilities and quiet, consistent support, rather than overt romantic

displays. Married for nine years and raising two young children, Hena reflected that “we are not a romantic couple,” noting how their expressions of affection have shifted since becoming parents. With limited time and financial resources, their love is often shown through practical gestures, her husband taking the kids out so she can rest or study, or her preparing a thoughtful dinner for the family: “I make some delicious food for him so we can enjoy the dinner together.”

Sarah (Transcript 12) articulated, “Helping out with stuff around the house, taking care of things, cooking for him. For me, that’s also a show of affection.” This perspective underscores the belief that affection extends beyond verbal or physical expressions and includes tangible actions that demonstrate support and partnership. Similarly, Hena (Transcript 8) shared that her husband’s willingness to take on household duties is a significant gesture of love: “He takes the kids out to give me some free time, which I really appreciate.” This act of service not only provides her with personal time to focus on her studies but also symbolizes his understanding and acknowledgment of her academic pressures. Such contributions reflect a mutual respect, empathy, and commitment to balancing domestic and academic responsibilities.

As I reviewed Mohon’s (Transcript 1) narrative, a graduate student in his final year, I was struck by the intricate ways he and his 22-year-old pregnant wife, also a graduate student, exchanged affection despite their demanding academic lives. Mohon described affection not only through verbal affirmations and physical touch but also through consistent acts of service. “I pay bills. I work hard, so that I can be like our role model,” he said, noting that his efforts to provide emotionally and financially were forms of expressing love. He also emphasized the mutual support they offer one another: “She helps me in things that I’m going through during the difficult time, I’ve shared how I care about her and how she cares about me.” Further illustrating this form of affection, Sarah (Transcript 12) described how she organizes daily routines to

support her husband when she is not at home: “When I’m not at home I organize my day ahead, what’s going to help him if he’s the one picking up the kids from school? That’s how I show affection.” This proactive effort demonstrates a deep sense of care and a willingness to ease her partner's burdens, reinforcing emotional connection through practical actions. These reflections highlight how acts of service serve as both practical and emotional expressions of affection among married graduate students. In navigating the dual demands of graduate school and family life, practical support becomes a vital method of demonstrating love and maintaining relational harmony. The ability to anticipate each other's needs and provide support in everyday tasks reflects a commitment to partnership, reinforcing emotional bonds through shared responsibilities.

Another act of service is showing parental affection. Parental affection emerged as an important aspect of how married graduate students express love and commitment within their family structures. Participants described how shared responsibilities in parenting not only symbolize affection for their children but also served as a meaningful demonstration of care and support for each other. For many, acts of co-parenting, childcare, and managing household responsibilities together represented deeper emotional connections that extended beyond individual expressions of affection. Hena (Transcript 8) highlighted how shared parenting roles reflect mutual support and affection between her and her husband: “We both take turns taking care of the kids when one of us is overwhelmed with work. It’s our way of showing support and affection for each other.” This reciprocal involvement in parenting not only alleviates individual burdens but also symbolizes a collective commitment to family well-being. Their shared responsibilities reflect a tangible expression of love that strengthens their partnership and promotes familial harmony.

Similarly, Sarah (Transcript 12) described how her husband's willingness to take over parental duties during her busy academic periods served as a profound gesture of affection: "When I'm overwhelmed with school, he handles most of the cooking and cleaning to make it easier for me." His proactive engagement in household tasks not only supports her academic journey but also symbolizes his understanding and appreciation of her efforts. For Sarah, these acts of service transcend practical support; they represent a form of emotional and relational commitment.

Moreover, Tulip (Transcript 11) emphasized how mutual caregiving for their children deepens their bond as a couple: "We share the load when it comes to our kids. When I'm busy, he steps in, and when he's stressed, I try to do more." This collaborative approach to parenting highlights how affection is embedded in shared responsibilities, where acts of care are equally distributed based on each partner's capacity and need. These gestures not only reflect emotional support but also reinforce their partnership through mutual understanding and cooperation. Thus, it has been illustrated that parental affection display among married graduate students is more than a demonstration of love for their children, it is also a profound expression of solidarity and commitment between spouses. Through shared parenting roles, couples communicate care, appreciation, and emotional support, reinforcing their connection amidst the demands of academic and family life.

Shared responsibilities as one of the service acts emerged as a meaningful form of emotional expression for married graduate students, reflecting how practical support within the household symbolizes love, understanding, and partnership. Participants described how engaging in household tasks, managing childcare, and assisting each other during busy academic periods served as acts of affection, reinforcing their relational bond amidst demanding schedules. Asma

(Transcript 9) emphasized the importance of her husband's willingness to take on household duties as a gesture of affection: "He knows I'm overwhelmed with school, so he handles most of the cooking and cleaning to make it easier for me." This proactive involvement in domestic tasks illustrates his understanding of her academic pressures and his commitment to easing her burdens. For Asma, his contributions are not merely practical; they symbolize his emotional support and partnership in managing family responsibilities.

Throughout the above examples it has been revealed that affection among married graduate students is often communicated through shared responsibilities, symbolizing understanding, empathy, and commitment to each other's well-being. For many couples, practical support within the household is more than just a division of labor, it is a deliberate act of love that reinforces emotional bonds and fosters partnership in navigating academic and family life.

Affection through food preparation emerged as a meaningful theme among married graduate students, symbolizing care, nurturing, and emotional connection within their relationships. Participants described how preparing and sharing meals served as an act of love and support, especially during periods of academic stress and demanding schedules. For many, cooking or providing food represented a tangible expression of affection that went beyond mere sustenance, reinforcing emotional bonds through thoughtful acts of care. Hena (Transcript 8) shared how her husband's commitment to preparing meals for her during stressful academic periods symbolized his affection: "When I'm exhausted from school, he always makes sure there's food ready for me. It's his way of taking care of me." This gesture not only alleviated her daily burdens but also demonstrated his understanding of her academic pressures. For Hena, the simple act of preparing food communicated his love and support, offering both physical and emotional nourishment.

Similarly, Asma (Transcript 9) emphasized how shared cooking experiences strengthen her emotional connection with her spouse: “We often cook together on weekends when things are less busy. It’s our time to bond and relax.” For Asma, the collaborative act of meal preparation symbolizes partnership and mutual appreciation, turning a routine activity into a moment of togetherness and affection. These shared experiences serve as a break from academic stress, providing an opportunity for emotional connection through simple, everyday rituals. Sarah (Transcript 12) also noted how her partner’s willingness to prepare meals during her busiest periods showed his support and understanding: “He knows I’m overwhelmed with school, so he handles most of the cooking and cleaning to make it easier for me. His proactive approach to managing household responsibilities, particularly through food preparation, allowed Sarah to focus on her studies without the additional strain of domestic tasks. This act of service not only met her practical needs but also reinforced his commitment and affection.

Thus, it has been evident that food preparation among married graduate students is more than just a household chore, it is a powerful expression of love and care. Through thoughtful acts of cooking and meal-sharing, partners communicate their understanding of each other's struggles and offer tangible support during challenging times. For many, the ritual of food preparation becomes a way to express affection, nurture their bond, and provide comfort amidst the demands of graduate life.

Financial Sacrifice as Affection

Financial sacrifice emerged as a unique expression of affection among married graduate students, symbolizing commitment, understanding, and long-term planning for family well-being. Participants shared experiences where making financial adjustments or prioritizing family needs over personal desires became acts of affection, reinforcing emotional bonds and

demonstrating mutual care. Aleena (Transcript 10) described how her husband's careful financial decisions are a significant expression of affection: “He always thinks twice before spending, saying it’s better for the kids and our savings. I know it’s his way of caring.” Her narrative highlights how thoughtful financial management serves as a demonstration of love and responsibility. By prioritizing family needs and considering long-term stability, Aleena’s husband communicates his commitment to their collective well-being. Similarly, Hena (Transcript 8) reflected on her husband's sacrifices to ensure family stability during her graduate studies: “He avoids unnecessary expenses.” It reduces financial strain allows Hena to concentrate on her academic responsibilities without added stress. His financial mindfulness symbolizes a deeper understanding of their shared goals, reinforcing affection through practical, long-term thinking.

In the same way, Sarah (Transcript 12) emphasized how mutual understanding around financial decisions contributed to expressions of affection in her relationship: “We’ve had to cut back on a lot, but he never complains. He just keeps supporting me because he knows it’s important.” Her reflection underscores how financial sacrifice is interpreted as a gesture of love and solidarity, where prioritizing family and academic success over material comforts serves as a meaningful form of care. This is evident that for married graduate students, financial sacrifice is not merely an economic decision, it is a profound expression of affection. Thoughtful budgeting, prioritization of family needs, and sacrifices for academic success represent tangible acts of love that strengthen emotional bonds and reinforce mutual commitment. In this context, affection transcends traditional gestures and becomes deeply embedded in practical, everyday decisions that reflect long-term dedication and care.

Cultural Preservation as Affection

Affection for cultural preservation emerged as a meaningful theme among married graduate students, reflecting how expressions of love are often intertwined with efforts to maintain cultural traditions and values within their relationships. For many participants, engaging in cultural practices, observing traditional celebrations, and upholding cultural values were seen as important expressions of affection that helped to preserve their shared heritage and strengthen their marital bond. Jarah (Transcript 13) described how she and her spouse make intentional efforts to maintain their cultural practices as a form of affection: “We still celebrate the cultural festivals from back home; it’s our way of staying connected and showing love.” This commitment to celebrating traditional events symbolizes their appreciation for their cultural roots and serves as an act of unity and shared identity. For Jarah, participating in cultural rituals together not only honors their heritage but also reinforces emotional closeness through shared experiences.

Similarly, Hena (Transcript 8) shared how cultural expectations shaped the way she and her husband express affection, particularly in the presence of family members: “In my culture, we don’t express affection openly, especially in front of elders.” Her reflection highlights how cultural norms influence their affectionate behaviors, steering expressions of love toward private moments rather than public displays. For Hena, adhering to these cultural expectations is both a gesture of respect and an act of love, reinforcing familial harmony and cultural continuity. Asma (Transcript 9) emphasized how maintaining cultural traditions during important life events serves as a form of affection and respect for their shared heritage: “When we had our first anniversary, we celebrated it the traditional way, just like my parents did.” Her choice to observe cultural rituals during significant milestones reflects a deep appreciation for her roots and a desire to

honor her cultural background within her marriage. These acts of cultural preservation symbolize affection by upholding shared values and creating continuity across generations.

Cultural influences also shape Tulip's (Transcript 11) approach to affection; she takes pride in caregiving roles, like cooking meals her husband enjoys, reflecting the traditional gender expectations she embraces. Despite heavy academic workloads, the couple strives to maintain closeness by eating dinner together daily without device distractions. While Tulip sometimes wishes for more overt affection from her husband, she recognizes and appreciates his unique ways of showing care. Their shared graduate school journey adds complexity but also deepens their understanding and trust, as they adapt affection strategies to accommodate their demanding schedules and emotional needs.

While she embraces his openness, Aleena (Transcript 10) still negotiates cultural expectations around gender roles and affection. "In my culture, I've been told, a wife should be doing all the house chores," she said, contrasting that with her husband's willingness to share responsibilities at home. Even during conflict or cultural pressure from in-laws, Aleena affirmed, "we've been able to lay down all those differences and integrate each person's culture into something that's comfortable for everyone." Her story illustrates how affection, when intentionally maintained, can serve as a bridge across cultural divides and academic stressors, reinforcing the strength and adaptability of graduate student marriages. These narratives reveal that affection among married graduate students is often expressed through the preservation of cultural traditions and values. Engaging in cultural rituals, honoring traditional practices, and respecting societal norms become acts of love that strengthen relational bonds while maintaining a sense of identity and belonging. For many couples, affection is not only communicated through personal gestures but also through collective acts that celebrate their shared cultural heritage.

Affection through Academic Support

For married graduate students, affection is often expressed through acts of academic support, where partners provide advice, encouragement, and practical help in navigating the demands of graduate studies. This form of affection extends beyond verbal affirmations or physical gestures, embodying a deeper commitment to mutual growth and shared success.

Participants highlighted how their spouses' involvement in their academic journeys reinforced feelings of support, understanding, and partnership. Tulip (Transcript 11) described how her partner's assistance with academic tasks serves as an important expression of affection:

"Whenever I'm drowning in assignments, she sits with me, reads over my work, and sometimes even proofreads it for me." Her narrative underscores how practical support during critical moments of academic pressure symbolizes a profound act of love and understanding. By engaging in her academic struggles, her partner not only alleviates her workload but also reinforces their emotional connection.

Similarly, Asma (Transcript 9) shared how her husband's willingness to participate in her study routines demonstrates his commitment to their shared goals: "He helps me prepare for my presentations and goes over my notes with me before exams." This proactive involvement reflects his acknowledgment of her academic challenges and his desire to contribute to her success. For Asma, these supportive gestures represent affection through partnership and mutual encouragement.

Hena (Transcript 8) also highlighted how academic support is a meaningful form of affection in her marriage: "When I have a big paper due, he makes sure I have everything I need and gives me space to focus." Her experience reflects the understanding that affection is not solely about physical or verbal expressions but also includes tangible acts of support that make

academic life more manageable. It has been evident that affection among married graduate students is often expressed through academic support, symbolizing solidarity and shared commitment to educational success. By participating in their partner's academic journey, spouses demonstrate empathy, understanding, and a willingness to alleviate burdens, reinforcing their emotional bond through practical acts of care.

Subtle Nonverbal Affection

Subtle nonverbal affection emerged as an important theme in understanding how married graduate students express love and support in understated but meaningful ways. Unlike grand gestures or overt verbal affirmations, nonverbal affection is communicated through small, everyday actions that convey care and emotional connection. These gestures, although simple, play a significant role in maintaining relational closeness amid the demands of graduate studies. Aleena (Transcript 10) highlighted the impact of subtle nonverbal gestures in her relationship: “Sometimes just sitting next to each other while working, or a quick touch on the shoulder, is all we need to feel connected.” Her experience reflects how mere physical presence and light, comforting touches serve as signals of affection and reassurance. In the midst of busy schedules and academic pressures, these small acts become powerful reminders of emotional support and partnership.

Similarly, Asma (Transcript 9) shared how nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and gentle touches, help sustain emotional closeness: “He doesn’t have to say much; just a look or a touch on my hand makes me feel better.” This form of silent communication symbolizes understanding and solidarity, reinforcing their emotional bond even without spoken words. Her account illustrates that affection is often communicated through the body language of presence and attentiveness, which can be particularly meaningful during stressful moments. Tulip

(Transcript 11) also emphasized the importance of nonverbal gestures in her marriage: “When I’m stressed, he knows just to sit with me. He doesn’t say anything; he’s just there.” Her narrative highlights how physical proximity and silent support function as expressions of affection, demonstrating empathy and emotional availability without the need for elaborate displays. For Tulip, the act of simply being present during moments of stress reflects a deep understanding of her emotional needs.

These reflections reveal that subtle nonverbal affection serves as a crucial form of emotional connection for married graduate students. Through small, intentional gestures such as light touches, eye contact, and physical presence, partners communicate love, empathy, and understanding in ways that transcend verbal expression. These understated acts of affection are especially valuable in the context of busy academic schedules, where quiet moments of connection provide comfort and reinforce emotional bonds.

Public vs. Private Affection

The distinction between public and private displays of affection emerged as a notable theme in understanding how married graduate students navigate expressions of love and care within their relationships. Participants highlighted the influence of personal comfort, cultural expectations, and societal norms in determining where and how affection is expressed. For many, the boundaries between public and private settings significantly shaped their willingness to engage in affectionate behaviors. As an African American woman raised in a culture with strict moral expectations, Aleena (Transcript 10) admitted that her comfort with public displays of affection evolved only after meeting her husband, who is white: “He introduced me to, doing it even in public. Something I didn’t know that I could do.” Aleena articulated her discomfort with public displays of affection (PDA) despite her partner's enthusiasm for it: “I feel uncomfortable

with public displays of affection, but my spouse enjoys holding hands in public.” Her narrative reflects a common tension in relationships where differing comfort levels with PDA can influence how affection is navigated. Aleena's preference for more private expressions of love aligns with cultural values of modesty and personal privacy, underscoring how public settings can act as a barrier to open affectionate gestures.

Jarah (Transcript 13) described how cultural traditions further dictate the acceptability of public affection, particularly in the presence of family or community members: “In my culture, we don’t express affection openly, especially in front of elders.” This perspective illustrates the influence of cultural norms on affection exchange, where public demonstrations of love are often reserved or discouraged out of respect for traditional values. Such expectations reinforce the notion that affection is to be shared privately, away from the gaze of community or family elders. Hena (Transcript 8) also shared how these cultural norms influenced her relationship: “When my parents were at home, me and my husband, we couldn’t show much affection in front of them.” Her account highlights the way public expressions of love are sometimes modified or restrained to align with cultural expectations, even within the home setting when elders are present.

Participants from collectivist backgrounds described modifying their expressions of affection to align with cultural expectations, such as limiting public displays of affection out of respect for tradition. Furthermore, affection for cultural preservation illustrates how participants actively engage in cultural rituals as a form of love and connection. These cultural expressions of affection highlight the influence of societal expectations on relational dynamics. Cultural expectations shaped their affectionate habits significantly. Hena, (Transcript 8) explained, highlighting the tension between her Chinese upbringing and U.S. norms, “In our culture, we cannot do that (show affection) in front of the public, when my parents are at home, we can’t

show much affection.” Overall reflections reveal that the expression of affection among married graduate students is often influenced by the visibility of their interactions. Public spaces may inhibit affectionate behaviors due to personal discomfort or cultural expectations, while private settings provide a more comfortable environment for emotional and physical displays of love. For many participants, the distinction between public and private affection is navigated thoughtfully, balancing personal comfort with cultural respect.

Preferred vs. Non-Preferred Affection

The theme of *Preferred vs. Non-Preferred Affection* highlights the unique preferences that married graduate students hold regarding how affection is expressed and received within their relationships. Participants shared insights into the types of affectionate gestures they most appreciate, as well as those they find less meaningful or even discomforting. These preferences are shaped by personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual expectations of partnership. Asma (Transcript 9) articulated her preference for verbal affirmations as her primary form of affection: “I prefer verbal affection, and he’s learned to be more verbal because that’s how I receive love.” This statement underscores the importance of clear, spoken affirmations of love and appreciation as a means of communication. For Asma, verbal affection represents an essential component of her emotional bond, reinforcing her feelings of security and validation within the relationship.

Conversely, Hena (Transcript 8) expressed a dislike for grand romantic gestures, preferring simple, thoughtful actions instead: “I don't want him to spend much money on me maybe you can buy me some apples or watermelon. That’s also romantic in a sense.” Her perspective reflects a cultural and personal appreciation for practical displays of care over material expressions of love. For her, affection is best demonstrated through small, meaningful

acts that reflect thoughtfulness and understanding. Asma (Transcript 9) also highlighted the need for planned affection rather than surprises: “I like it when he puts initiative into planning something, but I like to be told about it in advance. I don’t like affection being shown as a surprise.” This preference for predictability suggests a desire for emotional preparation and comfort in knowing what to expect, indicating that spontaneity in affectionate gestures may sometimes cause discomfort rather than joy.

Similarly, Tulip (Transcript 11) noted the challenges of receiving affection during moments of emotional distress: “I think maybe I just don't like when he tries to do something affectionate while I'm very upset and he doesn't notice. That's not the right time for me.” Her experience highlights the importance of timing and emotional awareness in affectionate exchanges, emphasizing that gestures of care should align with her emotional state to be fully appreciated. The narratives illustrate that affection is not universally received in the same way; personal preferences and emotional contexts greatly influence how affectionate gestures are perceived. Understanding these preferences allows partners to express love in ways that are meaningful and well-received, enhancing emotional connection and reducing misunderstandings in their marital relationships.

Functions of Affection

In my analysis of how married graduate students experience and express affection, I found that affection serves multiple important functions beyond simply conveying love. Participants consistently emphasized how affectionate gestures, whether verbal, physical, or action-based, operate as vital tools for coping with the emotional demands of academic life. Through this investigation, it has been indicated that affection functions as a form of stress relief, emotional support, and emotional regulation. Whether through comforting physical touch, kind

words, or collaborative actions, these gestures played a stabilizing role in the participants' lives, helping them manage academic pressure, maintain emotional bonds, and sustain relational balance amid the competing demands of school, work, and family. This section explores the functional dimensions of affection as revealed in these narratives, highlighting how love and care are intentionally deployed to soothe, support, and sustain each other in the unique context of graduate student marriage.

Affection as Stress Relief

For married graduate students, affection often serves as a powerful mechanism for alleviating stress and enhancing emotional well-being. In the midst of academic pressures, financial responsibilities, and familial obligations, participants described how affectionate gestures, both verbal and physical, functioned as critical coping strategies. Affection not only provided emotional comfort but also fostered a sense of security and connectedness that helped them navigate the demands of graduate school. Egbe (Transcript 5) emphasized the calming effect of affectionate touch during stressful moments: “When I am overwhelmed, a simple hug or words of encouragement make a big difference.” Her experience highlights how even brief moments of physical connection can mitigate feelings of anxiety, reinforcing emotional support and stability. For Egbe, these small but meaningful gestures were integral to managing stress and maintaining relational harmony amidst her academic commitments.

Similarly, Asma (Transcript 9) noted that physical affection, particularly through touch, significantly contributed to her emotional regulation during periods of heightened anxiety: “He prefers to hug me or give me a kiss on the cheek or on the mouth. A lot of times if I get anxious, he massages my scalp, it just makes me calm down.” This ritual of affectionate touch reflects an understanding of her emotional needs, where her partner's presence and physical comfort act as a

soothing mechanism during challenging times. Aleena (Transcript 10) also shared how affectionate acts helped alleviate her partner's stress, demonstrating a reciprocal understanding of support: “When he has a stressful day, I always offer my help I just sit down with him on the table and start working with him.” Her proactive engagement in his work symbolizes affection through practical assistance, reinforcing emotional solidarity and partnership in moments of stress.

Affection as Emotional Support

Emotional support emerged as a core function of affection among married graduate students, providing the emotional foundation for navigating the challenges of balancing academic work with marital responsibilities. Participants frequently cited empathetic listening, reassuring words, and thoughtful gestures as essential expressions of affection that deepened emotional bonds. For Tulip (Transcript 11), emotional support was exemplified by her spouse's efforts to alleviate her stress with small surprises: “Whenever I have a bad day, my spouse notices and tries to cheer me up with small surprises.” These thoughtful actions demonstrated emotional attunement, reflecting her partner's proactive approach to mitigating her stress and reinforcing her feelings of being cared for and understood. Rose (Transcript 7), a Ph.D. student and mother, described how affection in her marriage has evolved over time. While the “I love you” ritual has softened, she shared how physical affection, like leaning on her husband while watching TV, plays an important role in maintaining emotional intimacy: “I love touch very well I want to lean on him.” This shift from aversion to comfort with intimacy illustrates how affection adapts in response to both academic demands and relational growth. Similarly, Asma (Transcript 9) explained how her husband's supportive gestures, such as hugs and scalp massages, offered emotional comfort during anxious times: “He prefers to hug me or give me a

kiss on the cheek, it just makes me calm down.” These gestures transcend mere words, manifesting as physical acts that reinforce emotional support and connection.

Affection as Emotional Regulation

Affection also functions as a key strategy for emotional regulation, providing relief and stability during moments of stress and anxiety. For married graduate students, the demands of school, work, and family can lead to high levels of stress, and affection acts as an emotional buffer against these pressures. Asma (Transcript 9) highlighted the soothing effect of affectionate touch when managing anxiety: “A lot of times if I get really anxious, he massages my scalp, it just makes me calm down a bit.” This act of physical affection demonstrates not only her partner's understanding of her emotional needs but also the role of tactile connection in promoting relaxation and mental relief. For Asma, this simple gesture acts as a grounding mechanism, allowing her to decompress herself from the pressures of her academic life.

Aleena (Transcript 10) further emphasized the significance of affectionate gestures in managing emotional stress: “I share affection to relieve stress, probably he had a tough day the moment you have those hugs, you feel relieved.” Her account reflects the healing power of physical affection, where a simple hug or embrace serves as a means to offload emotional tension and reconnect with one's partner. These gestures symbolize mutual understanding and a shared commitment to emotional well-being. Thus, for married graduate students, affection functions not only as an expression of love but also as a strategic tool for emotional regulation. Through physical touch, verbal affirmations, and acts of support, partners provide each other with the emotional stability and reassurance needed to cope with the challenges of graduate school and marital life. Affection, in these contexts, is intentionally deployed to foster resilience,

support emotional well-being, and maintain relational harmony amidst the rigors of academic life.

Factors in Affection Exchange

Through my investigation, I found that affection is not merely a spontaneous gesture, it is shaped, negotiated, and performed within the broader structures of culture, academic pressures, and relational expectations. As married graduate students, my participants often described the challenge of balancing multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles: scholar, spouse, parent, and cultural subject. In this section, I explore the complex factors that influence how affection is exchanged within these intimate partnerships. Drawing on affection exchange theory, I show how expressions of love are filtered through cultural scripts, reshaped by the demands of graduate school, and navigated within the context of gender roles and reciprocal expectations. Through these narratives, it became clear to me that affection in this setting is rarely about dramatic romantic gestures; instead, it takes the form of subtle, adaptive practices that help partners stay emotionally connected amidst complexity.

Cultural Influence on Affection

Cultural norms and expectations play a significant role in shaping how married graduate students express affection within their relationships. Participants highlighted that cultural backgrounds often influence the manner and setting in which affection is demonstrated, particularly regarding the appropriateness of public displays of affection (PDA) and expressions of love in family settings. For many, cultural expectations dictate that affection is reserved for private moments rather than openly displayed. Jarah (Transcript 13), a 30-year-old South Asian woman, described affection in her marriage as a quiet, consistent presence shaped by shared responsibilities, cultural expectations, and deep emotional understanding. Jarah emphasized how

their faith and culture shape their boundaries, kissing or hugging in public is uncommon and expressing love verbally is rare. She shared, “In my culture, we don’t express affection openly, especially in front of elders.” This perspective reflects the cultural sensitivity towards modesty and respect for elders, which often curtails public demonstrations of love.

Jarah further emphasized the role of cultural and gender expectations in regulating affectionate behavior: “So, I think culture and gender definitely play a very big role in shaping how you're expressing your affection, we cannot express our affection through kissing or hugging in public.” This statement underscores the impact of cultural beliefs on how affection is displayed and perceived, particularly in public spaces. For some participants, these cultural expectations create boundaries around physical expressions of love, reinforcing the need for discretion and respect for societal norms. Yet, she firmly believes that affection is “a kind of feeling, a kind of love” that can be shown through action and presence. Her reflections underline how affection, when grounded in cultural awareness and mutual devotion, becomes a sustaining force that empowers both academic and marital life. Sarah (Transcript 12) also pointed out how their Christian faith and African heritage intersect in shaping affection norms: “From my cultural background, I don’t just call my husband by his name, that could be seen as disrespectful.” Instead, she uses pet names like “sweetheart,” and considers cooking for her husband a cultural and affectionate duty.

Cultural expectations influence how affection is expressed, necessitating adaptive strategies like nonverbal gestures, and emotional shielding. These expressions of affection are not only tools for relational maintenance but also mechanisms for coping with academic stress and marital responsibilities. South Asian student Amena (Transcript 6) said, “In our culture, we cannot do that (hug or kiss) in front of the public,” contrasting it with U.S. norms of public

affection. Amena acknowledged that graduate school has strained their time together:

“Sometimes he leaves the house before I wake up, and we come home around midnight.” Yet affection remains a vital buffer. They rely on daily check-ins, surprise gifts, and adjusted routines, such as postponing Eid or anniversary celebrations to weekends, to sustain emotional closeness. She reflected on how affection impacts well-being amid stress: “If we show affection and support, it is an extra boost for us.”

Rose (Transcript 7) also reflected on her cultural preferences, noting the difference in her husband's openness to PDA compared to her own reservations: “I think with him, like I said, he likes PDA, but for me, I think that is mostly why I just love to be indoors it’s a cultural thing.” Her comment illustrates how cultural upbringing can affect comfort levels with public displays of affection, leading to preferences for more private, intimate moments of connection. Despite her husband’s preference for public displays of affection, Rose felt hesitant due to cultural norms: “Coming from where I come from, you don’t even get parents to talk to you about these things,” noting she prefers affection to remain “between us.” Graduate school hasn’t significantly altered how they express affection, but life changes and mutual influence have. For example, her husband’s earlier habit of posting her photos on WhatsApp diminished over time, a shift she attributed to his perception of her reserved nature: “Maybe subconsciously he feels that I don’t like it because I don’t do it as much.”

Cultural differences also shaped their expressions of love, Mohon (Transcript 1) identifies as Black, and his wife is Hispanic. “I love cooking, she does not like our type (of food), and she doesn’t know how to cook it,” he reflected, acknowledging both friction and appreciation in navigating cultural preferences. Another participant Hena (Transcript 8) described how cultural traditions shaped her and her husband’s behavior when her parents were present: “Yeah, I think

my cultural background, they do not like people to show much affection in public when my parents were at home, me and my husband, we couldn't show much affection in front of them.” This adherence to cultural expectations illustrates how affection is regulated not only by personal comfort but also by societal norms, which influences how couples navigate expressions of love within family dynamics.

These narratives reveal that cultural norms significantly influence how affection is expressed, perceived, and received among married graduate students. The expectations surrounding public and private displays of affection are not merely individual choices but are deeply rooted in cultural values and social expectations. These cultural influences often shape the boundaries of emotional expression, dictating how love and care are communicated within marital relationships.

Graduate School Impact on Affection

The demanding nature of graduate school often imposes constraints on the expression of affection among married graduate students, influencing both the quantity and quality of affectionate interactions. Participants described how academic responsibilities, time limitations, and heightened stress levels sometimes led to a reduction in opportunities for emotional and physical connection. Sarah (Transcript 12) reflected on this shift, stating, “Since starting grad school, we have less time for each other, which has affected how we show affection.” This comment underscores the reality that the rigorous demands of academic life can disrupt routines of affection, making it challenging for couples to maintain the same level of intimacy they once enjoyed. Furthermore, Sarah (Transcript 12) elaborated on how academic pressures had reshaped her relationship dynamics: “So, since grad school, time has just, schoolwork has gotten in the way. There isn't enough time to spend together like we used to.” This perspective reveals how

time constraints imposed by coursework, research, and deadlines often encroach upon the time couples might otherwise dedicate to nurturing their relationship. The competing demands of school and family life force couples to adjust their affectionate practices, sometimes prioritizing academic tasks over emotional connection.

Apart from time scarcity, physical distance, and competing demands often challenge married graduate students to find innovative ways to maintain emotional closeness. Asma (Transcript 9) shared how physical distance due to graduate studies also impacted their affectionate expressions: “Becoming a graduate student meant we weren’t in the same place; we had to rely on verbal affirmation and creative virtual dates.” This experience highlights the adaptive strategies married graduate students employ to sustain affection even when physical proximity is limited. In her case, verbal affirmations and virtual interactions became substitutes for in-person expressions of love, demonstrating resilience and commitment to maintaining connection. Additionally, Sarah (Transcript 12) reflected on the transition from pre-graduate school life to balancing family and academic responsibilities: “Before we had kids, we had a lot of time together but now with children and grad school, things changed. We focus more on the children.” Her experience illustrates how the combined pressures of parenting and academic obligations further compress the time available for affectionate exchanges, reshaping priorities and altering expressions of love. These narratives underscore the profound impact that graduate school responsibilities have on affectionate behaviors. For many, affection becomes more intentional and symbolic, adapting to the constraints of their academic journeys.

Gender Expectations in Affection Exchange

Gender expectations emerged as a critical theme in understanding how married graduate students navigate affection within their relationships. In some cultural contexts, gender roles are

particularly rigid, shaping how partners perceive and perform emotional and domestic labor. For instance, during the interview with Aleena (Transcript 10), she reflected on the traditional norms she was raised with, stating, “In my culture, I’ve been told a wife should be doing all the house chores.” She contrasted this expectation with her current experience, highlighting her husband’s willingness to share household responsibilities. This divergence between cultural prescriptions and lived relational dynamics illustrates the tension married graduate students may face when negotiating affection and support in cross-cultural or evolving relational contexts.

Participants shared insights into how traditional gender roles often shaped both the expression and reception of affection. These expectations sometimes created unspoken assumptions about who should initiate acts of care, manage household responsibilities, or express emotional support. For some, these gendered expectations influenced their perceptions of affection, linking specific actions to notions of love and partnership. Sarah (Transcript 12) expressed her expectation that her husband would anticipate her needs as a form of affection: “I prefer my husband to anticipate my needs and help without me asking, rather than just saying nice words.” This perspective reflects a gendered assumption that affection should be demonstrated through practical support and proactive care, aligning with traditional expectations of masculine responsibility in attending to a partner’s needs.

Similarly, Tulip (Transcript 11) described the balancing act of affection exchange in alignment with gender expectations: “When I’m overwhelmed, he notices and steps in to help with the kids or around the house. I don’t always have to ask.” Her experience speaks to an unspoken understanding rooted in traditional gender norms, where husbands are expected to step up when their wives are struggling, reflecting a form of affection grounded in practical assistance. These accounts reveal that affection within the marital relationships of graduate

students is often shaped by gender expectations, which dictate not only the types of affectionate acts performed but also how those acts are perceived. For many participants, affection is intertwined with practical demonstrations of care, particularly those that alleviate household burdens or respond to unspoken needs. These gendered norms frame affection as emotional expression that reflect a deeper understanding of partnership.

Reciprocity of Affection

Reciprocity of affection emerged as a significant theme in understanding how married graduate students navigate expressions of love and care within their relationships. Participants described how mutual exchanges of affection fostered emotional connection, reinforcing bonds and promoting relational satisfaction. For many, affection is not a one-sided act but a dynamic, reciprocal process where both partners contribute to sustaining emotional intimacy. Rose (Transcript 7) illustrated the concept of reciprocity by reflecting on how her husband's expressions of love were influenced by her own affectionate behaviors: "He used to say 'I love you' a lot maybe I wasn't saying it as much. So probably he also reduced it. We learn from each other unconsciously." Her narrative highlights the subtle ways partners mirror each other's expressions of affection, suggesting that displays of love often require mutual reinforcement to thrive. This observation underscores the fluid nature of affection exchange, where both partners adapt their behaviors based on the other's emotional cues.

Similarly, Asma (Transcript 9) shared how her preference for verbal affection influenced her husband's behavior over time: "I prefer verbal affection, and he's learned to be more verbal because that's how I receive love." Her statement reflects how partners adjust their methods of expressing affection to align with their spouse's emotional needs. Asma's husband's willingness to adapt his communication style demonstrates a shared commitment to nurturing their emotional

connection, reinforcing the idea that affection is strengthened through reciprocal understanding and effort. Tulip (Transcript 11) also emphasized the balance of affection in her relationship, noting how mutual acts of care foster harmony and appreciation: "We express affection in different ways, but we've learned how to balance that. He does something for me, and I respond in my own way." This perspective highlights how affection is both given and received in ways that reflect individual preferences while contributing to collective emotional satisfaction. The ability to recognize and reciprocate affectionate gestures promotes a sense of equilibrium in the relationship, ensuring that both partners feel valued and supported.

The above narratives illustrate that affection within married graduate student relationships is not merely a unidirectional act; it is deeply rooted in reciprocity. Partners learn to adapt to each other's expressions of love, fostering mutual understanding and emotional growth. Through conscious efforts to mirror and respond to affectionate gestures, couples reinforce their emotional bonds, sustaining intimacy even amidst the challenges of academic and personal responsibilities.

Challenges in Affection Exchange

While affection remains a central pillar in the marital relationships of MGSs, its expression is often complicated by the intersecting pressures of academic, cultural, and personal demands. This section explores the nuanced barriers that limit or reshape how affection is communicated, received, and sustained in these partnerships. Drawing from participants' lived experiences, the findings reveal that affection is not always easily or consistently exchanged; rather, it is challenged by time scarcity, long-distance separation, emotional fatigue, personality mismatches, cultural norms, and crisis-related stress. These challenges do not necessarily signal relational failure but instead reflect the adaptive, effortful, and sometimes restrained ways MGSs

maintain emotional connection while juggling their multifaceted roles. The themes discussed such as difficulty expressing affection, affection fatigue, emotional shielding, and affection in crisis offer insight into how married graduate students navigate relational closeness within the high-stress, time-constrained world of academia.

Challenges in Expressing Affection

The theme of *Challenges in Expressing Affection* emerged prominently in the narratives of married graduate students, highlighting the barriers they encounter in maintaining emotional and physical closeness amidst academic and personal responsibilities. Participants described time constraints, stress, cultural expectations, and personality differences. Amenia (Transcript 6) shared how stress and exhaustion often interfered with her ability to express affection, despite her desire to do so: “Sometimes, I want to show affection, but stress and exhaustion make it difficult.” This statement underscores the impact of academic pressures and daily responsibilities on emotional availability. For many married graduate students, the demands of coursework, teaching, and research consume much of their time and energy, leaving little room for intentional displays of affection. This challenge is further complicated by the emotional toll of managing academic deadlines alongside family obligations.

Similarly, Sarah (Transcript 12) reflected on the time scarcity that affects her relationship, noting that balancing her role as a student and a spouse often limits opportunities for affectionate gestures: “Since starting grad school, we have less time for each other, which has affected how we show affection.” Her experience reflects the reality that academic commitments can disrupt routines of affection, making it difficult to prioritize emotional connection in the face of demanding schedules. Cultural expectations also play a role in constraining expressions of affection. Jarah (Transcript 13) added that in her culture, public displays of affection are

considered inappropriate, which affects how she and her partner express love in public settings: “In my culture, we don’t express affection openly, especially in front of elders.” These cultural norms impose limitations on how affection is communicated, requiring adjustments to maintain relational harmony while adhering to societal expectations.

Additionally, Asma (Transcript 9) described personality differences as a source of tension in expressing affection, particularly when her preferred forms of affection did not always align with her husband's. “I prefer verbal affection, and he’s learned to be more verbal because that’s how I receive love,” she explained, highlighting the need for mutual understanding and adaptation in affectionate behaviors. These accounts reveal that expressing affection within the context of graduate school and cultural boundaries is not always seamless. Academic pressures, cultural expectations, and individual differences often complicate affectionate exchanges, requiring intentional effort and adaptation to sustain emotional closeness. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience in finding ways to navigate these barriers, reflecting their commitment to maintaining connection in the face of adversity.

Fatigue Challenges in Affection Exchange

Fatigue challenges emerged as a distinct theme among married graduate students, reflecting the gradual decline in affectionate behaviors due to the pressures of academic life, parenting responsibilities, and long-term partnership adjustments. These types of challenges in affection are common experiences among married graduate students, influenced by the competing demands of academia, parenting, and partnership. Hena (Transcript 8) shared how managing both schoolwork and household responsibilities contributed to a reduction in affectionate displays: “He takes the kids out to give me some free time, which I really appreciate, but sometimes I feel we are just surviving the day.” This sentiment illustrates how affection

fatigue is often a byproduct of survival-mode functioning, where daily responsibilities overshadow opportunities for emotional connection. The demands of parenting and academia often consume the time and energy that would otherwise be dedicated to nurturing affection.

Participants expressed how the demanding nature of graduate school, coupled with the responsibilities of family life, sometimes led to a reduction in expressions of affection. This fatigue is not indicative of a lack of love or commitment, rather a response to the overwhelming demands of balancing multiple roles. Sarah (Transcript 12) described how the accumulation of responsibilities has impacted her relationship: “We used to be more affectionate, but now with school and the kids, it’s hard to find the time. We still care, but it feels different.” Her reflection captures the essence of affection fatigue, where expressions of love are deprioritized due to time constraints and the mental load of academic and familial obligations. Despite the underlying love and commitment, the frequency and intensity of affectionate gestures diminish over time.

Asma (Transcript 9) also noted that affection has become more intentional due to their busy schedules: “We try to set time aside for just us, but it’s not like before, everything is scheduled.” Her narrative reflects the shift from spontaneous affectionate interactions to more deliberate and planned expressions of love. For Asma, maintaining affection amidst graduate school and family life requires intentional effort, highlighting how affection fatigue influences the spontaneity and frequency of emotional exchanges. While affection remains a vital component of their relationships, its expression often becomes more scheduled and intentional, reflecting the realities of graduate students’ busy lives. Despite this, couples demonstrate resilience by finding ways to adapt and preserve emotional connection, even when time and energy are limited.

Emotional Shielding

Emotional shielding emerged as a pivotal theme in understanding how married graduate students navigate affection within their relationships, particularly during demanding academic periods. This concept refers to the act of protecting one's partner from personal stress, emotional burdens, or external challenges by withholding certain emotions or minimizing the visibility of personal struggles. Participants shared how they sometimes suppressed their own anxieties or frustrations to shield their spouses from additional stress. For instance, Tulip (Transcript 11) explained her approach: "I don't tell him when I'm stressed with my own work because I don't want him to feel more pressure." This narrative illustrates her instinct to protect her partner from emotional strain, emphasizing her prioritization of his well-being over her own need for emotional expression. For Tulip, affection was often expressed through self-restraint, bearing her burdens alone to preserve harmony and prevent overwhelming her husband.

In a similar vein, Nyon (Transcript 3), a 27-year-old African American male Ph.D. student, reflected on affection within the context of his demanding academic and professional life. Nyon and his 25-year-old wife, also a graduate student, manage their relationship amidst the pressures of coursework, research, and freelance work. Despite their busy schedules, Nyon highlighted the importance of small, consistent gestures of affection, such as "waking up in the morning, greeting and kissing each other," and offering mutual support, especially when one partner is emotionally drained. "When she's not emotionally okay, I try to support her," he noted. These subtle expressions underscore their shared resilience and dedication to maintaining emotional closeness, even amid the stress of graduate life.

Similarly, Sarah (Transcript 12) discussed her tendency to withhold certain frustrations during her husband's stressful periods: "When he is having a hard time, I try not to mention my own problems. I don't want him to feel more burdened." This reciprocal understanding of

emotional shielding demonstrates how affection can be expressed through prioritizing a partner's emotional well-being over personal venting or emotional release. Aleena (Transcript 10) also shared her practice of minimizing her challenges to maintain a stable emotional environment: "I try not to complain about school too much because I know he's already stressed with work." This restraint reflects her awareness of their shared stressors and her dedication to nurture a supportive, harmonious home, even at the cost of suppressing her own frustrations.

These reflections suggest that emotional shielding, although potentially limiting vulnerability, is often seen as an expression of affection among married graduate students. By actively choosing to protect their partners from additional stress, participants demonstrate love, empathy, and a commitment to relational harmony. Emotional shielding, while it may not always involve open emotional expression, signifies an understanding of the partner's emotional capacity and a willingness to prioritize their well-being during challenging times. This phenomenon, as seen across various participants, raises the question of whether the act of shielding one's partner differs based on specific relational dynamics or circumstances, such as the level of academic stress or the couple's coping strategies.

Affection in Crisis Moments

Affection in crisis moments emerged as a powerful theme among married graduate students, highlighting how expressions of love and support become especially significant during periods of personal or family crises. Participants described how their partners' affectionate behaviors intensified during moments of emotional turmoil, reinforcing feelings of security, commitment, and emotional bonding. These moments of heightened affection served as critical sources of comfort and resilience, helping couples navigate difficult experiences together. Sarah (Transcript 12) shared a poignant example of how her husband expressed affection during a

family health crisis: “When my father got sick, he was there every step of the way, holding my hand and just being there. That’s when I realized how much he loves me.” Her narrative reflects how affectionate gestures, such as physical presence and emotional support, become deeply meaningful during times of crisis. His willingness to stay by her side symbolized his unwavering commitment and love, strengthening their emotional connection amidst uncertainty and fear. Likewise, Aleena (Transcript 10) described how her partner provided emotional support during a challenging academic period: “When I was overwhelmed with deadlines and assignments, he took over the household chores and made sure I could focus. He even stayed up late with me sometimes just to keep me company.” These acts of service not only alleviated her stress but also symbolized his empathy and understanding of her struggles. For Aleena, his practical support during her crisis reinforced feelings of love and partnership.

Hena (Transcript 8) also reflected on the importance of affectionate presence during emotional hardships: “When I had that really bad day, he didn’t ask questions; he just hugged me and stayed there until I calmed down.” This silent gesture of comfort illustrates how affection sometimes transcends words, offering solace and emotional grounding through physical closeness. His understanding of her need for presence rather than conversation demonstrated a profound level of emotional attunement. The above reflections reveal that affection during crisis moments is not just an expression of love, it becomes a lifeline for emotional stability and resilience. Through physical presence, emotional reassurance, and practical support, partners demonstrate their commitment to each other, reinforcing bonds of trust and mutual care. For married graduate students, affectionate acts during times of crisis serve as powerful reminders of partnership and shared strength.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Findings provide evidence of both theoretical and practical implications. This study explored how married graduate students navigate affection exchange within their relationships while managing the dual demands of academic responsibilities and family life. Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, four themes emerged that illustrate the participant's multifaceted experiences of affection. The themes include forms, functions, factors, and challenges of affection exchange.

The findings of this study underscore the multidimensional nature of affection exchange among married graduate students and contribute to existing literature on affectionate communication, stress regulation, and cultural influences on relational dynamics. The results affirm the central propositions of affection exchange theory (AET), particularly the assertion that affectionate behaviors including verbal, physical, and supportive actions, are integral to maintaining relational satisfaction and psychological well-being (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021; van Raalte & Floyd, 2021; Floyd & Morman, 1998). AET posits that verbal expressions are not only communicative acts but also biologically adaptive behaviors that foster relational closeness and resilience (Floyd, Hesse, et al., 2021). This recurrent verbal exchange served as a demonstration of love and as a reaffirmation of emotional support amidst academic pressures.

Consistent with prior research, verbal and physical affection emerged as the most salient expressions of emotional closeness. Floyd and Morman (1998) and Gullede et al. (2003) note that affectionate communication includes both nonverbal behaviors, such as kissing and hugging, and verbal affirmations of love and support. These expressions not only demonstrate relational commitment but also regulate stress and enhance relational satisfaction. As supported by Floyd

and Riforgiate (2008), affectionate expressions, such as saying "I love you," engaging in physical touch, or offering emotional reassurance, serve as essential mechanisms for maintaining intimacy, especially in stressful environments. For married graduate students navigating academic pressures, these behaviors help regulate emotional stress and enhance relationship resilience. The findings reinforce Campbell et al. (2017), who found that affectionate communication is positively correlated with relational functioning and coping efficacy.

Dillow et al. (2014) further highlight that affectionate communication has positive impacts on both physical and mental health; findings especially relevant for married graduate students juggling academic stress and personal commitments. Floyd et al. (2006) also emphasize that affectionate interactions can mitigate the physiological effects of stress, such as elevated cortisol levels, underscoring the role of affection in promoting well-being.

Throughout the findings, it became clear that affection and support, while closely related, are conceptually distinct. Affection involves expressions of fondness, love, and emotional closeness, such as saying "I love you," offering compliments, hugging, or holding hands. Support, on the other hand, refers to actions aimed at helping someone cope with stress, including emotional (e.g., empathy, listening), instrumental (e.g., doing tasks), and informational support (e.g., offering advice). Although both play vital roles in close relationships, their functions differ: affection primarily signals emotional closeness, whereas support provides tangible or emotional resources during times of need. This distinction aligns with Floyd's (2006) idea that affectionate communication enhances relational satisfaction and promotes well-being. Yet in practice, these expressions may overlap, as supportive acts are often interpreted as affectionate gestures depending on context and relational dynamics.

While this study distinguishes between affection and support as conceptually distinct constructs, these two can often appear similar, especially within the context of marital relationships. For example, acts such as cooking a meal, checking in during a stressful day, or taking on extra childcare duties may be perceived simultaneously as supportive gestures and expressions of affection. This overlap reflects the fluidity with which relational behaviors are interpreted based on intent, context, and cultural background. As some participants noted, instrumental support was not only about easing a partner's burden but also about communicating love and care. Such dual interpretations align with Floyd's (2006) assertion that the function of affection can be both expressive and utilitarian. Recognizing that support can embody affection, and vice versa, adds nuance to our understanding of how married graduate students negotiate emotional closeness in high-stress academic environments.

Acts of service also emerged as a critical component of affectionate communication in this study. These behaviors align with findings by Floyd, Morman, et al. (2021), who emphasized that affection is often expressed through supportive, instrumental actions like household assistance or routine check-ins. In this study, such acts were consistently framed as necessary strategies for balancing academic and relational demands, thereby providing further support to the idea that affectionate behaviors go beyond verbal affirmations and physical touch. In addition, affection exchange serves as a critical buffer against the emotional strain associated with graduate school. Physical touch, verbal affirmations, and acts of service provide emotional reassurance, helping to regulate stress and maintain relational satisfaction. These findings echo Debrot et al. (2013), who assert that romantic relationships contribute to the maintenance of positive behaviors that reinforce emotional connection.

Cultural background significantly shaped how affection was expressed, with participants from collectivist cultures often downplaying public displays of affection in favor of private or indirect expressions. Caldwell-Harris et al. (2013) argue that expressions of love and warm feelings facilitate relational closeness and interdependence, both highly valued in collectivist societies. Similarly, Burleson et al. (2019) state that affectionate touch is central to interpersonal relationships and is influenced by culture in subtle but powerful ways. This study affirms those assertions, revealing how participants modify their affectionate behaviors in accordance with cultural values, gender roles, and social expectations.

In addition, cultural background played a significant role in shaping how affection was expressed and perceived, echoing Lum's (1997) finding that emotional expression is influenced by cultural norms and social expectations. Participants from collectivist cultures often moderate their displays of public affection, adhering to social norms that emphasize modesty and respect. This is in line with Floyd's (2025) assertion that affectionate communication is culturally contingent and shaped by societal values. Participants negotiated expressions of affection within the boundaries of cultural expectations, particularly around gender roles and public versus private behaviors. These cultural considerations are often informed of preferences for nonverbal or service-oriented displays of love.

Faith-based beliefs further influenced how participants managed affectionate expression. Several participants referenced religious teachings that discouraged public displays of intimacy. These findings support Horan and Booth-Butterfield (2010), who emphasized the benefits of affectionate messages in various forms, including nonverbal and indirect communication. These messages, even when understated, contributed to partners' perceptions of being valued and supported, further enhancing emotional well-being.

Importantly, this study highlights how affectionate behaviors are fluid and adapt over time. Participants described adapting their affectionate behaviors over time in response to both academic stressors and relational evolution. The adaptive nature of affection supports van Raalte and Floyd's (2021) perspective that affectionate communication evolves in response to situational demands and relational growth. This adaptability was evident in how participants navigated dual academic and family responsibilities through intentional affectionate routines, shared caregiving, or emotional reassurance. Whether through structured routines, quiet moments of connection, or mutual caregiving, participants found ways to express affection that were both contextually relevant and emotionally meaningful. Moreover, the emotional and physiological benefits of affectionate communication were evident in participants' narratives. Floyd et al. (2009) emphasize that both expressed and received affection carry emotional and health-related advantages, including lower stress levels and improved relational satisfaction. For married graduate students, whose lives are shaped by continuous academic pressure, these benefits are especially salient.

The dual stressors of academic work and cultural transition can strain marital relationships, yet this study supports the claim that strong marital support, expressed through affectionate communication, can alleviate co-occurring stress and promote resilience (Mesmer et al., 2024). Misra and Castillo (2004) found that stress coping mechanisms vary between international and American students, with cultural context shaping whether cognitive or behavioral responses are prioritized. This finding was echoed in the current study, where international participants tended to express affection more through practical support and less through overt verbal or physical displays. The data also affirm Pfeiffer's (2001) proposition that transitions into new cultural or institutional environments require relational adjustments, often

involving renegotiation of familiar norms. Graduate school, as a site of both academic pressure and personal transformation, necessitated intentional efforts to sustain emotional closeness. These findings illustrate how affection functions as a relational resource, both expressive and instrumental, helping couples manage the complex intersection of academic, cultural, and emotional responsibilities.

In relationships shaped by different cultural norms, affectionate exchanges became important negotiation tools for balancing intimacy and comfort. Burleson et al. (2019) advocate for greater awareness of one's own and others' attitudes about touch to maintain relational harmony, which was evident in participants' ongoing adaptation to each other's comfort levels. The functional role of affection in enhancing emotional security during high-stress periods—like examinations or thesis deadlines, is also supported by Berretz et al. (2022), who found that affectionate acts, such as embraces, can reduce cortisol responses during stressful events. This study mirrors that observation, revealing that participants often used small gestures of affection to provide emotional grounding.

Furthermore, affection as a relational maintenance strategy aligns with Goodboy et al. (2022), who showed that both husbands and wives use prosocial maintenance behaviors when they feel supported. Participants' use of affection to maintain relationship quality reinforces the broader literature suggesting that marriage can provide emotional and physiological benefits when navigated with mutual respect and adaptive communication strategies (Williams & Umberson, 2004). This study extends Affection Exchange Theory and related models by highlighting how affection operates as a dynamic, culturally grounded, and health-enhancing practice among married graduate students. These findings not only answer the research question

but also offer a deeper understanding of how affection acts as both a buffer against stress and a catalyst for relational resilience in academically and culturally complex environments.

An important implication of these findings is the potential for a cyclical relationship between stress and affection exchange. As academic and familial pressures intensify, participants often reported having less emotional energy, time, or bandwidth to engage in meaningful expressions of affection, ironically, at a time when such exchanges are most needed. This creates a potential vicious cycle: stress reduces affectionate communication, and the absence of affection further heightens relational and emotional strain. This dynamic highlights the need for sustainable and accessible forms of affection that do not add to participants' cognitive or emotional load. Future research should explore low-effort yet meaningful strategies such as brief affirmations, shared rituals, or small acts of care, that can serve as effective "affection shortcuts." These approaches could offer high emotional impact with minimal effort, helping couples maintain emotional closeness even amid overwhelming demands.

The overall findings reveal that affection among married graduate students is not merely a display of love but a multifaceted, adaptive mechanism for managing emotional well-being, sustaining marital harmony, and navigating the pressures of academic life. Participants described affection through a range of expressions, including verbal affirmations, physical touch, acts of service, and consistent emotional support, each shaped by individual preferences, gender roles, and cultural norms. While some preferred overt verbal affection or physical closeness, others found meaning in subtle gestures such as caregiving or shared routines, particularly when direct expressions were limited by time, stress, or cultural expectations. Cultural influences played a significant role, especially in shaping distinctions between public and private displays of affection and the interpretation of supportive behaviors. The demands of graduate school,

intensive workloads, time scarcity, and transitions to new environments, challenged many participants' ability to express affection in preferred ways, yet most adapted through intentional strategies to maintain emotional closeness. Gendered expectations also influenced how affection was both offered and received, reflecting traditional and evolving roles within the dynamic marital. Together, these nuanced accounts provide a comprehensive answer to the research question by demonstrating that married graduate students experience affection exchange as a dynamic, context-sensitive practice. It is both shaped by and is responsive to academic, cultural, and relational pressures, serving as a key mechanism for sustaining emotional bonds and fostering resilience amid graduate education.

Theoretical Implications

The findings align with concepts in affection exchange theory (Floyd, 2006), which posits that affectionate communication is an adaptive behavior that promotes relational and individual well-being. In this study, expressions of affection were shown to buffer against the stresses of graduate school, providing emotional stability and reinforcing relational bonds. For example, acts of service and physical affection were instrumental in mitigating stress, reflecting the theory's assertion that affectionate behaviors contribute to stress reduction and emotional resilience.

To talk about affection exchange theory (AET), Floyd (2025) articulated that humans are born with both the need and the capacity for sharing affection because doing so has been adaptive for viability and fertility over the course of human evolution. Rather than attributing affectionate communication solely to external influences like modeling, reinforcement, or punishment, AET emphasizes the biological and evolutionary underpinnings of why affection matters. This theoretical lens aligns with my findings, which suggest that married graduate

students, both domestic and international, navigate academic and relational stress by actively engaging in affectionate behaviors such as verbal expressions, physical touch, and supportive gestures. These behaviors were not merely reactions to social expectations but reflected deeper emotional needs and relational investments, reinforcing AET's central premise that affection is not only communicative but essential to individual and relational well-being.

Consistent with AET, participants in this study, particularly married graduate students, relied on affectionate behaviors such as verbal reassurance, physical closeness, and emotional support to navigate academic and relational stress. These findings support Floyd, Hesse, et al.'s (2021) assertion that AET offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the function and impact of affectionate communication in human relationships. According to the theory, affectionate behaviors play a vital role in fostering relational stability and individual well-being by reinforcing human pair bonds and their associated emotional resources. Participants frequently described affection not as a passive or habitual practice but as an intentional strategy to sustain emotional connection and manage the demands of graduate life. This is further supported by van Raalte and Floyd's (2021) argument that affectionate communication evolved in the human species to regulate stress and enhance viability and fertility, with its benefits extending to physiological pathways related to stress regulation and emotional reward. In line with these claims, participants expressed that their affectionate exchanges contributed to psychological resilience and a sense of emotional grounding during periods of uncertainty, reinforcing AET's prediction that higher levels of affectionate communication are associated with improved relational and health outcomes (Campbell et al., 2017).

Overall findings support AET's assertion that affectionate communication is foundational to relational and individual well-being, as participants used affection not only to express love but

also as a coping mechanism to navigate academic, financial, and personal stressors, echoing Gullede et al.'s (2003) observation that such relational dynamics significantly contribute to happiness and satisfaction.

Limitations

While this study offers important insights into how affection is exchanged and experienced among married graduate students, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 13$), which, although appropriate for qualitative inquiry, limits the generalizability of findings. The study focused primarily on the perspectives of women ($n = 10$), and men's experiences ($n = 3$) were comparatively underrepresented. As a result, the gendered dimensions of affection exchange may not be fully captured, and future studies may benefit from a more balanced gender distribution to explore potential differences.

Second, although the study included participants from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, including African American, Latin American, African, South Asian, and Chinese; these groups were not evenly represented. For instance, only one participant identified as Chinese, and two were from Africa, which may limit the cultural depth of interpretation for those subgroups. Additionally, all participants were married graduate students within the U.S. academic context, which may not reflect the experiences of similarly situated individuals in other countries or educational systems. Including voices from varied geographic regions and institutional types could broaden the applicability of findings.

Third, although strategies such as peer review, member checking, and triangulation were used to enhance credibility, the study would have benefited from longitudinal data collection to examine how affection practices and needs evolve over time, especially during key academic or life transitions.

Lastly, while an audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions, this study relied on participants' retrospective accounts, which may be subject to recall bias. Participants were asked to reflect on their past experiences of affection exchange, and their memories may not accurately capture the nuances or timing of these behaviors. The absence of methods such as participant journaling or real-time observational techniques limits the depth and immediacy of the data. Future research should consider incorporating mixed methods or longitudinal ethnographic approaches to capture the evolving nature of affection in academic marriages across different life stages and cultural contexts with greater accuracy.

Future Research Directions

Future research on affection exchange among married graduate students will expand in several important directions. First, larger and more diverse samples, including students from different cultural backgrounds beyond domestic American and international groups, would provide a broader understanding of how affection exchange varies across different populations. Additionally, future studies will explore the intersectionality of other factors, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and the presence of children, to see how these elements influence affection exchange and well-being. Future research might also explore the intersection of gender roles and affection exchange in greater detail, examining how expectations differ across different cultural and social contexts.

Though some research shows that a few international graduate student parents (IGSPs) worked with mentors who advocated work-family integration (Long & Buzzanell, 2024), further research is required to investigate related challenges. Incorporating longitudinal designs will also offer insights into how affection exchange evolves over time as students' progress through their academic programs. Furthermore, integrating quantitative methods, such as surveys or

physiological measures of stress and well-being, will complement qualitative findings, providing a more comprehensive view of how affection exchange impacts academic success and emotional health. According to Horan and Booth-Butterfield (2010):

Affectionate messages accounted for considerable variance in relationship satisfaction and commitment and, hence, relational scholars should continue to examine how affectionate messages impact relationships. For example, future research could investigate how communicating affection mediates relational difficulties and transgressions. (p. 409)

Investigating the role of institutional support systems in facilitating or hindering affection exchange will offer actionable insights for universities looking to enhance the well-being of their married graduate students.

I propose several other theories that could be used in future research. Firstly, work-life balance theory (WLB) explores the interaction between work and personal life, emphasizing how individuals manage competing demands across different domains (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999). Given that married graduate students must balance academic responsibilities, relational commitments, and sometimes parenting duties, this theory could help future research examine how affection exchange contributes to or is affected by work-life balance. Future scholars could explore whether affectionate communication serves as a compensatory mechanism for academic stress, how different coping strategies influence relational satisfaction, and whether institutional support systems (such as flexible deadlines or family-friendly policies) impact the ability of married students to maintain affectionate relationships.

Secondly, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory, which categorizes coping strategies into problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, would provide a valuable

framework for exploring how affection exchange impacts interpersonal relationships among married graduate students (Biggs et al., 2017). Problem-focused coping involves actively addressing and managing stressors, such as seeking solutions to academic challenges or negotiating responsibilities within the relationship. In this context, affection exchange could serve as a communicative strategy that helps partners collaboratively tackle stressors, fostering a sense of teamwork and resilience.

On the other hand, emotion-focused coping involves regulating emotional responses to stress, which may include expressing affection to provide comfort, reassurance, or emotional validation. However, the effectiveness of these coping strategies may vary based on cultural background, gender expectations, and individual stress thresholds, making it essential for future research to examine how different populations of married graduate students navigate affection exchange within their coping mechanisms. By integrating stress and coping theory into the study of affection exchange, researchers can gain deeper insights into the role of affectionate behaviors in managing stress, sustaining relational stability, and fostering overall well-being in academic and personal domains.

Thirdly, future research may benefit from incorporating Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience (CTR) to provide a more robust understanding of how married graduate students navigate relational and academic stress. While AET highlights the biological and relational importance of expressing affection, and stress and coping theory explains how individuals manage emotional and problem-based stressors, CTR adds a vital communicative lens by framing resilience as a process enacted through discourse. Specifically, it emphasizes how individuals craft normalcy, reaffirm identity, and activate support networks through everyday communication. As Buzzanell (2010) states that resilience is developed,

sustained, and grown through discourse, interaction, and material considerations. This perspective highlights how expressions of affection, both verbal and nonverbal, can be understood not only as emotional support but also as discursive practices that help individuals “craft normalcy,” “affirm identity anchors,” and “maintain and use communication networks” in times of uncertainty and transition.

Finally, theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) is another promising direction for future research which provides a relational framework for understanding how couples manage stress and maintain emotional bonds over time (Afifi et al., 2016). TRRL emphasizes that relational partners can build resilience through consistent investment in relational maintenance behaviors, particularly during times of low stress, which act as a buffer when challenges arise. In the context of married graduate students, who often experience chronic academic and relational stress, this theory helps explain how ongoing expressions of affection may function as preventive care, sustaining the emotional “bank account” of the relationship. As Afifi et al. (2016) explain that resilient relationships result from people appraising stress as something that can be managed together and from their continued investment in the relationship in good times and bad. This theoretical lens complements Affection Exchange Theory and the Communication Theory of Resilience by highlighting the cyclical nature of stress, communication, and relational well-being.

When studied together, these theories can illuminate how affectionate communication not only supports emotional regulation but also functions as a low-effort, high-impact resilience strategy that sustains well-being and relational stability in the face of chronic academic and familial challenges.

Practical Applications

Academic institutions can use the findings of this study to develop targeted support systems that enhance the well-being of married graduate students by recognizing the crucial role of affectionate communication in managing stress and maintaining relational satisfaction. Given that affection exchange serves as a coping mechanism that mitigates academic and personal pressures, universities can implement policies that foster a supportive environment for married students. For example, institutions can create relationship-focused wellness programs, counseling services, and peer support groups that emphasize the importance of affectionate communication in stress reduction and emotional resilience. Additionally, universities could introduce flexible academic policies, such as adjusted deadlines or parental accommodations, recognizing the dual responsibilities that married graduate students navigate. Workshops on work-life balance and communication strategies tailored for married students could further equip them with tools to sustain strong relationships while excelling academically. Moreover, by considering cultural differences in affectionate communication, institutions can design inclusive programming that acknowledges and respects diverse expressions of affection among international and domestic students. These initiatives, informed by this study's findings, can contribute to a more supportive academic environment that promotes both relational and academic success among married graduate students.

Conclusion

The findings from this study illustrate that affection among married graduate students serves as a critical mechanism for emotional stability, relational satisfaction, and cultural preservation. Despite the challenges of academic life, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability in expressing affection, whether through verbal affirmations, physical touch, acts of service, or cultural traditions. These expressions of love not only fostered emotional well-being

but also reinforced the bonds that sustain their partnerships through the rigors of graduate education. By understanding these dynamics, support structures within academic institutions can better address the unique needs of married graduate students, promoting both relational harmony and academic success.

Married graduate students' lives are often marked by rigorous academic demands, economic pressures, and career uncertainties, turning their spousal relationships into a crucial source of support and holistic well-being. The findings from the literature review underscore the numerous benefits of affectionate communication, including its positive impact on hormonal stress regulation, reduced stress levels, lower anxiety, and depression, as well as overall health improvement. Drawing strength from extended family networks, graduate students often rely on their spouse as their primary source of emotional support due to geographical separation from family. The findings will also underscore the importance of understanding cultural nuances in how affection is expressed and valued. By prioritizing the well-being of married students from diverse backgrounds, academic institutions will foster a more supportive and equitable environment that will enhance both academic success and personal well-being of this demographic.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Message

Subject: Study of Married Graduate Students and Affection

Hello,

I hope this message finds you well. I am conducting a research study to better understand how affection relates to the well-being of married graduate students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a married graduate student, your experiences and insights are incredibly valuable to this study.

You are eligible to participate if you are an adult, currently enrolled full-time in a graduate program, are married, and you live with your spouse.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a 45–60-minute online (or in-person) interview with me. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential.

By participating, you will contribute to important research that could help shape future support services for married graduate students in academia. Also, you will get a \$15 gift card as a thank you.

To participate or learn more, please email me. I greatly appreciate your time and consideration in helping me with this study.

Best regards,
Aklima Begum
MA student, Communication
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Email: beguma@uwm.edu

IRB#25.144

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form



Study title	Exploring Affection Exchange: Married Graduate Student Perspectives
Researchers	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Erin Sahlstein Parcell, Professor of Communication Aklima Begum, Graduate Student, Communication MA

IRB #: 25.144

IRB Approval Date: January 9, 2025

We’re inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to explore how married graduate students express affection within their marriage and how these interactions impact their emotional well-being and relationship satisfaction while balancing academic pressures.

What will I do?

If you qualify, you will be asked to participate in an interview where you’ll be asked about your experiences related to affection exchange with your spouse. The interview will focus on how cultural background, academic stress, and affection exchange influence your marital dynamics. The interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes and can be conducted online or in person. The audio will be recorded, and, with your consent, you may also be contacted for follow-up questions after the interview.

Risks

Possible Risks	How We’re Minimizing These Risks
Some questions may be personal	You can skip any questions you don’t want to answer.
Breach of confidentiality	• We’ll store all identifiable information in electronic data on password-protected, encrypted computers as well as password protected online folders in Microsoft

	TEAMS. All identifiers will be removed from transcripts and any other reportable data. • We'll store all paper data (printed interview transcripts) in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.
Online data being intercepted or hacked	We're using a secure system to collect this data, but we can't eliminate this risk entirely.
Unknown risks	If we become aware of any new risks, we'll inform you immediately.

Other Study Information

Possible benefits	An opportunity to share and learn more about how you navigate your marriage. The study will contribute to understanding how cultural perspectives impact affection exchange and relationship satisfaction, particularly among married graduate students from diverse backgrounds.
Number of participants	We expect to recruit up to 30 participants for this study.
How long will it take?	Approximately 45 to 60 minutes for the interview.
Costs	None
Compensation	\$15 gift card for each interviewee.
Future research	De-identified information (all identifying information removed) may be used in future publications and presentations
Recordings / Photographs	We will be recording your interview. We will transcribe the audio and look for themes and patterns among all participants in the study. Recording your interview is necessary for this research. If you do not want to be recorded, you should not be in this study.

Confidentiality and Data Security

We'll collect identifying information, such as your name and email address, for recruitment and communication purposes only. All data will be de-identified before analysis.

Where will data be stored?	On our computers – or – In our offices at UWM
How long will data be kept?	De-identified data will be kept indefinitely.

Who	Why	Type of Data
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The researchers	To conduct the study and analyze the data	De-identified (no names, birthdate, address, etc.)
The IRB (Institutional Review Board) at UWM	To ensure the study follows ethical and legal guidelines	De-identified
Public (via publications or presentations)	To share findings	De-identified (with pseudonyms for quotes)

Mandated Reporting

As mandated reporters, we are legally obligated to report any suspicions of abuse or neglect of a child to the authorities.

Contact Information:

For questions about the research	Aklima Begum	beguma@uwm.edu
For questions about your rights as a research participant	IRB (Institutional Review Board; provides ethics oversight)	414-662-3544 / irbinfo@uwm.edu
For complaints or problems	Dr. Erin Sahlstein Parcell	eparcell@uwm.edu
	IRB of UWM	414-662-3544 / irbinfo@uwm.edu

Thank you for considering participation in this study. Please let us know if you have any questions before providing your consent.

Agreement to Participate

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. To participate, you must be:

- *At least 18 years old.
- *Legally married.
- *Enrolled full-time in a graduate program in the US.
- *Currently living with your spouse.

By participating in an interview, you will be indicating that you have read the consent form, that you meet the above criteria, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Appendix C: Affection Study Interview Guide

[Small talk to start, such as, introducing yourself, asking how they are, etc.]

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this project. As you know, I am conducting this interview as a part of a communication research study at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. We are interested in learning about affection within your marriage while in graduate school.

I shared the consent form with you over email but let me go over some important aspects with you. Please remember:

- This interview is completely voluntary.
- You do not have to answer any question(s) that you are not comfortable answering.
- You can stop this interview at any time if you choose.
- Also, please know that all information shared in this interview will be kept confidential.
- I will be recording our conversation and taking brief notes.
- Once our interview is over, the recording will already be transcribed. Immediately after the interview, I will camouflage your identity by taking out any identifying information in the transcript, such as names and specific places you mention.
- Your name will not appear in the data, nor will the names of your family members.
- We will not use your given name in any papers or presentations for this project. We will assign you a pseudonym.

What questions do you have about anything in the consent form? [Answer all questions before moving on]

[GET VERBAL CONSENT HERE] Okay, before we start the interview, I need to get your consent. **By participating in this interview, you will be indicating that you have read the consent form, that you meet the eligibility criteria, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. Do you agree to participate?**

[If yes, move forward. If no, thank them for their time and end the call.]

Because marriages are so complex, we like to let all our participants know that they can learn more about marriage counseling from the American Counseling Association. On their website (<https://www.counseling.org/>), you can learn about several types of counseling and find a counselor near you.

Okay, before we start, do you have any other questions?

As I said earlier, this interview is being recorded for research purposes. If you wish the recording to stop at any time, please tell me, and I will stop it. Do you agree to being recorded? [If they are uncomfortable being on camera, they may turn off their video]

Okay, the recording starts now.

[Click “More” in TEAMS and then “Record and transcribe” and “hide transcription”]

[Interview Questions start on next page]

For this study, we are defining affection as behaviors such as hugging, kissing, and saying things like “I love you” to your spouse. These behaviors are what we want you to think about during this interview. Do you have any questions about what affection means? [If yes, answer their questions]

[If not, or when you are done answering questions, say] Okay, let us start with some background questions about you and your family.

Demographic Information

- How long have you been married?
- How old are you? How old is your spouse?
- What is your gender? What is your spouse’s gender?
- How many, if any, children do you have?
- How long have you been in graduate school?
- What degree are you working on (MA, MBA, MS, MFA, PhD, for example)? What field/discipline?
- Is your spouse also in graduate school? If so, how long have they been in graduate school? What program and field are they in?
- How many hours do you typically spend on academic work in a week/per day?

Okay, now that I have some background about you and your family, let us talk about affection in your marriage.

Affection in Relationships

- How would do you describe the way you and your spouse typically show affection toward each other?
- How do you show affection most often? What about your spouse?
- What reasons do you show affection? That is, what do you show affection for?
- What ways do you prefer you and your spouse to show affection with each other in your marriage? Also, what ways do you not want your spouse to show affection?
- Have you noticed any changes in how you and your spouse show affection since becoming a graduate student? [If so, ask for elaboration and examples, if possible]

Okay now I would like to ask you questions about how your culture might influence affection in your marriage.

Cultural Influences (including Gender) on Affection

- What is your cultural background?
- How do you think your cultural background (including gender) affects how you and your spouse show affection?
- Are there any cultural traditions or practices related to affection that you and your spouse observe?
- How do you think cultural (or gender) expectations shape the way affection is exchanged in your relationship compared to other couples you know?

Next, I want to learn about your experiences in graduate school and how affection in your marriage might help or hinder you as a student.

Impact of Academic Stress on Relationship Dynamics

- Briefly, tell me about your workload in graduate school.
- How has your graduate student workload impacted your marriage?
- Do you and/or your spouse express affection to help you with your workload?
- Can you recall an example of a time when showing affection impacted your marriage since you have been in graduate school?

Affection Needs

- How do you and your spouse communicate your needs for affection within your relationship?
- Does your spouse meet your affection needs? Do you think you meet their needs?
- Are there specific strategies or routines that you and your spouse use to maintain affection during busy periods?
- Have you and your spouse ever had to adjust how and when you express affection to cope with the demands of graduate school?

Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to share about how affection exchange has impacted your relationship during your time as a graduate student?
- Would you be willing to review some of the findings from this study to help verify that they accurately reflect your experience?

I will turn off the recording now then. [Turn off recording]. Thank you for talking with me today. What you shared will help with our study and in turn other couples in the future.

If I need to clarify anything we talked about today or ask you for your input on our findings, would it be okay if I contacted you for a follow up conversation? This is optional of course.

Thank you. Goodbye.